The 2012 Food Assistance Convention

A commentary by the Trans-Atlantic Food Assistance Dialogue (TAFAD)

In late April 2012, the member states of the current Food Aid Convention (US, EU and member states, Japan, Canada, Norway, Switzerland and Argentina) agreed upon the text for a new food assistance treaty to replace the 1999 Food Aid Convention. These formal negotiations, which extended over a 16 month period, were carried out against a backdrop of budgetary constraint and weakening multilateralism making their success notable.

KEY POINTS IN THE NEW TREATY

- The new treaty has a food assistance frame, replacing the old food aid concept. This adds new tools to help people meet their consumption needs (vouchers and cash transfers, special nutritional foods) as well as food production inputs to help them protect or re-establish their livelihoods. This is a major improvement.

- The former multi-year food commitments by members has been dropped to be replaced by annual commitments of either cash or food. This means a loss of predictability and a risk of declining support by members.

- For the first time, the new treaty contains a commitment to providing public information on meeting members’ commitments. However, the completeness of this information is not specified and information on changing commitments by members will not be public in advance.

- A much stronger emphasis has been placed on the principles for good food assistance, particularly the importance of ensuring a smooth transition of support from emergency to longer term development. However, there is no specified mechanism for ensuring accountability for adhering to these principles.

- Although the new treaty has been separated from the International Grains Agreement, it remains disconnected from the Committee on World Food Security, the principal forum for global food security governance.

See end of document for TAFAD’s recommendations for further development of the treaty
The Trans-Atlantic Food Assistance Dialogue, a coalition of North American and European NGOs active in providing food assistance and long term food security in developing countries, has been advocating since 2005 for the reform of 1999 Food Aid Convention. We welcome the success of the negotiations for the new treaty and look forward to its early ratification by the current member states. The following comments relate to our specific advocacy points during the negotiations.

What is Food Assistance?

Given the choice of title for the new treaty, it is notable that the treaty itself includes no definition of the term ‘food assistance’, a term which is new in the context of international assistance generally. There are a series of twenty food assistance principles given in the treaty but they don’t provide a definition.

TAFAD has earlier proposed the following definition which has received positive comments in many circles:

> Food Assistance refers to a range of activities which provide direct transfers to individuals or households for the purpose of increasing the quantity or quality of food consumed by the recipients, either immediately or in the short term.

Note that this definition would have excluded monetization which is still permitted in the new treaty.

The Nature of the Resource Commitments

TAFAD advocated that the total commitments contained in the new treaty reflect the level of need for international food assistance rather than sum of the individual member state’s offerings. Recognizing the difficulty of determining this need which varies year by year and is itself imprecise given varying national governments’ own capacity, TAFAD proposed that an approximation of this need be made as an aspirational collective commitment. This was based on the annual caloric needs of 30 million people, a representative figure of recent levels of food assistance provided. This would still permit individual member’s to determine their own commitment level and would provide a clear indication of any deficit to guide the commitments of new members to the treaty.

The new treaty has retained its ‘resource-based’ character with each member state making its own commitment but doing so on an annual basis rather than for the duration of the treaty. This reduces the treaty’s traditional goal of predictability of minimum levels of food assistance. Furthermore these commitments will be made in a combination of quantities of food and amounts of money (value).

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1 Action Contre La Faim, Canadian Foodgrains Bank, CARE, Catholic Relief Services, Concern Worldwide, Diakonie Katastrophenhilfe, PLAN International, Oxfam, Save the Children International, Welthungerhilfe (at various times)
2 TAFAD, Food Aid or Food Assistance Convention?, June 2010
3 TAFAD, Proposals for a Renewed Food Aid Convention, September 2006
4 TAFAD, Letter to FAC Members, 8 September 2010
Commitments in value will be open to further unpredictability in the context of continuing high international and regional food price volatility.

The loss of predictability is a major weakening of this treaty. The change to flexible annual commitments underlines the importance of transparent timely public reporting including any changes in members’ commitments as soon as they are known.

**Food Assistance Principles**

Although the 1999 FAC contained some sound ideas about good food aid programming, there was no effort to determine whether the members were actually following these principles. TAFAD advocated for more attention to be paid to high quality needs assessments, human rights based programming and meaningful evaluations.

The new treaty contains much more specific references to the principles of good food assistance. A strong focus is placed on the integration of food assistance activities into the long term development activities of the recipient countries and strengthening the resilience of vulnerable people. Reference is also made to involving beneficiaries in the assessment of their needs and the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of food assistance. Although not referenced as such, the principles of human rights based food aid programming as contained in the Voluntary Guidelines\(^5\) are also included in these principles.

These principles are good as far as they go. However, the development of regular transparent accountability mechanisms will be essential if they are to be realized in practice. TAFAD recommended that a representative sample of food assistance activities carried out under the treaty be evaluated by a third party and form the basis of a bi-annual review carried out in conjunction with the Committee on World Food Security\(^6\). Under Principles of Food Assistance Accountability, the new treaty states that members should adhere to “monitor(ing), evaluat(ing) and communicat(ing) on a regular and transparent basis, the outcomes and the impact of food assistance activities”. Furthermore, the treaty provides for the participation, on invitation, of other stakeholders involved in food assistance. A mechanism for reviewing the use of these principles will be essential.

**The Food Assistance Toolbox**

The new treaty significantly increases the types of activities whose resourcing can be counted against treaty commitments. TAFAD had recommended that six types of activities be included\(^7\):

1. **Food transfers**

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2. *Food-oriented voucher transfers*

3. *Food-oriented cash transfers*

4. *Food-linked livelihood transfers* – resources to enable the procurement and distribution of agricultural inputs during and immediately post a food emergency.

5. *Micronutrient fortification* – including fortificants added to food or specially formulated products to meet specific nutritional needs.

6. *Food Transportation Assistance* – funding to be provided to permit non-members of the treaty to deliver food assistance.

All of these activities are recognized in the new treaty. The new treaty also includes therapeutic feeding which TAFAD did not recommend on the basis that such activities were medical in nature.

**Integrating Food Assistance into Food Security**

The 1999 Food Aid Convention was part of the International Grains Agreement which has its origins in a trade agreement, the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs (GATT). Given the strong movement away from agricultural surplus disposal in the last decade and the important linkage between food assistance and long-term food security, TAFAD recommended that the new treaty be delinked from the International Grains Agreement and linked more closely with the Committee on World Food Security (CFS). TAFAD went on to recommend that the treaty administration be located in Rome close to the UN food agencies.

The new treaty has severed its linkage with International Grains Agreement but has, at least until further notice, remained housed in the offices of the International Grains Convention in London. Furthermore, although there is no reference to the CFS in the treaty text, there is an acknowledgement of the importance of conducting food assistance to support the broader goal of food security by linking short-term humanitarian response with long-term support to improve the resilience of poor communities. Connecting this treaty and its activities to broader food security governance remains an important future task for member states.

**Regular Timely Transparent Reporting**

Until recently the reporting on the performance of the 1999 Food Aid Convention was not publicly available and, after 2007 when the Secretariat made these reports publicly available, they were often more than a year out of date. TAFAD called for regular timely transparent reporting.

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9 TAFAD, Proposals for a Renewed Food Aid Convention, September 2006
The new treaty simplifies the member state’s reporting process and calls for reporting to be completed within three months of the end of the calendar year annual reporting period. These reports will then be used to prepare an overall report to be issued by the end of June of the same year. The Rules of Procedure specifically call for a version of this report to be made available on a public website. It is not clear if these will be as detailed as the currently available reports.

If this timetable is complied with and if the reporting provides the same level of detail as the current reports, it will meet TAFAD’s call. This will only become clear once the treaty has been in force for at least one year.

**TAFAD Proposals for Future Development of the Food Assistance Convention**

1. **Bi-Annual Review of Food Assistance Principles** – every two years the Food Assistance Convention Member States should organize a meeting in connection with the Committee on World Food Security to review the implementation of the treaty’s food assistance principles in light of practice and new ideas. This event should include participation by all stakeholders active in food assistance.

2. **Improved Transparency of Members’ Commitments** – members commitments should be made public early each year rather than waiting for the reporting of actual performance 18 months later.

Trans-Atlantic Food Assistance Dialogue (TAFAD)
Contact: Alessandra Spalletta
Coordinator
Square Ambiorix 23, 1000 Brussels. Tel: +32 (0)486 647 612
aspalletta@tafad.org