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Innovations in food assistance: issues, lessons and implications

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1. Introduction

This is a testing moment for the world. New drivers of food insecurity, such as globalization and climate change, are combining with older ones, such as civil strife, inequality and weak governance, to expose ever-increasing numbers of people to sudden plunges into severe hunger. The high food price crisis came and went; the global economic crisis is abating. But the effects of the ravage wrought by these crises on livelihoods around the world will linger, most likely for decades.

Governments responded admirably to the crises, but public interventions are increasingly stretched while the demand for safety net measures is increasing (Timmer, 2010; Ravallion, 2009; von Braun, 2007). Many citizens in the world's richer countries, long accustomed to lifestyles built in no small part on generous public transfers and services, are finding themselves newly vulnerable to the poverty and food insecurity typically associated with life in far poorer countries. Rich countries' seemingly insatiable demand for goods, gadgets and groceries – a demand that supported livelihoods in far-flung lands – remains anaemic at best. In the many lower-income countries where foreign demand looms large in gross domestic product (GDP), prospects for export-led growth and employment generation are less bright. So too are those for cutting poverty and hunger. The new hardships and vulnerabilities are deep, global in scope and expanding.

It is now clear that under this dynamic, the world is losing hard-won ground in the fight against hunger – a fight that until recently it was winning. Millennium Development Goal number 1 to halve extreme poverty and hunger by 2015 is moving rapidly out of sight for countries where its attainment is most urgent. The

proportion of undernourished people around the world declined from 20 to 17 percent in the first half of the 1990s. Since then, however, progress has come to a halt, and there have even been reversals in the past three years. At the same time, the number of undernourished people has increased by almost 20 percent since 2005–2007. In 2009, more than a billion people were undernourished (FAO, 2010), and more than 1.3 billion people were living on less than US\$1.25 a day per capita, with almost half the world's population on less than US\$2 a day (World Bank, 2010a). About 23 percent of children under 5 years of age are stunted, 178 million children in total, and nearly 11 percent are wasted (UNICEF, 2009).

Governments, communities and households are under immense and growing pressure. For governments in countries as different as Greece and Chad, the United States and Kenya, France and Peru, there is pressure to do something about the food and nutrition insecurity facing growing numbers of their people. The immediate pressure on communities and households is to cope with crises, and to prepare the next generation for the complex challenges it will face.

This book is about a revolution in responses to these kinds of pressures – responses by the World Food Programme (WFP) and its many partners around the world.

A book about responses to overcome hunger is relevant and timely because the dominant narrative of global hunger and food insecurity can lead to the conclusion that the challenges are too daunting to be dealt with, while the facts – as seen from WFP's standpoint – are very different. There are many interventions against hunger that do work, in many contexts, and very well. However, the existence of these operationally feasible and effective food assistance initiatives, designed and implemented in the real world, is often forgotten or ignored, leading either to apathy or to a sense of powerlessness in the face of a seemingly intractable problem.

So this is a book about a revolution in food assistance. WFP has a dual mandate: to avert starvation in humanitarian crises through food assistance, delivered not only within emergency operations that fill food gaps in the short term, but also within programmes that promote long-term development and thereby break the deeply rooted hunger-poverty cycle. This is a book about food assistance across the full spectrum of contexts in which WFP works.

Most of all, this is a book about innovation in food assistance.

For WFP, innovation in food assistance is essential. WFP's success as a food assistance agency is based on its ability to identify: who are the hungry and vulnerable; where they are; why they find themselves hungry and vulnerable; what they are doing to combat hunger and vulnerability; whether they would benefit from food assistance; and how such assistance can best be delivered and in which form. Crucially, WFP backs this analysis with the capacity to implement

programmes, often in areas and under conditions where few other agencies are able or willing to operate.

Herein lies the fundamental imperative for innovation in food assistance. How does WFP secure its commodity supply chain in a rebel-held area? How does it procure grain of acceptable quality from dispersed smallholder farmers operating in high-cost, high-risk markets? How does it build and manage an information base with both global coverage and local relevance? How does it strengthen national institutions while working at speed? How does it draw the private sector into areas where there are few incentives for operating?

For WFP, innovation is often not only necessary, but is typically the only practical option. Hunger and food insecurity are driven by myriad complex factors, which can be overcome effectively only through innovation at a fundamental level. Such innovation can only emerge from practice – from responsible judgements in complex worlds of action. This book is about the results of such innovation.

Another important motive for WFP's innovation in food assistance is its Strategic Plan for 2008–2013 (WFP, 2008e). The plan has transformed WFP not only into a front-line catalyst of innovation in the humanitarian domain, but also into an agency that offers an expanded set of food assistance tools for addressing hunger, and thereby promoting growth and development within a rapidly changing global environment. Under the plan, WFP's interventions should be provided in ways that meet hunger needs, strengthen local markets, foster small farmers' productivity, and build national capacities. Success in this endeavour will require not only the visionary leadership and strong partnerships that helped develop launch this new strategic direction, but also considerable innovation across the board. In other words, modern WFP not only delivers food – it delivers hunger solutions. It is not instrument-based, but problem-based. This historical shift – the revolution – has positioned WFP as a catalyst of practical hunger innovations with fundamental changes in the way WFP implements programs, shapes key policy debates, and engages strategically with actors and partners.

This book captures the range and depth of WFP's innovation agenda as it undergoes the required transition. The ultimate aims of the book are to identify and document innovative interventions from WFP's work around the world, draw lessons from these initiatives, yield further advancements in food assistance knowledge and practice, and thereby enhance evidence-based food assistance policy-making and programming.

This chapter is organized as follows. The next section lays out the definitions of food assistance and innovations adopted in the book; section 3 presents the structure of the book, including its sections and chapters; section 4 draws key lessons emerging from the chapters; and section 5 sets out implications.

2. Innovations in food assistance

“Innovation” and “food assistance” mean different things to different people. In generic terms, an innovation is an idea, object or practice that is perceived as new by a social system in which actors invest cash, labour or learning (Mahajan and Peterson, 1985). Innovation may include: (i) creation of new products and processes, such as the invention of mobile phones; (ii) application of new products in other domains, such as the use of mobile phones to deliver food vouchers in humanitarian assistance; and (iii) enhancement of the routines and procedures associated with these applications, such as the development of new contractual arrangements with food retailers based on electronic verification of beneficiary identities. This book focuses on the latter two forms of innovation – the sweeping changes generated by the application of novel products and processes within WFP’s action arena, and refinements in existing routines.

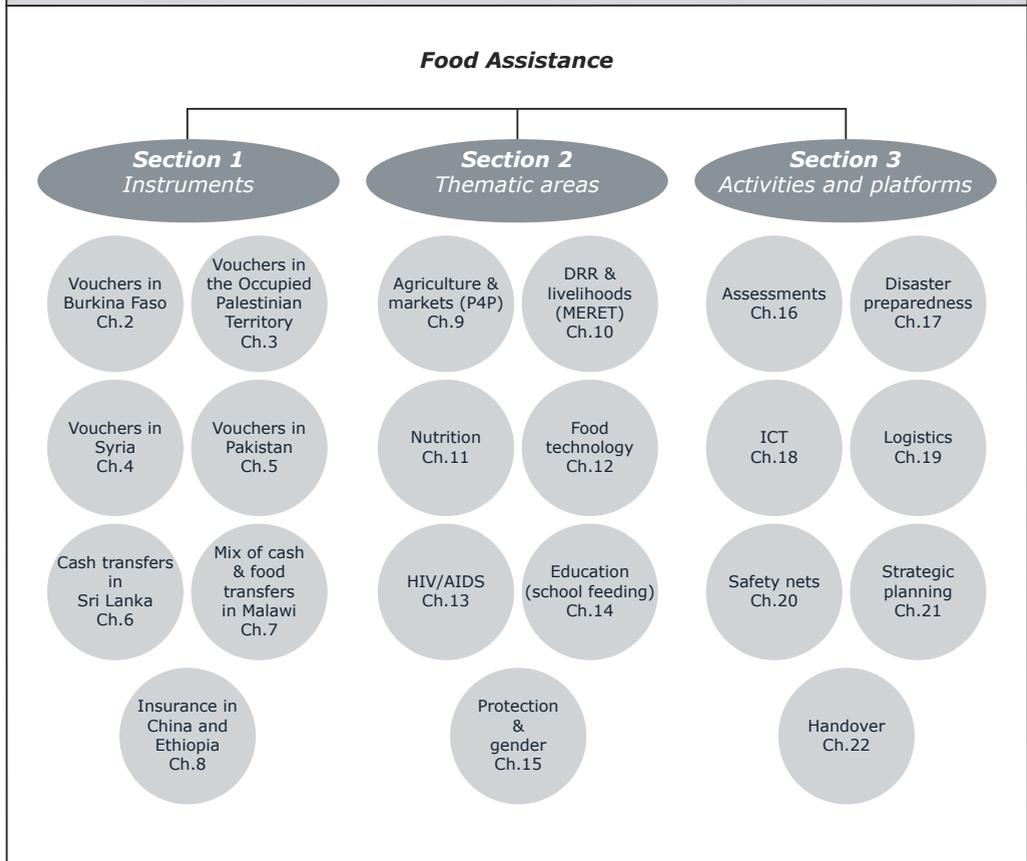
Several definitions of food assistance exist in the literature, ranging from broad conceptualizations that encompass all food security interventions to narrower approaches that focus on specific tools and partnerships (Harvey et al., 2010; Maxwell et al., 2010). In this book, food assistance refers to the set of interventions designed to provide access to food to vulnerable and food insecure populations. Included in the definition are instruments, such as in-kind food, voucher or cash transfers, to assure access to food of a given quantity, quality or value. These instruments can be used to pursue specific objectives, such as nutrition, education or disaster risk reduction. Several supportive activities and institutional platforms render the instruments successful and sustainable relative to the objectives, such as needs assessments, logistics, information management, or engagement in national safety nets and strategies for hand-over. Each of these three dimensions is covered in the book.

3. Organization of the book

The book is organized around the three attributes of food assistance presented in the previous section (Figure 1.1).

3.1 Section 1: Instruments

The first section addresses the evolving nature of food assistance and its diverse modalities by presenting how WFP has applied a number of instruments in a range of contexts across the globe. The primary focus is on vouchers and cash transfers, which – depending on circumstances – can be provided as alternatives or complements to food transfer programmes. Since 2008, WFP has expanded its toolbox to include these instruments alongside traditional in-kind programmes. Also presented are insurance-based tools for disaster risk reduction.

Figure 1.1 The organization of the book

DRR = disaster risk reduction.

In Chapter 2, Ouattara and Sandström describe WFP’s food voucher operation in Burkina Faso, the first of its kind in Africa. This initiative was set up to respond to high food prices, and features two areas in which WFP has only recently started to gain experience: fairly large-scale voucher programmes, and operations in urban areas. These two aspects pose a host of new operational challenges such as managing beneficiary targeting in urban areas where “everybody is poor”, and dealing with constraints caused by fragile markets. The pilot in Burkina Faso illustrates that carefully designed and implemented voucher programmes can be successful in low capacity contexts.

In Chapter 3, Galluzzi and Natsheh provide a review of the operational aspects and initial impacts of a voucher programme in the Occupied Palestinian Territory. The programme was set up to mitigate the impact of high food and

fuel prices on food-insecure households already negatively affected by conflict. Operating in an economy weakened by restricted movements and trade, the voucher intervention seeks to achieve a dual objective: (i) to improve dietary diversity and nutrition of urban households; and (ii) to stimulate local business and farming sectors. These objectives are pursued by providing beneficiaries with a voucher basket including mainly locally produced protein-rich food items.

In Chapter 4, Brinkman, Gentilini and Majeed derive insights from Asia's longest-standing voucher programme, in Pakistan, set up in 1994 to address the high logistics costs associated with direct food transfers. Although the voucher programme has been running for several years there are still opportunities to be explored, including scaling up, joint programming, extending intra-community support, testing vouchers in other WFP programmes, using index-based vouchers, participating in national social protection initiatives, and undertaking a rigorous impact evaluation.

In Chapter 5, Elguindi's analysis of an electronic voucher scheme in the Syrian Arab Republic demonstrates that innovative delivery mechanisms provide opportunities for efficient and secure management of programmes, and prompt reporting and monitoring. The programme – which was the first in the world to be delivered through mobile phones – operates among Iraqi refugees who have access to markets but no legal income-generating opportunities. The first phase of the pilot confirmed that the voucher programme reduces the resale of food items – a perennial challenge facing in-kind distribution.

In Chapter 6, Sandström and Tchatchua examine a cash transfer initiative in post-tsunami Sri Lanka. In one of WFP's first cash-based interventions in the aftermath of an emergency, an important question was whether cash transfers would meet key food security objectives. An evaluation carried out as part of the pilot, comparing the impacts of cash and food transfers, provided important insights into this issue, particularly on changes in households' consumption patterns and gender-related control and preferences.

In Chapter 7, Blake, Halme and Balzer consider a combined food and cash transfer initiative in Malawi. At issue is the cost efficiency versus the cost effectiveness of the different transfer modalities. A detailed cost/benefit analysis reveals that while in the context of rural Malawi food is cheaper to deliver than cash, households receiving cash transfers show considerable improvements in food consumption and dietary diversity.

In Chapter 8, Balzer and Hess detail the rationale and initial outcomes of WFP's experience with weather-index insurance products in China and Ethiopia. Designing and implementing ex-ante interventions is crucial to both emergency risk financing and development programming. In the short term, these instruments – which are growing in importance under the threat of global

climate change – seek to build resilience against the effects of extreme weather events that displace or wipe out the assets defining food security, and thus to prevent the negative coping strategies that provoke plunges into mutually reinforcing poverty and hunger traps. In the long term, climate risk insurance can stimulate behavioural adjustments that allow individuals, communities and countries to accommodate changes in climate patterns, thereby protecting key natural, ecological, human and economic assets from degradation and displacement, and thus safeguarding food security.

3.2 Section 2: Thematic areas

The second section of the book examines innovations in food assistance in terms of WFP's engagement in various thematic areas of work, or sectors. Agricultural development, disaster risk reduction, nutrition, health, education and protection, especially of women, throw up challenges as diverse as their implied objectives, requiring an equally varied a set of innovations.

In Chapter 9, Davies and Menage review Purchase-for-Progress (P4P), a flagship programme in which WFP uses its purchasing power in new ways to develop agricultural markets and support smallholder farmers' engagement in those markets. Having WFP as a committed buyer reduces the risks smallholder farmers face, and provides an incentive for them to increase productivity, raise quality and diversify crops. Farmers benefit from the support of a wide range of partners, allowing them to take advantage of new market opportunities and to meet new standards. Under P4P, WFP is identifying mechanisms that help develop secure markets for small-scale farmers, and solutions that are country-specific. The best practices identified will be mainstreamed into WFP's long-term policies and programme practices. The lessons drawn will be shared as a model for national governments and other public and private players in the agriculture sector.

In Chapter 10, Nedessa and Wickrema detail WFP's multiannual experience with the Managing Environmental Resources to Enable Transition (MERET) programme in Ethiopia. Experiences from MERET illustrate how food assistance can support effective disaster risk reduction at scale. While meeting the immediate needs of food-insecure populations, the programme strives to address the causal factors of vulnerability by supporting sustainable land management and increased productivity. MERET, widely praised recently in climate change forums, shows how watershed management, participatory approaches and technical rigour can enhance communities' livelihoods and resilience.

In Chapter 11, de Pee, van den Briel, van Hees and Bloem show how WFP uses new ways to prevent and treat malnutrition. Specially formulated foods have revolutionized the field, but a thorough understanding of the causes of malnutrition is crucial, as are continuing advances in food technology. WFP is

continuously developing, improving and adding food commodities to the food basket, to meet more effectively the nutritional needs of its beneficiaries. Recent developments include addressing the needs of specific target groups, including children under 2, moderately malnourished children, pregnant and lactating women and people living with HIV/AIDS or TB. New strategies, such as home-fortification to address micronutrient deficiencies, ready-to-use supplementary foods (RUSFs) for treating children with moderate acute malnutrition, and food supplements to complement the diets of young children aged 6 to 23 months and prevent malnutrition, are also being implemented.

In Chapter 12, Bounie, Bienfait, Prigge and Salvignol describe how advances in food technology enable WFP continuously to improve the quality, taste, convenience and safety of its food basket. Although they vary in technological complexity, fortified foods, fortified blended foods and ready-to-use food for children can be prepared according to local habits and taste, and many can be produced using basic technologies that demand low technical capacity. A recent challenge is to develop ready-to-eat meals to complement fortified biscuits during the first days of emergencies. In this area of continuous development and innovation, WFP's food technologists cooperate with universities and the food industry to track promising technological innovations that may be transferred to humanitarian contexts: new processes, new equipment, new regulations, new technological skills, and evolving scientific theories.

In Chapter 13, Erdelmann, Njoroge and Isler review the evolution of food assistance for HIV/AIDS care and treatment, paying special attention to the institutional innovations and scientific advances that have taken place in this area and that shape programme directions and approaches. The history of HIV programming in WFP reflects a decade of evolution and innovation, responding to rapid scientific, epidemiological and political developments, while contributing to global and national priority setting.

In Chapter 14, Molinas and Regnault de la Mothe summarize the growing empirical evidence for the multiple impacts of school feeding, and show how programmes could be leveraged to foster national ownership and country-led approaches. In its new school feeding approach, WFP is seeking to change its role from direct implementation to that of enabler, capacity builder, adviser and repository of best practices. The ultimate aim is to align programmes more closely with national development strategies, education policies and financing frameworks.

In Chapter 15, Crawford, Pattugalan and Dale examine how food assistance programmes – including distributions, communication campaigns, advocacy, and staff and partner presence – might be retooled to improve beneficiaries' safety and protection and, ultimately, their food security. Working in complex

emergencies and conflict situations, WFP is confronted by protection concerns ranging from violence during food distributions to rights abuses faced by crises-affected populations. Violence against women is a recurring theme; food assistance can empower women, thereby constituting a tool for protection, but it can also put women at risk of violence. Although WFP's experience with protection is relatively new, interventions in a range of countries and contexts have demonstrated that WFP can use its food assistance activities to address protection concerns.

3.3 Section 3: Supportive activities and institutional platforms

The third section examines innovations in several areas, comprising supportive activities and institutional platforms for food assistance. Activities in these areas provide essential “hard” and “soft” foundations for application of the instruments in thematic areas, including the strategic and policy foundations for food assistance operations, and technical platforms for programme design and implementation, aiming ultimately to achieve effective and efficient hand-over of interventions and programmes to national governments and other actors. Technical support and capacity building are seldom provided in isolation. Engagement in multi-actor platforms shows that coordinated, synergistic and integrated partnerships are key to sustainable approaches and results.

In Chapter 16, Sanogo and Luma demonstrate the results of cutting-edge methods used by WFP to gather, analyse and interpret macro- and micro-level data on the impact of global economic crises, and outline the findings and lessons learned from these studies. The objectives of these assessments were to determine country-specific transmission channels of the impacts of the global food, fuel and financial shocks, changes in the food security status of households, and mitigating responses that might be appropriate. In-depth studies of food markets were central because, in most contexts, key impacts are mediated through these markets.

In Chapter 17, Balletto and Wertheimer focus on the ways in which information is managed and organized when preparing for emergencies in Central and Latin America. Innovations in this area centre on preparedness tools and response capacities in the region, including the pre-positioning of food and non-food items in subregional depots, decision support tools based on Geographic Information Systems (GIS), early warning, targeted training, enhanced coordination, and South-South cooperation mechanisms.

In Chapter 18, Yu details how WFP uses state-of-the-art information and communications technology (ICT) to support its food assistance activities. ICT not only supports food assistance initiatives, it also changes their very nature, enabling entirely new capabilities. Innovations span the full range of food

assistance activity – from individual action to system-wide coordination and integration, often across the globe.

In Chapter 19, Quinn describes WFP's central role in humanitarian logistics, demonstrated by its leadership mandate in logistics operations whenever an emergency requires a joint response from United Nations and other agencies. Complex operating environments and increasingly sophisticated food assistance demand logistics operations that are dynamic and multi-modal, ranging from the management of complex pick-up networks from multiple remote locations as required by the P4P initiative, to handling large-scale unpredictable emergencies such as earthquakes or tsunamis.

In Chapter 20, Gebru, Gentilini, Wickrema and Yirga lay out the evolution, achievements and challenges emerging from WFP's engagement in the largest safety net scheme in Africa – Ethiopia's Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP). The innovations and principles that define the PSNP approach and have shaped its design and implementation include its multi-actor platform, strong government ownership and guidance, multi-annual approach, and integration within a broader food security framework.

In Chapter 21, Samkange, Howe and Cavalcante lay out key steps undertaken by WFP's Uganda Country Office to contextualize and operationalize WFP's corporate Strategic Plan at the country level. A path-breaking consultative process for priority setting, forging partnerships, establishing institutional linkages, and formulating a programme portfolio resulted in an internally consistent, relevant and widely embraced strategy that brings together previously disparate investments in Uganda's food system in an operationally feasible manner.

Finally, in Chapter 22 Osmani describes the modalities, arrangements and steps for effective hand-over of food assistance interventions from international actors to the Namibian government. A programme for orphans and vulnerable children (OVCs) was designed with an exit strategy entailing the integration of beneficiaries into the national social safety net.

4. Lessons

WFP's practical experience with action against hunger and food insecurity, day-in day-out, across the globe, is at once humbling and inspiring. It is humbling because WFP and its partners are reaching barely one-tenth of the people who need such assistance – so much more needs to be done. However, it is also inspiring because from its experience WFP is constantly acquiring a firmer sense of what is possible in the fight against hunger: what works well, how and why; what can be sustained; and what could be scaled up to reach more people. Several lessons about the kinds of initiative the world needs so badly emerge from the chapters in this book.

Lesson 1: Innovation is fundamental to successful and sustainable food assistance

The factors driving vulnerability and hunger are diverse and dynamic. Food assistance must be constantly on guard against stagnating. Viewed together, the chapters demonstrate that both the adaptation of existing tools in new arenas and the development of new routines play important roles at different stages in innovation processes. At times, there is greater pressure for adaptation, as is currently the case for cash and vouchers in many contexts, or for ICT capacity across the board (chapter 18). At other times, the impetus is towards developing new routines, as was the case for needs assessment and vulnerability analysis during the previous decade, and for logistics since the late 1990s (chapter 19).

Lesson 2: Innovations in food assistance are context-specific

Food assistance must accommodate a wide range of operational constraints imposed by geography, demography, economic relations, institutions and politics. Successful innovations in food assistance ease these binding constraints, increasing the scope for reducing costs, enhancing benefits, or both. Just as there are no universally applicable food assistance interventions, there can be no blueprint innovations in food assistance. For instance, each of the seven cash-and voucher-based innovations described in Section 1 was designed and implemented through the judicious analysis of beneficiary needs and preferences, market conditions, and financial system capacity. Each differed from the others. Were they to be designed and implemented today, months or years later, even in the same places and serving the same communities, they would differ in crucial details. In some contexts, humanitarian protection is the backbone of effective food assistance (chapter 15). Context appears to be especially critical to the expansion of initiatives via replication or scale-up. Several chapters suggest that prospects for sustainable expansion are enhanced by effective management of the adaptation process, proactive investment to

anticipate and accommodate the new bottlenecks invariably created by success, deliberate cultivation of strategic partnerships, and careful monitoring and assessment of impacts.

Lesson 3: Innovation in food assistance requires strong leadership and deliberate and sustained investment

Successful innovations do not crop up overnight, nor do they come for free. They spring from farsighted leadership and continuous, iterative efforts to improve products, processes and outcomes. Some innovations focus on specific operational tasks, others cover cross-cutting functions, a few are strategic and policy-oriented. All require relevant installed capacity. Such capacity is costly and time-consuming to build, with set-up costs typically swamping initial returns by several orders of magnitude. WFP's ability to move rapidly into cash and voucher programming (chapters 2 to 7) rests on decades of investment in vulnerability analysis and monitoring, needs assessment, and community-level action undertaken in tandem with skilled partners. The P4P initiative builds directly on broad-based expertise in food procurement and market analysis (chapter 9). The introduction of new nutritious products is based on expertise in nutrition sciences and food technology and processing (chapters 11 and 12). Institutional innovations in school feeding are made possible by years of successful operation of "traditional" school feeding programmes in scores of countries across the globe (chapter 14). The chapters show that costly experimentation correctly reconciled with available capacities, balances risks against expected benefits, and is therefore a key ingredient for success.

Lesson 4: Markets are central determinants of the outcomes and impacts of many innovations in food assistance but cannot be relied on as the sole guide for innovation

Several of the chapters illustrate very clearly that markets discipline action, delineate possibilities, generate and mitigate risk, provide new skills and novel products, and signal and facilitate rewarding partnerships in food assistance. However, these chapters also demonstrate that the impacts of food assistance innovations often depend on developments in the public domain. Especially important are public investments in agricultural development, food system strengthening, and social protection. In many of the fragile environments in which food assistance is undertaken, markets are fraught with risks and difficulties, but WFP's experience shows that even in these settings markets can serve crucial functions (chapters 2 and 6). More important for this book, WFP's experience with innovating in these settings demonstrates that success often depends on private action undertaken through markets (chapter 8). Deliberate

investment in market development is almost always required, particularly for innovations with strong public good dimensions, as is often the case for food assistance innovations.

Lesson 5: Innovation in food assistance requires strong and dynamic partnerships

Innovation in food assistance raises major paradoxes for partnerships. Grasping the opportunities for innovation typically requires strong partnerships spanning public, private and civil society sectors. For example, vouchers can be redeemed by beneficiaries in private shops (chapters 2 and 3), or be delivered through private partners but redeemed in public shops (chapter 5); fortification of foods includes collaboration with the private sector (chapters 11 and 12); and the management of transportation and communication technology is based on an array of partnerships with public and private actors (chapters 18 and 19). However, almost by definition, partnerships are constantly under pressure to adjust to the new demands unearthed by successful innovations. Furthermore, innovation destroys value in one domain even as it creates value elsewhere, so partnerships based on innovation processes are built on particularly unstable foundations. As illustrated in the MERET initiative in Ethiopia (chapter 10), HIV/AIDS care and treatment (chapter 13), strategic planning in Uganda (chapter 21) and hand-over in Namibia (chapter 22), strong and sustained institutional commitment is crucial.

Lesson 6: Globalization implies both opportunities and threats for food assistance innovations

Many innovations in food assistance depend on global processes for their full expression and impacts, such as those in vulnerability analysis (chapter 16) and emergency preparedness (chapter 17). This is a logical upshot of threats to food security that are global in scope, such as climate change, financial market instability and pandemics. It is also a logical upshot of the many opportunities for enhancing food security thrown up by globalization, such as those linked to ICT (chapter 18). For example, food systems are more closely interconnected; new institutional and contractual forms largely govern food standards and commercialization; and supermarket chains are rapidly emerging in all continents (Reardon et al., 2009, McCullough, Pingali and Stamoulis, 2008). However, the smallest, marginalized farmers may not be well positioned to seize those opportunities. Programmes such as P4P (chapter 9) may help bridge the divide by providing tailored support to connect vulnerable farmers to markets. Food-insecure households are also less insured against shocks, so insurance products (chapter 8) may help farmers to enhance productivity while reducing

risks. The challenge for innovation in food assistance relates to managing risks in ways that limit exposure but improve efficiency and promote learning.

5. Implications

Looking ahead, and returning to the core challenge of how to maximize the impacts of food assistance interventions in the fight against hunger, the most obvious aspects are, first, the tremendous scope of food assistance as an area of work and, second, its inherent dynamism. Its ability to respond to these features has clearly been a major plus for WFP throughout its history, especially over the last decade. It will be crucial for going forward.

However, even a much larger and more rapidly innovating WFP could address only a small part of the hunger problem. Capacity for effective food assistance design and implementation and for innovations in these areas must be distributed widely. Every country or agency has potential for generating innovations in food assistance, but innovation is the reserve of the expert. National food assistance structures and processes require targeted investments to build expertise in relevant areas. As clearly demonstrated in several chapters, the nature of innovation in food assistance is such that with prudent investment, countries should be able to bypass several previously obligatory technical stages and organizational forms on the road to achieving expertise and excellence in food assistance design and implementation.

It may be easy to forget that many of the innovations reported in this book occurred in emergency contexts, under extremely difficult circumstances. This is the first time that many of the innovations have been systematically documented outside standard project and programme reports. It could be argued that this makes the book an even more important contribution to the literature than it might otherwise have been. It also almost certainly implies lost opportunities for building an evidence base to inform and support decision-making at all levels. Such opportunities should be more systematically and strategically grasped in the future.

With a few exceptions, the book's contributors did not undertake full assessments of the interventions they were describing. But a central message emerging from the book is that food assistance is generating major impacts across a wide array of contexts. The food assistance community must do much more to fill the gap in impact evaluation. A book such as this one can only scratch the surface, but it makes clear that rigorous impact evaluations are crucial to good decision-making in food assistance (Deaton, 2009; Duflo and Kremer, 2009; Rodrik, 2008).

According to Ravallion (2007: 2), "... without research, the conceptual

foundations for policy-making will be weak; there will be very little new knowledge or data to inform policy decisions; [and] there will be little or no innovation.” This book is built on real-world food assistance practice. A call for heavy empirical research on the minutiae of food assistance techniques and processes would be inappropriate, but as Rosenberg (1976: 125) observed, “If we would like to understand the kinds of problems to which technically competent personnel are likely to devote their attention, we must come to grips with their inevitable preoccupation with day-to-day problems.... If we pay more attention to the cues thrown out by this daily routine, we may gain a clearer understanding of the process of technical change.”

For WFP – as a large food assistance agency seeking constantly to accommodate the vicissitudes of a volatile world – the imperative to change and innovate within its daily routine is strong and enduring. The lessons that have emerged from the comprehensive self-examination summarized in this book are profound and challenging, but deeply inspiring.