Panel 4 Summary: Intelligent Food Aid: Moving beyond Bags of Rice & Maize

Panel: Adrian Finighan, CNN Anchor/Correspondent, Moderator
Josette Sheeran, WFP Executive Director
Simon Maxwell, ODI
Feike Sibbesma, CEO DSM
Alex Renton, The Observer etc
(N.B. Speakers’ own words are given, with some paraphrasing)

This session covered innovations and new horizons in the delivery of food assistance to the hungry. The panel discussed recent developments, the way food assistance is delivered – from the targeting of nutritionally-enhanced food assistance to the implementation of programmes using cash and food vouchers instead of bags of food. While the landscape is changing, much of the reporting of food assistance remains rooted in language about food aid dumping, market disruption and dependency.

Adrian Finighan (Moderator) Josette, the language is rooted in dumping…?

Josette Sheeran (WFP) There are a lot of success stories: 20 years ago, China was one of WFP’s largest aid programmes – no longer; they can track to a tipping point on food security – that is the goal. I quote Amartya Sen on famine: it’s not lack of food, but lack of access to that food. Simon (Maxwell) made me think about WFP’s model. 1) Are people hungry? and 2) What is causing hunger that could drive a different response? WFP has a strategic plan…we say we have moved from food aid to food assistance.

Sometimes farmers have been cut off from markets because of conflict, storms, disaster etc. You have a situation where a food price doubles overnight; living on a dollar a day, you’ve gone from one bowl of food per day to one bowl every two days. We’ve authorised a number of different possibilities. E.g. in Burkina Faso, we provide a voucher which can be cashed in a store… In an area where stores were losing business, people were becoming malnourished, farmers were unable to sell to stores….with that voucher, think of the wins!

We’re there to jump-start and help ensure that markets can be sustainable, including Haiti, although it’s a food deficit nation, we provide cash for work. If there are no functional markets, we provide food – or a blend (of measures). This more sophisticated response is revolutionary (at this scale). There are other benefits: cost-saving, dignity, integration.

Today most donors are cash donors; 20 years ago many of our donations were in kind, but cash allows us not only to see if the cup is full, but what is in the cup – the micronutrient value.

We have the burden of knowledge about nutrition. We actually didn’t know until recently that a child aged under two, denied adequate nutrition, will suffer permanent damage in brain and body. We now prioritise the under two year-olds.
WFP is purchasing 80 percent of food from the developing world. Modelling in 21 countries how to purchase from farmers, contributing to a population most often affected by hunger (small farmers) – it’s a dramatic transformation in the way we approach the issue of individual hunger.

Simon Maxwell (ODI) I want to underline how important and far-reaching the change that Josette has initiated is and why it matters. Talking (earlier) about the metaphor of the Gulf oil spill: delivering humanitarian aid is the oil slick, solving the problem of hunger is the plume at the bottom. WFP is getting more effective: providing vouchers, working with markets, using cash – it’s a cultural transformation. Why does it matter in a UK context? The previous government published a policy paper on nutrition, saying 30 percent of children are malnourished, we need a broad range of measures – food aid is part of it.

Adrian Finighan Feike, forgive my cynicism, but you’re a businessman, the bottom line is to make money?

Feike Sibjesma (DSM) There is no hidden agenda, just a simple one: there are 1 billion hungry people, another billion living with malnutrition. I was touched at the World Economic Forum when an African leader said: ‘People may not starve, but they will be ill.’ I came to WFP: starving people cannot be a business model – you help them or you don’t – we have that knowledge and I think it’s a responsibility – business has more roles and responsibilities to play than just making money. It’s important to consider what we put in the cup: can we enrich that? That’s what we do, and it makes people in our company enthusiastic and proud.

Adrian Finighan Alex, this is good news – are you going to burst the bubble?

Alex Renton (Observer) My cynicism is chiefly because these reforms should have happened decades ago. (Describes 2008 when farmers in Malawi were unable to sell their bumper maize crop while their children ate imported US maize.)

Since the ‘50s, the US has used food aid to support American agriculture and open up markets; for almost 50 years, WFP and FAO failed to solve hunger – because they were frightened of putting off the biggest donor. It’s hard to quantify damage, but West Africa’s economy in wheat will never recover. While I congratulate WFP, we have to see what’s happening now. I was in Haiti in March: WFP did a good job, but why is WFP not looking at some of the core problems surrounding agriculture in Haiti – which imports 80 percent of rice from America. If WFP is an advocate it should be tackling that problem directly.

Josette Sheeran It is about time we focus on the poor farmer in developing countries; the world needs her to ensure we can feed the world. A number of structural changes have led to changes in what we’re doing. I can’t speak for FAO, which focuses on fish, forest, fertiliser, whereas WFP’s sole focus is on the hungry individual.

I’m a believer in having the right tool at the right time and the right place. There’s no ready solution, but I look forward to WFP not being in business – it should be the goal of all agencies. What bugs me is that statement: “Teach a man to fish…” It’s really
hard if you don’t have the rod, the bait …etc! Sometimes, when there is no food, you’ve got to bring food to people.

**Simon Maxwell** Three things you (JS) need to tell Andrew Mitchell (UK Secretary of State for International Development) 1. Niger was not a failure to recognise famine, but failure of donors to provide core-funding to agencies and build a central emergency response fund (WFP shouldn’t have to beg for a fire engine). 2. Alex is right about FAO and the UN – A. Mitchell should be pushing hard for a UN effort on food. 3. We have to make these emergencies less common; we’ve talked about moving countries from the Darfur/ Haiti column to the China/ Chile column – those who can manage their own emergencies. DFID have instructed that 10 percent of all emergency funding should fund preparedness, all donors should be doing the same. WFP should be calling on Andrew Mitchell to support procedures – to ensure that WFP *does* go out of business 10 years from now.

**Q: Barney (Burford School)** Can we raise resources more intelligently - awareness among youth?

**Josette Sheeran** You are the generation which is going to end hunger. My first target is to end child stunting, something which we should relegate to history; it’s not that expensive. WFP spends .01% on PR, communications etc – dramatically less than other agencies. When we needed a video on hunger, we put a competition on Youtube – we got fabulous material.

**Feike Sibjesma** The reason why we’re here is because media have responsibility (not just business) I mind about this topic – 850 million hungry two years ago has now grown to 1 billion. We spent so much money on saving the banks – if you look at all the collective resources, we can solve this problem if we want to.

**Adrian Finighan** Alex and I are “old media” Should WFP focus on the internet?

**Josette Sheeran** I’m a big believer in old in addition to new – we have to use every tool possible. If you look at the food crisis, it was about the fact that it was hitting people all over the world. (Ethiopia grain market example of trader checking his mobile for Chicago board of trade.) Hunger is connected through the internet, market to market – village to village. It would cost 3 billion to feed every child. If every student could put one pound in this cup a week; one billion online to one billion who don’t have enough to eat.

**Q David Williams (Burford School)** Media is expensive, but education is not, push (hunger awareness) into the education system – it would cost nothing.

**Q Megan Rowling (Reuters AlertNet)** The media hasn’t done a good job reporting on longer-term issues, do you see sea-change?

**Alex Renton** It was a major complaint of the morning sessions – too much time was given to problems of delivering aid in Somalia, these are small issues compared with 1 billion hungry. I don’t have an answer – maybe through social networks. You’re not going to get existing media to cover hunger better.
Josette Sheeran  For WFP maybe we can’t end hunger, but we will stand beside that hungry individual and give them the support they need… Tens of millions of children wake up and have no idea how to fill this cup. That’s what wakes me up. It’s important that stories get told. We need this type of dialogue and openness and our supporters – we value that trust. I’m sure you heard today that WFP has zero tolerance for fraud. I fire people. Despite being in difficult places, we can never tolerate laxness in reaching people in need. It’s the reality we live with everyday. Stand true to make the tough reforms, make sure we are efficient and effective and look for the day when every person is empowered to fill this cup themselves.