

# Food and Nutrition Needs in Emergencies



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Printed November 2002 — Cover Photo: WFP © Shirley

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# FOREWORD

UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP and WHO have jointly developed these guidelines as a practical tool for assessing, estimating and monitoring the food and nutrition needs of populations in emergencies.

Major food shortages can be a primary feature of an emergency, as in droughts or floods that lead to famine, or they may be a consequence of war, economic disaster, or population displacement. The often serious protein-energy malnutrition and micronutrient deficiencies that inevitably follow such shortages add greatly to the burden of disease and mortality, slow - or even impede altogether - socioeconomic recovery, and make intense additional demands on scarce resources.

The guidelines are aimed at field staff involved in planning and delivering a basic general food ration for emergency-affected populations. Their overall aim is to promote timely, coordinated and effective action through improved understanding of food and nutrition needs during emergencies.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<b>BMI</b>	body mass index	<b>HDR</b>	humanitarian daily ration
<b>BMR</b>	basal metabolic rate	<b>HEM</b>	high-energy milk
<b>BMS</b>	breast milk substitute	<b>IBFAN</b>	International Baby Food Action Network
<b>CMR</b>	crude mortality rate	<b>MoU</b>	Memorandum of Understanding
<b>DSM</b>	dried skim milk	<b>MRE</b>	meals ready to eat
<b>DWM</b>	dried whole milk	<b>NGO</b>	Non-Governmental Organisation
<b>ENN</b>	Emergency Nutrition Network	<b>PAL</b>	physical activity level
<b>FBM</b>	food basket monitoring	<b>TM</b>	therapeutic milk
<b>GIFA</b>	Geneva Infant Feeding Association		



# PREFACE

According to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) Article 25(1), “everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food...”. In emergency contexts, it is important to reaffirm the fundamental right of everyone to have access to adequate and safe food. The Humanitarian Charter and the Minimum Standards (1998)<sup>1</sup> aim to quantify people’s requirements for water and sanitation, food and nutrition, shelter and health care. Taken together, the Humanitarian Charter and the Minimum Standards contribute to an operational framework for accountability in diverse humanitarian assistance efforts.

Food supply should be adequate to cover the overall nutritional needs of all population groups in terms of quantity, quality and safety. In emergency situations, where populations are dependent on food assistance, an “adequate food ration” meets the population’s minimum energy, protein and fat requirements for survival and light physical activity. An adequate food ration is also nutritionally balanced, diversified, culturally acceptable, fit for human consumption and suitable for all sub-groups of the population.

Because micronutrient deficiencies are common worldwide—and endemic in many developing countries—rations should provide adequate micronutrients (vitamins and minerals), where possible, particularly for populations entirely dependent on food aid.

For planning purposes, the World Health Organization (WHO) and the U.S. Committee on International Nutrition recommend that an average of 2,100 kcal per person/per day be used as an initial planning figure. This estimate covers the energy needs of a typical population in a developing country, assuming a standard population distribution, body size, ambient temperature, pre-emergency nutritional status and light physical activity level (PAL).<sup>2</sup> Since implementation of revised Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) (UNHCR/WFP, July 2002; WFP/UNICEF, February 1998), the three agencies have adopted 2,100 kcal as their initial planning figure for calculating energy requirements and designing food rations.

The process of tailoring food requirements for a specific population requires a number of considerations. The initial planning figure for energy should be adjusted according to environment, demographic and physiological criteria specific to the affected population. Food commodities are then selected to meet basic nutritional requirements. Finally, other factors are considered to ensure that the ration is appropriate to all population sub-groups, such as infants and young children, pregnant and lactating women and the older persons. Food-management aspects and the underlying preconditions for ensuring adequate nutrition (such as the social and health situation or environmental issues) are also considered when estimating food and nutritional needs in emergencies.

<sup>1</sup> Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response. The Sphere Project. Geneva, 1998.

<sup>2</sup> Light PAL defined as 55 percent above the basal metabolic rate (BMR) for males and 56 percent above the BMR for females.

# CONTEXT AND PURPOSE

Close collaboration between the agencies of the United Nations is essential for an effective emergency response. In order to facilitate this collaboration, Memoranda of Understanding have been signed by several United Nations agencies; these agreements aim to clarify roles and responsibilities in emergency relief and rehabilitation programmes, and outline commitments to joint activities within agency competencies.

The purpose of these guidelines is to provide practical tools for estimating food and nutritional needs of populations in emergency situations. In particular, these goals include to:

- provide practical operational guidelines for United Nations<sup>3</sup> and other agency staff involved in planning a basic general food ration for emergency situations;
- estimate the food and nutritional needs for vulnerable groups;
- provide a clear outline of the main factors to take into consideration when planning an adequate ration; and
- provide a framework for training activities and/or supporting ongoing training activities related to planning food assistance.

<sup>3</sup> The guidelines are based on the recommendations of the relevant technical United Nations agencies, specifically WHO and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).

## OVERVIEW OF APPROACH

Table 1, below, provides an overview of the two characteristic phases<sup>4</sup> of an emergency response. During the first phase of the emergency (Phase I), the initial planning figure for energy is used and adjusted according to available information at the outset of the emergency as food-management and -monitoring systems are established. Later on, in Phase II, when the situation is stabilized, the initial planning figure

for energy is further revised based on changing circumstances during periodic reassessment exercises. It is during these periodic reassessments that strategies for continued assistance and/or phase-out activities are planned. The “Planning a Ration” section of the guidelines (pages 6-29) summarizes the basic principles for the design of an adequate ration in emergency situations.

### Table 1: Emergency Phases and Planning

## PHASE I OF THE EMERGENCY

From the outset and during initial stages of the emergency (i.e. during initial rapid assessments)

- ⇒ Adopt 2,100 kcal/person as a reference figure.
- ⇒ Adjust the 2,100 kcal figure based on information available immediately, using the factors outlined in Section II (pages 7-8).
- ⇒ Ensure that food ration is adequate to address the protein, fat and micronutrient requirements of the population.
- ⇒ Ensure that food ration is adequate to address the nutritional needs of all sub-groups of the population.
- ⇒ Outline strategies for collecting information to make further adjustments.
- ⇒ Consider food-management issues.
- ⇒ Consider food-related conditions.
- ⇒ Establish a monitoring system to ensure adequacy of the ration.

## PHASE II OF THE EMERGENCY

Situation stabilized

- ⇒ Through periodic reassessment, further revise and adjust the reference

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