



# Intersections

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## Food assistance

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The articles in this issue of *Intersections* explore a variety of themes around the topic of food assistance. Food assistance remains a significant part of MCC's international program, particularly through MCC's account at Canadian Foodgrains Bank. This introductory article previews some of the topics in this issue while also exploring two overall themes: first, the emergence of various food assistance modalities (cash, vouchers, food) and the importance of gender analysis in making decisions about the appropriate modalities in different contexts; and second, the need for predictable, timely and adequate social protection to prevent conflict and hunger.

As we approach the World Humanitarian Summit to be held in Istanbul, Turkey in May 2016, humanitarian actors are increasingly pushing to increase the amount of humanitarian assistance provided in the form of cash transfers, and rightly so. Over the last decade, development research has demonstrated that cash transfers increase the dignity and empowerment for crisis-affected people by allowing them to prioritize their own particular household needs and priorities. As Stuart Clark indicates in his article, an acceptance of providing food assistance in the forms of food vouchers and cash transfers is increasingly widespread.

MCC has increased the amount of assistance provided in the form of cash transfers and vouchers as it has worked with partners to respond to disasters in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Haiti, Afghanistan, Ethiopia and Myanmar. Several articles in this issue provide examples of food assistance projects involving vouchers and cash transfers in Lebanon, Ethiopia and Colombia. In contrast to these examples, Darrin Yoder provides an overview of MCC's canned meat program, arguing that there is still a place for in-kind food assistance.

There is a growing consensus that cash transfers should become the default modality of providing all forms of humanitarian assistance: that is, the default question now seems to be "Why not cash?" This reflects a broader adoption of cash transfers and vouchers in all forms of humanitarian assistance, including vouchers for shelter materials, fuel, rent assistance and other essential non-food items (e.g. hygiene items, cooking utensils and bedding). People affected by disaster should be able to buy what they need

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and therefore humanitarian actors should provide affected people with “multi-purpose cash.” To the outsider, the need to preface cash with multi-purpose must seem both redundant and absurd. Yet, the humanitarian aid architecture remains sectorally compartmentalized, with aid agencies having discreet mandates and required to report on end use (i.e. food, shelter and non-food items).

How do we determine the best modality for delivering humanitarian assistance? Following the Nepal earthquake earlier this year, an assessment agency representative asked other agencies in the Kathmandu coordinating meeting whether NGOs had any market assessment information from the earthquake-affected locations to determine whether cash assistance was appropriate: Are food and temporary shelter materials available in the area? Are markets functioning? What is the inflation on basic goods?

Market assessments have now become a key, if not primary, criteria in project rationale and design. Yet, in the stampede toward cash transfers, we seem to have forgotten about a less sophisticated, yet primary, assessment method: ask people what they need. And perhaps more importantly: ask women.

In many contexts where MCC works, including the Middle East and South Asia, when project participants are asked about their preference for food or cash transfers, women repeatedly report that they prefer in-kind food assistance or food vouchers. Women are often the ones in the household who make decisions on and control food resources, while men control cash. The evidence suggests that men are less likely than women to spend resources on overall household priorities. The shift away from providing food baskets and food vouchers towards cash transfers could have unintended consequences connected to gender dynamics and control over resources in some contexts.

For Syrian refugees in Jordan and Lebanon, cash transfers have become the default mode of humanitarian assistance. Recent discussions with Canadian government officials indicate that despite the government’s longstanding and strong emphasis on integrating gender equality in the delivery of humanitarian assistance, government officials do not have strong gender analysis to back up their funding priorities. After decades of work on promoting strong gender analysis and results, are we losing our way? In this issue, Vanessa Hershberger and Annie Loewen explore the concept of intra-household vulnerability and reflect on the importance of gender analysis.

Regardless of modality, the larger and more pressing concern is to ensure the timeliness, predictability and adequate scale of food transfers. People affected by ongoing conflict and sudden-onset disasters must be able to access assistance that is timely and substantive so they can plan and rebuild. And for the millions of smallholder farmers and farm labourers who face annual and predictable seasonal food insecurity, assistance must be on time and consistent so that they can invest and mitigate the risk of disaster.

During the hunger season, the time when household food stocks are low and food prices are high, farm households have to make many difficult decisions. In addition to providing family members with daily nutritional requirements, these rural households also need to invest in agricultural inputs and labour during their primary growing season. Without assistance, households engage in harmful coping strategies, including reducing food portions and meal frequency, pulling children out of school, selling productive assets or sending household members away to work. During the time of year that requires the

largest investment, these households have reduced cash liquidity and labour resources and face acute undernourishment.

The growing prominence of the social protection agenda aims to address the predictable food insecurity of the most vulnerable households. In particular, governments in India, Ethiopia, Mexico and Brazil have moved toward providing predictable safety nets in the form of food or cash transfers to rural households. Not only have these programs allowed households to stabilize their food consumption, they have also prevented the sale of assets under economic duress and enabled households to invest in production and build community and household assets. While there remains a pervasive fear that long-term social transfers can lead to dependency, the evidence suggests otherwise, namely, that the poorest households invest in their future, including in agricultural production and education, while at the same time prioritizing urgent household needs. The key driver of chronic poverty is vulnerability to shocks and stresses such as seasonal hunger. One cannot springboard out of poverty without a safety net; you cannot climb the ladder out of poverty, if every year you get knocked off. Within MCC we continue to prioritize food assistance projects that address seasonal food insecurity in places like Ethiopia, India, Burundi, Bangladesh, Afghanistan and Laos. In this issue, Vurayayi Pugenii compares the effectiveness of MCC's safety net program in Ethiopia with less predictable programming in Zimbabwe.

The reliability of food assistance also plays an important role in preventing conflict. As Kaitlin Heatwole argues in her article, the reliability of food assistance for internally displaced people in Iraq enhances the potential for social cohesion with host communities. While significant uncertainty for agencies working in conflict-affected countries persists, these agencies must move beyond short-term planning horizons, recognizing that ongoing assistance will be required for many years to come as coping mechanisms erode.

Moreover, as Terrence Jantzi observes in his article about internal displacement and humanitarian assistance in Colombia, food assistance programs can provide stability for conflict-affected families and also allow for group formation so that displaced people can mobilize to realize their rights. MCC aims to provide predictable and ongoing assistance for conflict-affected households in Colombia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Syria and Iraq.

Humanitarian organizations are increasingly using food vouchers and cash transfers, with reduced reliance on in-kind food assistance. Yet even as this shift takes place, the need for improved gender analysis and more timely and predictable social protection strategies will be essential in order to support families in meeting their food needs.

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## Speaking up about food assistance—and being heard

Food assistance has been and continues to be controversial. On the one hand, for someone who has missed several meals in a row, the provision of food is a gift from heaven. On the other hand, the motivations that have driven food assistance have been highly mixed, often (but not always) based on disposing of donor stocks of surplus grain, pulses or cooking oil. There



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**“ Within the humanitarian sector there is now a push to dispense entirely with a food focus in favor of simply giving cash to allow people to buy whatever they need, including food. We may be seeing the end of the modern food assistance era.**

are good people and good arguments on both sides of the heated debate about the appropriate modalities of food assistance.

Timely advocacy by the Canadian Foodgrains Bank (CFGB) has led to significant changes in the Canadian government’s commitments to, and the modalities of, food assistance. Moreover, the changes in the past decade may have rendered the food assistance debate irrelevant. Indeed, current humanitarian trends, notably the growing acceptance of cash transfers, may eliminate traditional food assistance altogether.

In this article I tell the story of the dramatic change in food assistance policy by one major global food assistance donor: Canada. Canada was, in fact, the first modern food assistance donor as part of the intergovernmental Colombo Plan for economic and social development in Asia and the Pacific in the early 1950s. Except for some brief periods of reform in the 1970s, until 2005 Canadian food assistance donations were mostly tied to sending food produced in Canada to countries around the world. Most U.S. food assistance continues to be tied to U.S. production, although European donor governments largely untied their food assistance in 1996.

In the decade leading up to the untying of Canadian food aid in 2005, the Canadian government had been quietly cutting its food assistance program, with the funding redirected towards more ‘evidence-based’ programs like vitamin pills and food fortification. This trend meant that Canada was falling farther and farther behind the food aid commitments it had made as part of the multilateral Food Aid Convention in 1999.

This convention, created in the 1960s, was designed to ensure that rich agricultural exporting countries would share the burden of providing emergency food and avoid using food assistance to steal each other’s export markets. The convention has been renegotiated several times since its instigation, broadening the range of foods covered and changing the commitments of the various donors. Since 1999 Canada had been committed to providing 420,000 tonnes of food each year in emergency food aid. But actual donations had slipped as low as 250,000 tonnes/year in the first years of the twenty-first century, and Canada owed the hungry of the world several hundred thousand tonnes of food.

The Canadian Foodgrains Bank’s work focusses on providing food for those who face hunger. The funding for this work comes from private contributions, matched by the Canadian government. Operationally, the government requirement to send food from Canada meant that it often arrived many weeks after it was first needed. And, as international shipping was revolutionized by containerization, the shipping of bulk food commodities became slower and more expensive. Getting more flexibility for increased local and regional purchase of food for food assistance had become a high priority.

The creation of the public policy program at CFGB in 2000 focused the organization’s efforts to effect policy changes. In addition to lobbying the Canadian government for the untying of Canadian food assistance, CFGB catalyzed the creation in 2005 of a consortium of European and North American NGOs to push for the reform of the 1999 Food Aid Convention. To strengthen the case for change, public policy staff linked the desirability of untying Canadian food assistance with Canada’s interest at the World Trade Organization to limit the ability of U.S. food assistance to interfere with Canadian food exports.

Although CFGB and other humanitarian actors had some success in persuading Canadian elected officials of the value of untying food assistance and meeting Canada's commitments, it took the 2005 Indian Ocean tsunami to tip the balance. In places like Sri Lanka, local food was plentiful and largely unaffected. It made no sense to send more food from Canada.

The national media, having run out of direct stories about the tsunami, picked up on this obvious fact and took aim at Canada's food assistance policies. Policy change came swiftly, with 50% of Canadian food assistance funding becoming available to buy food wherever it made the most sense early in 2005.

Meanwhile, Canada's failure to meet its Food Aid Convention commitments began to receive more attention, at least in part as a result of CFGB's advocacy. The partial untying of Canada's food assistance helped by permitting Canada to recalculate its food assistance shipments. Starting in 2005 Canada met or exceeded its 420,000 tonne commitment.

Finally, Canada's food assistance policy reform and the 2008 global food price crisis stirred the members of the Food Aid Convention into action. During 2010 and 2011 member states agreed upon a new Food Assistance Convention. The new Convention went far beyond providing traditional food assistance to include providing food vouchers and cash transfers to allow recipients to buy their own food on the local market. It also included provisions to allow cash to purchase livestock and other short-term agricultural inputs.

These changes make sense. But as the focus of food assistance has broadened and become more closely linked to the market, other issues have arisen. Food assistance commitments are increasingly made in cash terms rather than amounts of food. If the food prices skyrocket, as they did in 2008 and again in 2010, less food will be available to those who need it most, when they need it most.

Within the humanitarian sector there is now a push to dispense entirely with a food focus in favor of simply giving cash to allow people to buy whatever they need, including food. We may be seeing the end of the modern food assistance era.

The Foodgrains Bank's efforts to reform food assistance demonstrate the importance of building coalitions of support and being ready for the opportunity to build the momentum for change. But the momentum for change can exceed the goals of reform. Would a loss of a focus on food and a move toward cash transfers reduce the public commitment to end hunger? It is certainly possible. Or will we perhaps see a renewed commitment to a more flexible, less restrictive way to help the least of these?

*Stuart Clark is special advisor to the Canadian Foodgrains Bank and is based in Whitehorse, Yukon.*

## Opportunities and dilemmas in the use of MCC's canned meat

For almost 70 years MCC has operated a mobile meat cannery in the U.S. and Canada, shipping chicken, pork, beef and turkey canned by Mennonite, Amish, Brethren in Christ and other communities to countries around the world. In this article I describe the MCC canned meat program and also summarize recent evaluations which identify best practices for



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**“ Access to animal-sourced food improves growth, the level of physical activity and cognitive performance in undernourished children.**

how most appropriately to program this unique resource. I specifically examine the role of the canned meat program in fostering relationships with MCC's supporting constituency, the contribution of animal-sourced protein in improving nutrition among vulnerable groups and recommendations for integrating canned meat into various food security and livelihood projects.

Each year from October to May the MCC mobile cannery travels to rural communities in thirteen U.S. states and two Canadian provinces, making over thirty stops along the way. At each of these locations, the canner is met by a group of organized volunteers who donate money, meat, facilities and time to the canning process, motivated by the desire to provide "relief in the name of Christ." An estimated 30,000 volunteers participate in meat canning each canning season. Meat canning is a tangible service through which these communities help others facing need across the globe.

In 2007 MCC commissioned an external evaluation of MCC's material resources program (the donation of in-kind kits, blankets and canned meat). The review solicited feedback from MCC's constituency, program partners and project participants. The review team found that when constituents are involved in donating time to sew, purchase, pack and load items, they are also involved in other ways with MCC, including cash contributions to MCC's program. Meat canning is beneficial, the reviewers argued, because it is a very visible and community-building way of involving rural Mennonite communities in the activities of MCC. Because canning committees donate space and meat, contribute money to underwrite canning costs and mobilize volunteer efforts, MCC incurs minimal expenses from the operations of the canned meat program.

MCC undertook a review specifically focused on the canned meat program in 2014, exploring appropriate opportunities for MCC's programming of this unique resource. This review included a survey of MCC staff and partners as well as a literature review of the role of canned meat in food assistance and nutrition programming.

The review report notes that the most significant endemic micronutrient-deficiency diseases present worldwide involve iron, vitamin A, zinc and iodine deficiencies. These deficiencies create a greater risk of mortality, especially among children under five and pregnant women, who run a higher risk of developing complications around childbirth. These micronutrient deficiencies also cause an increase in the severity of infections, stunted growth, cognitive impairments and disabilities such as blindness.

Animal-based protein contains many of the micronutrients that are needed to address deficiencies in iron, vitamin A, zinc and more. Approximately 47% of preschool children globally suffer from anemia related to iron deficiency. Animal-sourced foods provide essential macro- and micronutrients as well as fatty acids required for growth and development during childhood. Meat and dairy products contain micronutrients including iron, zinc, calcium and vitamins A and B12. Access to animal-sourced food improves growth, the level of physical activity and cognitive performance in undernourished children.

In emergency situations and during regular seasons of increased food insecurity, adequate sources of iron are often not accessible. Use of enriched cereals, pulses and iron-rich vegetables for treatment of iron deficiency often do not provide adequate sources of iron due to poor absorption rates and require complementary vitamin C content to facilitate the breakdown of

nutrients. Animal-sourced foods such as meat and fish, on the other hand, contain high levels of iron that is more easily absorbed and provide a more concentrated source of iron.

While the nutritional benefits from meat are clearly of high value, obstacles remain for programming MCC's canned meat. The canned meat review of 2014 notes the following challenges facing MCC's canned meat program:

- The cost and time that it takes to ship, especially to land-locked countries;
- A lack of halal certification for MCC canned meat, which prevents programming within many Muslim communities;
- The cultural appropriateness of the meat, which may be uncommon in some diets;
- The strict and growing health, safety and customs regulations that prevent the shipment of meat or lead to delays in customs clearance and project implementation.

Religious and cultural questions regarding MCC canned meat coupled with logistical hurdles create reluctance on the part of some country programs to pursue the programming of canned meat.

Overall, MCC's 2014 canned meat review recommends that providing canned meat in an ongoing institutional setting (school feeding, supplementary feeding programs, soup kitchens) is the best way to use this resource. In addition, the review also recommends using meat as a complement to food baskets with locally-purchased products provided in emergency and seasonal food assistance projects. Building on this review, a three country evaluation of MCC's drought response across Central America in 2014 recommended MCC canned meat be complemented with other forms of protein.

The production of canned meat has been and continues to be an important connection for many MCC constituents. While programming challenges exist, the connection to MCC constituents and the nutritional value continue to make canned meat a relevant part of MCC's efforts to address hunger and malnutrition

*Darrin Yoder is material resources manager for MCC, based in Akron, PA.*

## Food vouchers and diet diversity among refugees from Syria

The ongoing armed conflict in Syria has contributed to what many observers describe as the worst humanitarian crisis since the Second World War. The statistics related to those displaced from their homes are staggering and grow on a daily basis as families abandon their communities and livelihoods in search of safety.

More than 1.2 million refugees from Syria have sought safe haven in Lebanon. The recently arrived refugees face a myriad of challenges, including steep housing prices, limited employment opportunities and dwindling humanitarian assistance from international agencies such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the World Food Programme (WFP) and, for Palestinians from Syria, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA). This article explores the impact of an MCC-funded food voucher project on household diet diversity among refugees from Syria.

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**“ The impact of the vouchers was greatest on the families who initially reported the worst dietary diversity.**

As resources held by displaced Syrian families become scarce, many IDPs face the difficult decision of deciding between spending their limited funds on food or on shelter. While households experiencing food insecurity typically employ a number of strategies to save money on food, a commonly-employed tactic used by refugee families is reducing the diversity of their diet by increasingly relying on low-cost, carbohydrate-heavy foods such as rice, oil and sugar. While cheaper and more filling in the short term, the long-term consequences of a poorly balanced diet can quickly result in poor health outcomes such as stunted growth, diabetes or cardiovascular issues. In the fall of 2013, MCC, with funding from MCC’s account at the Canadian Foodgrains Bank, launched a food voucher program to address the food insecurity faced by the newly arrived refugees. In particular, the voucher program sought to increase diet diversity and the nutritional value of food consumed by refugee families.

Cross-sectional surveys were conducted of refugee households at six month intervals to evaluate the food consumed by household members. The survey asked respondents to report which of 12 pre-defined food groups had been consumed by anyone in the household in the previous 24 hours to calculate a Household Diet Diversity Score (HDDS). The food groups included:

- Cereals—bread, pasta, rice, couscous, bourghul
- White tubers or roots
- Vegetables—dark leafy greens, spinach, cilantro, onions, tomatoes, etc.
- Fruit—apples, oranges, bananas, strawberries, mangoes
- Meat—beef, chicken, lamb, liver
- Eggs
- Fish—canned fish (tuna), fresh fish, dried fish
- Legumes—beans, hummus, chickpeas, fuul, lentils, nuts
- Milk—full portion of milk, cheese, lebneh, yogurt, processed cheese
- Oil, fat, or butter
- Sweets and sugar
- Coffee, tea and spices

The surveys found that the food vouchers contributed to refugee households consuming a more diverse diet. Surveys from July 2013, administered before households began receiving food vouchers, indicated that the average HDDS was seven. In June 2014, after families had received food vouchers for nearly 11 months, the average HDDS had risen to 7.7, a significant increase, indicating that refugee households were eating a more diverse diet as a result of receiving the food vouchers. More tellingly, the median HDDS rose from seven in July 2013 to eight in February 2015, indicating that more than half of households receiving food vouchers consumed at least eight food groups in the 24 hours prior to being surveyed. The impact of the vouchers was greatest on the families who initially reported the worst dietary diversity. By February 2015, the minimum HDDS doubled from two to four, suggesting that the food voucher program allowed the most vulnerable families to access and consume a more diverse diet.

Households were also classified as having low dietary diversity (three or fewer food groups consumed), medium dietary diversity (four to five food groups consumed) or high dietary diversity (more than six food groups consumed). By February 2015, 86% of households were classified as having a highly diverse diet.

Families who received the vouchers reported in focus groups the impact that the vouchers had on the household diet. One mother reported that prior to receiving the voucher, “We usually ate one small meal of grains a

day, if we ate at all. My daughter was malnourished because we couldn't eat a diverse diet, and she became anemic." After receiving the vouchers, however, the family was able to purchase enough food to eat three meals a day. The mother reported, "Our children are able to get the nutrition they need."

This voucher program has aided some of the most vulnerable refugees who have few other options, allowing them to follow a healthier diet and freeing up their other limited income to use on other pressing expenses such as rent. Food vouchers can play a critical role in helping newly-arrived families access the food necessary to maintain a healthy diet. Vouchers afford heads of households the dignity of choice when shopping and, just as importantly, empower them to protect the health and promote the well-being of family members through a diverse diet.

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## Intra-household vulnerability in eastern Congo

The household is the standard social unit used in planning humanitarian interventions, including cash transfers and the distribution of food and non-food items. Humanitarian assistance is often distributed to households based on the assumption that household members have uniform needs and preferences. However, households cannot simply be characterized as places where individuals share the same priorities or even necessarily pool their resources. Households are more commonly places where competing claims, unequal power, diverse interests and access to resources are frequently negotiated and shaped by differences in age, gender and position within the household, among other factors. In this article we explore the concept of intra-household vulnerability in eastern Congo by exploring gender dynamics at play within the context of food assistance programming along with power dynamics between internally displaced persons (IDPs) and host families.

MCC has been working with partners in the eastern provinces of North and South Kivu in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) since 2008 to implement humanitarian programming in response to internal displacement. During pre-planning for food assistance projects, MCC's program partner, the Ministry of the Church of Christ in Congo for Refugees and Emergencies (MERU)-North Kivu, conducts thorough assessments of target communities, including displaced families and their host communities. MERU's analysis has brought to light the differing gender roles within households, particularly surrounding control over resources and the division of household labour, with women largely in charge of food storage and preparation as well as agricultural work.

Observation and monitoring by MERU staff showed that households where women were primarily responsible for managing food stocks were more often able to make food last longer and refrained from selling assets for the purchase of items considered to be non-essential. Households with male-controlled food stocks were more likely to sell food to buy items that they considered personally important, but were non-essential for the household. In response to this finding, MERU staff sought to raise awareness of social spending within the community and

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UNHCR Syria Regional Refugee Response. Inter-agency information sharing portal Available at <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=122>

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“ Households are more commonly places where competing claims, unequal power, diverse interests and access to resources are frequently negotiated and shaped by differences in age, gender and position within the household, among other factors.



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to encourage male participation in agricultural work as a way to share the burden and increase crop productivity. This critical understanding of intra-household dynamics allowed MERU staff to explain how placing women in key decision-making roles would be beneficial for the well-being of the entire family.

MERU staff worked with the community to define responsibilities for both men and women in the implementation of the food assistance project. Men accepted responsibility for specific work in agricultural production, namely, clearing and preparing the soil for planting and ongoing field maintenance, including applying insecticide, transporting fertilizer and pruning. Knowing that these agricultural activities were taken care of, women were able to turn their energy to other activities, including planting, weeding and harvesting. Because of MERU's ability to work closely with participants, understand the differing needs of different groups and make project adjustments accordingly, MERU successfully implemented its food assistance project and received strong affirmation from the communities participating in the project.

MERU's food assistance programming also seeks to account for intra-household vulnerability due to the high number of IDPs in eastern Congo who do not take refuge in official IDP camps but rather live with host families. In combined host-IDP households, it becomes more difficult to assess the food security of IDPs, as the use of household targeting may prevent a clear understanding of additional vulnerability experienced by IDPs. Not only should more widely understood household dynamics related to gender or age differences be accounted for when designing food assistance programming: the additional power dynamics within mixed host-IDP households must also be considered.

MERU has found that in the case of the host-IDP household, food assistance programs should determine and account for who has control over the household's food resources and what that means for daily consumption among household members. Additionally, host families are more likely to have control over resources such as a plot of land for cultivation. In cases of combined host-IDP households, what is the impact of the IDP family on these resources? In some cases documented by MERU, host-IDP households harvested before crops matured, intensifying food insecurity. Seed stock was consumed in the immediate term, leaving families without adequate seeds for planting.

MERU's analysis conducted at the end of each six month project phase showed that while the average number of meals eaten per day increased significantly for all participants over the course of the project, host family food consumption saw a greater level of improvement than that of IDP families. Based on the intra-household dynamics observed by MERU staff, sensitization of the particular vulnerabilities of IDP families was prioritized and resulted over time in narrowing the gap of food consumption between IDPs and host families. By the fourth phase of the project, the average number of meals eaten per day was identical for both host and IDP families. A critical learning from the project is the need to assess the specific vulnerabilities experienced by the host-IDP households in order to reduce the burden on IDP and host families in negotiating how to share food, agricultural inputs and labour responsibilities.

Abandoning the household unit as a means of grouping and interacting with project participants is not likely to happen anytime soon. Thus, we at MCC must equip ourselves and our partners with tools and critical lenses

through which to pay attention and respond to the complex dynamics within and between households.

*Vanessa Hershberger is MCC program coordinator for the eastern provinces of the DRC, based in Bukavu, South Kivu. Annie Loewen is a humanitarian assistance coordinator for MCC, based in Winnipeg, MB.*

## **Social protection and seasonality in Ethiopia and Zimbabwe**

In this article I compare the impacts of predictable seasonally-targeted safety nets in Ethiopia with annual unpredictable emergency food assistance interventions in Zimbabwe, based on cases studies of MCC supported projects. I argue that when designing food assistance projects, more predictable assistance during the hunger period provides greater opportunity to build long-term food security through the protection of household assets and labour and the promotion of greater risk-taking to enhance agricultural production. I conclude with a focus on practical measures to enhance safety net interventions.

MCC's experience in Ethiopia provides evidence that the predictability of seasonal safety nets enhances food security and reduces the risk of acute crisis. Seasonally-targeted and predictable social protection interventions aimed at addressing chronic and seasonal food shortages in the form of cash-for-work and food-for-work have been successful in boosting agricultural productivity and in scaling up conservation agriculture in severely degraded watersheds of Ethiopia. Implementation of physical and biological soil conservation activities in farms in Amhara has reduced soil erosion, thereby improving soil fertility and expanding the productive land available for farming. Crop yields have steadily increased and targeted communities have restarted growing nutritious, palatable and higher-value crops such as barley, wheat, teff, field pea and haricot bean. In some of the graduated watersheds, the number of months of adequate household food provisioning has improved from six to ten.

Growing a greater variety of crops also helps decrease vulnerability to climate change by diffusing risk. Over 7000 small-scale farmers in Ethiopia's Amhara and Sidama zones can now apply conservation agriculture (CA) techniques on their rehabilitated land, something they could not do before because of the level of erosion and land degradation. Most of the farmers in these two zones who have taken the lead in introducing CA techniques to the region have praised the seasonally-targeted safety net project as the reason why they were able to adopt new farming technologies that otherwise they would have considered too risky. Most of the farmers are using the income generated from the cash-for-work resources to buy fertilizers and improved seeds. Increased fodder availability thanks to biological and soil conservation techniques is also leading to better livestock production outcomes.

These seasonally-targeted and predictable transfers in the form of cash and food have resulted in more consistent consumption at the household level. Project participants are eating more food, of different types, of better quality and more often. At the beginning of the project, 80% of the project participants were eating fewer than two meals per day and to date the same participants are consuming at least three meals per day thanks to the seasonally-targeted and predictable transfers of food and cash. The number of food groups consumed has also increased from three to seven

**“ Most of the farmers in these two zones who have taken the lead in introducing CA techniques to the region have praised the seasonally-targeted safety net project as the reason why they were able to adopt new farming technologies that otherwise they would have considered too risky.**

**“ Cash payments from cash-for-work projects are also used for a range of productive investments, including education, livestock and savings schemes.**

out of a possible twelve groups measured by the Household Diet Diversity Score index. The project is designed to ensure consumption smoothing (i.e. more predictable, stable consumption patterns) through the use of cash-for-work during the first three months of the annual hunger period (the months when food is available and accessible through the market) and food-for-work during the last three months of the hunger period (when markets have more limited food options available).

Seasonal cash- and food-for-work projects are also protecting people's productive and labour assets in Amhara and Sidama zones. Significant numbers of project participants are now able to avoid selling their limited harvests to pay for short-term household needs such as medicine or school fees and have also been able to avoid selling productive assets like livestock and household utensils for food. They have avoided high interest loans for food and have not had to migrate to find work during the annual hunger months (distress migration), thereby allowing more investment in their own household livelihood activities. In addition, they also avoid low-paying, exploitative and insecure casual labour as well as avoid harvesting their crops prematurely to address pressing food shortages. Cash payments from cash-for-work projects are also used for a range of productive investments, including education, livestock and savings schemes. Moreover, the predictable transfers play a key role in allowing people to feel secure enough in their income to take out productive loans which they previously found too risky.

By way of contrast, in one MCC project I examined in Zimbabwe short-term and unpredictable emergency safety net interventions in the form of food-for-work meet the immediate food needs of households during peak hunger periods and create community assets such as earth dams and weirs. However, the unpredictability and late delivery of these food transfers create a tension in chronically food insecure households between meeting urgent food consumption needs and liquidating those limited food reserves in order to meet other needs for agricultural investment and education.

Year after year, rationing consumption and irreversible coping mechanisms (such as the sale of capital assets) had been reported before the emergency food-for-work projects started. Repeated exposure to seasonal stress is leading to the use of erosive coping mechanisms which in turn undermine a household's ability to cope in the long term. Communities take on potentially disastrous debts and sell productive assets, which in turn compromises future livelihood gains, all to buy food for immediate needs. This pattern severely limits families' abilities to bounce back, thus leading to a poverty trap. Uncertainty in the delivery of emergency assistance discourages households from making risky investments and taking out productive loans because their consumption smoothing and asset protection are not guaranteed. Not surprisingly, distress migration is common, with the majority of the able-bodied youths in the community opting to cross the border to South Africa in search of work.

While seasonally-targeted and predictable social protection interventions in the form of cash-for-work or food-for-work schemes are the best options for addressing chronic and seasonal food shortages, specific conditions should be in place for the predictable seasonal safety nets to be more effective. These conditions include:

- Where cash-for-work is used, the size of the payments should be realistic and reviewed against inflation and the local cost of a diverse

monthly food basket for the household. In Ethiopia, the size of the benefits paid is regulated by the government and in most cases the participants perceived the payments as too small to meet the food gaps.

- Payments should be made on time. When payments are made late, households are likely to revert to harmful coping mechanisms which defeat the whole idea of a predictable safety net. Timeliness and predictability of payments from cash-for-work projects are key.
- Participants in cash-for-work or food-for-work projects should be informed upfront of the payment amounts or of the food ration sizes. Participants should also be alerted to the duration of the project and when they will no longer be eligible to participate in the project (the project's "graduation threshold"). When households are aware that they will receive seasonally-targeted cash or food transfers for a number of years, they are encouraged to take risks on their farms and adopt new technologies without fear of being food insecure.
- Projects should establish clear guidelines about who is targeted for participation and what the project's graduation thresholds will be. Such guidelines are essential for effective household selection and monitoring.
- Very poor, labour-challenged households should be accommodated. Those who cannot contribute labour such as the sick, elderly and children should not be left out. Arrangements should be made for them to receive unconditional cash or food transfers each month.
- Public works components of cash- or food-for-work projects should be conducted during the agriculture slack period so that these initiatives do not compete for agricultural labour aimed at household food production.
- Community assets created through public works schemes need to be maintained on a regular basis. For this to happen, community-based structures to support sustainability are vital. So, for example, in Boricha, Ethiopia, social fencing, the community shaming of those who encroach on rehabilitated land, has proven to be useful in protecting community assets.
- Participants need continued access to the seasonal safety nets until livelihood-enhancing activities have created a sustainable livelihood.

While the food assistance schemes in Ethiopia and Zimbabwe examined above both provide immediate access to food for vulnerable households, the predictable and timely seasonal safety nets in Ethiopia are more effective in promoting long-term food security and reducing risk. Seasonal safety net projects should accordingly ensure that cash and food transfers happen in a predictable and seasonally timely manner.

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## Beyond doing no harm: reducing conflict through food assistance

Over ten million people in Iraq—almost a third of the country's total population—are in need of humanitarian assistance, with food assistance being the ongoing priority need. Local, regional, national and international actors are using a variety of strategies to provide food and other assistance. However, the means of delivering this food assistance—how, when, by whom and for whom—impacts conflict dynamics far beyond the contents

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of the package. Tools like Do No Harm (DNH) examine how assistance is conducted in order to identify the likely negative consequences that may occur beyond immediate food consumption, but strategies for revising and shaping interventions to produce positive social impacts are more limited. Providing long-term, predictable and consistent food assistance as well as involving both displaced and host communities in the intervention are two actions that can improve security and reinforce the existing social fabric in otherwise unstable environments. These are positive impacts of humanitarian interventions that go beyond improving food consumption.

The Do No Harm framework provides tools to analyze how an intervention positively and negatively impacts its context. Distributing assistance along sectarian lines, undermining existing support systems or giving power to a certain group or individuals over others are all actions that fuel conflict. Conversely, actions motivated by respect, accountability, fairness and transparency (RAFT) serve to mitigate conflict. One of the key principles of DNH is that no negative impact is inevitable: there are always options to revise and improve programming. At the practical level, DNH recommends minimizing potential negative impact of humanitarian interventions by minimizing dividers that fuel conflict and maximizing connectors that strengthen social cohesion.

One of the main dividers that increases conflict and fuels tension in food assistance is a lack of predictable and consistent delivery. When a family receives food from different groups, in different amounts, in different ways and at different times (or not at all), they cannot predict or plan their next week, let alone future months or years. In Iraq, families displaced by the Islamic State group rely on monthly food assistance, with the World Food Programme (WFP) providing substantial funding through many implementing partners. In April 2015, a delay in its funding pipeline resulted in a missed month for all WFP-funded food assistance across Iraq. Around 1.5 million individuals did not receive food that they were counting on, with little or no advance notice. As increasingly desperate families heard about non-WFP actors providing food assistance in other areas, this funding delay triggered secondary displacement, with families relocating in search of assistance to meet their basic needs. Irregular provision like this—especially delays or changes in regular distribution schedules and alterations of the amount or type of food provided—has direct negative consequences for conflict-affected people. In this case, relocations forced many internally displaced persons (IDPs) to leave behind previous assistance (such as winterized shelters or large items like refrigerators) and likely strained resources and exacerbated host community–IDP tensions at their new locations.

To go beyond simply avoiding negative effects and instead strengthen the existing social networks of support, interventions must proactively integrate both IDP and host communities. For example, one of MCC’s partners, Zahko Small Villages Project (ZSVP), has engaged host communities and IDPs by incorporating ongoing livelihoods projects for vulnerable host community members—kitchen gardens, beekeeping and other home-based income generation activities—with monthly food assistance for IDPs living in the same and nearby towns. Collaboration between the two groups has happened spontaneously, and ZSVP encourages equal treatment and interaction (rather than segregation according to status) by drawing on IDPs and host community members alike for involvement in project volunteering, project participant selection and information-gathering. Hosts in these and other towns frequently provide crucial supplemental assistance

through their individual generosity—providing their new neighbors with vegetables from their gardens, shared refrigerator space, cash and other necessities—that goes unrecognized and undocumented. With only ten percent of Iraqi IDPs living in camps, host communities across the country have absorbed displaced families—usually an additional 30-50% of their original population—and may themselves be in need of assistance. Outside interventions should seek to mitigate the strain on small host communities like these without undermining their contributions.

There is no one-size-fits-all solution for good interventions. However, some practical tools can be applied in many contexts, especially regarding food assistance. Beyond improving immediate food consumption without doing harm, food assistance has the capacity to decrease conflict and promote peace by prioritizing long-term and regular distributions while incorporating social cohesion into project implementation.

*Kaitlin Heatwole is a program coordinator for MCC.*

## Humanitarian assistance for sustainability in Colombia

One of the long-standing criticisms of humanitarian assistance initiatives is that they often respond to an immediate crisis, but do not leave beneficiaries in any position to re-integrate or resume lives once the assistance has ended. As a result, relief projects face an ongoing challenge as to how to allow beneficiaries to later re-integrate into society.

Organizations ranging from non-governmental organizations all the way to United Nations institutions are confronted by the question of how to build sustainable development mechanisms into their humanitarian initiatives while at the same time addressing the underlying drivers of conflicts.

In Colombia, the ongoing armed conflict and the actions of illegal armed groups have led to millions of rural families being forcibly displaced to urban centers where they settle in the most marginalized slums on the outskirts of these receptor cities. The forcible displacement not only deprives these families of access to their livelihoods (land for farming), but also disrupts the social networks they rely on for support and often leaves them with few skills that translate to employment in urban contexts.

Within this context, MCC's partner organization, Mencoldes (the social services organization of Colombian Mennonite and Mennonite Brethren churches), has been accompanying displaced families who have settled in the slums of Bogota and Ibague. Mencoldes has been implementing an MCC-supported project which seeks to combine both humanitarian responses to immediate displacement and the reintegration of these internally displaced families into society. This integrated response unfolds in four phases:

- 1) **Immediate stabilization:** Recently displaced families in crisis receive food vouchers that will last for six months and household supplies to allow them to set up residence in the city slums with some degree of dignity. Mencoldes has made the shift from providing in-kind food baskets and household items to vouchers. This allows families to purchase culturally appropriate and diverse food supplies. Empowering families to select their own food increases household autonomy and decision-making power.

“ One of the key principles of DNH is that no negative impact is inevitable: there are always options to revise and improve programming.

“ Strengthened social networks could in turn form the basis of coalitions to advocate for the rights of displaced people to municipalities and other local authorities.

- 2) **Psycho-social support and human rights:** Displaced families often suffer some form of trauma which impedes their ability to take actions for self-improvement, while also lacking an understanding of what rights they have under the state. Mencoldes carries out a series of seminars and workshops to help participants develop healthy responses to their trauma and understand what resources are available from the state for displaced families.
- 3) **Economic strengthening:** Mencoldes has developed an urban gardens component to help families with rural agricultural skills to apply these skills in their new urban contexts. This initiative has two intentions: first, to build the self-esteem of the participating families by allowing them to practice their crafts; and second, to encourage displaced families to develop a source of potential income or food consumption to increase their autonomy.
- 4) **Mobilization and networking:** Mencoldes seeks to strengthen social networks among displaced families in order to strengthen their social capital. Strengthened social networks could in turn form the basis of coalitions to advocate for the rights of displaced people to municipalities and other local authorities.

Within this integrated multi-component project, the humanitarian assistance component serves as the foundation to allow displaced families to begin rebuilding their lives. However, the distribution of food and other humanitarian assistance is the first in a series of development and organizing activities that seeks to allow the families to better re-integrate into Colombian society in their new urban contexts. This four-stage structure is Mencoldes' response to the challenge of stabilizing and re-integrating families sustainably.

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