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**COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE COUNCIL AND THE
EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT**

Humanitarian Food Assistance

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1. INTRODUCTION

In accordance with the orientation of the Humanitarian Aid Consensus¹, and more generally to promote best practice in the provision of humanitarian food assistance by the EU and its Member States, the principal aims of this Communication are to:

- (1) maximise the effectiveness and efficiency of EU food assistance, in accordance with the Commission's humanitarian mandate defined by the humanitarian legal framework, and in accordance with the Financial Regulation²;
- (2) improve policy coherence, coordination, and complementarity between the Commission, Member States and other donors, in the provision of food assistance;
- (3) inform partners and stakeholders of the Commission's objectives, priorities and standards in the delivery of humanitarian food assistance.

This Communication therefore sets out the policy framework for EU humanitarian food assistance. It explains the issues and trends to be taken into account; the concepts, definitions and objectives that should drive humanitarian food assistance; the principles that should underscore this work; and the scope of activities undertaken.

The accompanying Staff Working Document explains, from a more detailed operational perspective, how the Commission programmes, implements and coordinates its humanitarian food assistance.

This Communication should be read in conjunction with the Commission's Communication on food security ("An EU policy framework to assist developing countries in addressing food security challenges"). Two separate Communications on these interrelated topics are deemed necessary in order to respect the distinction between their policy focus i.e. food assistance linked to humanitarian objectives for populations affected by crises in emergency contexts and food security linked to development objectives. The two policy frameworks have been designed in such a way as to ensure coherence and safeguard against uncoordinated overlap.

2. BACKGROUND

There is an increasing incidence of natural disasters, often exacerbated by the impact of climate change, affecting more people than in the past. Conflict and repression continue to undermine people's ability to pursue their day-to-day livelihoods, and often generate large numbers of refugees and internally displaced persons. Rapid population growth increases existing pressures on natural resources. In many parts of the developing world, these factors

¹ In December 2007, the Council of the European Union adopted the Humanitarian Aid Consensus (European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid: 2008/C 25/01). In the accompanying Action Plan, adopted as a Staff Working Paper in 2008 (European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid – Action Plan: SEC(2008)1991), the European Commission implicitly acknowledges the fast-evolving field of best practice in the food sector, and articulates a specific commitment to elaborate diversified approaches to food assistance and adjust policy accordingly.

² COUNCIL REGULATION (EC, Euratom) No 1605/2002 of 25 June 2002 on the Financial Regulation applicable to the general budget of the European Communities (OJ L 248, 16.9.2002, p. 1)

force vulnerable populations to further compete for natural resources and potentially lead to increasing incidences of conflict.

The impact of these trends deepens the vulnerability of the world's poorest, most notably their food and nutritional vulnerability. Chronic food insecurity, where insufficient food production or an inability to purchase enough nutritious food leads to sustained and persistent inadequacies in the quantity or quality of food consumed, is a driver of chronic malnutrition. This in turn has irreversible and damaging consequences for child development and long-term productivity, which further exacerbates poverty and vulnerability. The poorest, with least resilience, also carry the greatest exposure to the consequences of disasters. These can prompt more temporary but dramatic interruptions in food consumption (transient food insecurity), leading to acute malnutrition and heightened risks of morbidity and mortality.³

Indeed, the number of undernourished people affected by both chronic and transient food insecurity² has increased by 172 million, from 848 million in 2006 to 1.02 billion in 2009⁴. 95% of those undernourished live in developing countries and a growing proportion of these live in urban settings, thus especially exposed to the impact of volatile food prices and the economic/financial crises. The prevalence of acute malnutrition has risen, affecting 8% of the world's under-five children in the period 1995-2003, increasing to 11% in the period 2000-2006⁵.

Approximately 10% of those who are undernourished are food insecure as a consequence of a disaster or emergency situation, and it is anticipated that related humanitarian and development food needs will continue to increase. It is therefore essential that the available humanitarian resources are used in the most efficient and effective way, adapting to this more complex and pressured environment, and that decisions are informed by fast-evolving best-practice.

3. DEFINITIONS AND OBJECTIVES

Humanitarian food assistance aims to ensure the consumption of sufficient, safe and nutritious food in anticipation of, during, and in the aftermath of a humanitarian crisis, when food consumption would otherwise be insufficient or inadequate to avert excessive mortality⁶, emergency rates of acute malnutrition⁷, or detrimental coping mechanisms. This includes ensuring food availability, access to nutritious food, proper nutrition awareness, and appropriate feeding practices. Food assistance may involve the direct provision of food, but may utilize a wider range of tools, including the transfer or provision of relevant services, inputs or commodities, cash or vouchers, skills or knowledge.

Humanitarian food assistance can also be used to protect and strengthen the livelihoods of a crisis-affected population, to prevent or reverse negative coping mechanisms (such as the sale

³ See Glossary in Annex A of accompanying Staff Working Document

⁴ The U.N.'s Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO), 19 June 2009.

⁵ The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) "State of the World's Children" Statistics 2005 and 2008.

⁶ "Excessive" is considered to combine absolute measures in relation to established emergency thresholds (as defined by the Sphere handbook, UNICEF and the UN Standing Committee on Nutrition (SCN)), and relative measures in relation to context-specific baselines.

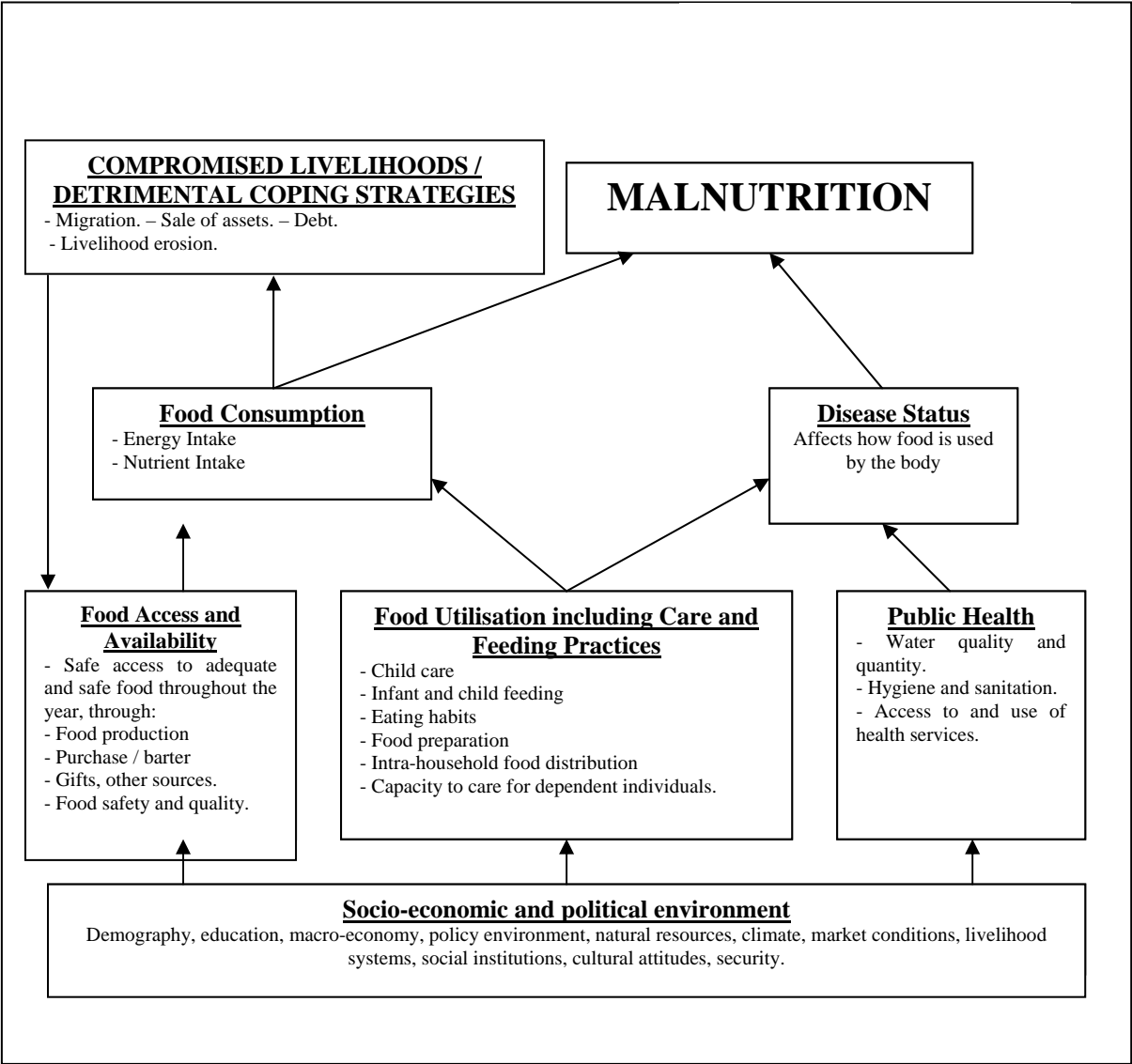
⁷ As defined by the UN Standing Committee on Nutrition (SCN) and the World Health Organisation (WHO)

of productive assets, or the accumulation of debts) that could engender either short-term or longer-term harmful consequences for their livelihood base, their food-security status or their nutritional status.

Adequate food consumption may not *in itself* ensure adequate nutrition. Poor health may inhibit the digestion and utilisation of nutrients leading to malnutrition. Therefore, complementary interventions, including those that ensure safe food preparation (e.g. provision of cooking fuel), or access to potable water, hygiene and health services, may also be required, alongside direct food assistance, to prevent or treat malnutrition.

At the conceptual level there has been an important shift over the last 15 years from the use of in-kind commodity food aid as a default response to emergency food needs, towards consideration of a broader set of humanitarian food assistance tools tailored to tackling the diverse causes and symptoms of transient food insecurity.

The following conceptual framework captures the various root causes, exacerbators, symptoms and consequences of food insecurity, which in turn underscore the definitions and objectives for humanitarian food assistance adopted by the Commission:



In line with the main objectives of EU humanitarian aid as laid out in Council Regulation (EC) No 1257/96 of 20 June 1996 concerning Humanitarian Aid, the principal objective of humanitarian food assistance is to save and preserve life, to protect livelihoods, and to increase resilience, for populations facing on-going or firmly forecasted⁸ food crises, or recovering from them.

This is to be achieved through the specific objectives of humanitarian food assistance, as follows;

- (1) to safeguard the availability of, access to, and consumption of adequate, safe and nutritious food for populations affected by ongoing, firmly forecasted, or recent humanitarian crises so as to avoid excessive mortality⁹, acute malnutrition, or other life-threatening effects and consequences;
- (2) to protect livelihoods threatened by recent, ongoing, or imminent crises, minimise damage to food production and marketing systems, and establish conditions to promote the rehabilitation and restoration of self reliance; and
- (3) to strengthen the capacities of the international humanitarian aid system, to enhance efficiency and effectiveness in the delivery of food assistance.

4. PRINCIPLES

In pursuit of these objectives, the following principles should underscore the delivery of humanitarian food assistance. These are consistent with the general principles governing the delivery of EU humanitarian aid, as laid down in the European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid:

The modalities of food assistance must respect the fundamental humanitarian principles of *humanity, impartiality, neutrality* and *independence*. Decisions on the allocation of humanitarian food assistance will be strictly needs based. Funding will be allocated in an objective manner, according to these principles, to improve the food consumption of those in greatest need, without bias or prejudice.

To this end, the EU and its Member States will ensure that their Humanitarian Food Assistance responses are preceded by, and based on, detailed needs assessments and causal analyses that are as accurate and up to date as possible.

Financing of humanitarian food assistance interventions will be prioritised according to (i) the severity of the crisis and the scale of the unmet needs (ii) the immediacy of the crisis, and (iii) the expected impact of the response. However, the EU is also committed to demonstrating solidarity on a global basis, to sharing the burden of urgent unmet humanitarian food needs and to responding to forgotten crises.

⁸ Such “forecasting” should be based on early warning indicators, and should show a critical inadequacy or deterioration in food consumption which, unless prompting an early response, will become life-threatening within a timeframe consistent with the EC’s humanitarian remit.

⁹ See Footnotes 6 and 7

The EU and its Member States will support humanitarian food assistance operations with flexible resources so as to deliver the most appropriate and effective response in a specific context. The design of any response should compare alternative activities and tools on the basis of their cost-effectiveness for meeting the defined needs.

When food aid is deemed to be the most appropriate tool, local purchase (i.e. purchase in the country of operation) or, secondarily, regional food purchases (i.e. procuring from neighbouring countries) are favoured, so as to maximise acceptability of food products, protect or support local markets, and reduce transportation costs and delivery timeframes.

EU humanitarian food assistance should be results-based, measuring outcomes and impact across its operations (as well as from the practice of other players, and from relevant research) and using it to inform the design of subsequent humanitarian food assistance interventions.

The EU and its Member States will therefore endeavour to ensure that all humanitarian food assistance operations that are financed can be monitored, without hindrance.

The EU and its Member States will strive to do no harm in the process of providing humanitarian food assistance. For instance, they will ensure that, as far as possible, humanitarian food needs are met in ways that do not create undue dependency on the relief system, nor disrupt the functioning of markets, nor expose beneficiaries to undue risk in receiving assistance, while minimising negative environmental impacts and ensuring that conflicts over natural resources are not ignited or antagonised. The EU and its Member States will ensure that, especially in conflicts, protection risks and protection opportunities are properly evaluated in considering the consequences of both intervention and non-intervention¹⁰.

The EU and its Member States will incorporate nutritional perspectives into all food assistance needs assessments and responses, and will pay particular attention to the specific nutritional needs of defined vulnerable groups (including children under-two and pregnant and lactating women).

The EU and its Member States will ensure that human dignity is respected in the provision of humanitarian food assistance. They will seek the involvement of beneficiary communities in identifying needs, and designing and implementing responses. They will ensure that the special needs of vulnerable groups within their beneficiary caseloads (e.g. disabled, elderly, chronically ill) be factored into the design of humanitarian food assistance responses.

Recognising the different needs, capacities and roles of women, girls, boys and men, the EU and its Member States will systematically seek to mainstream gender considerations within humanitarian food-needs assessments, in the design of humanitarian food assistance responses, and in analysing their impact.

Humanitarian food assistance operations and food security development interventions should be designed and implemented in such a way that together they ensure an optimal coverage of emergency and development needs, whether they succeed each other in a continuum or coexist in a contiguum², as in many fragile states. They should be coordinated and eventually dovetailed with each other so as to maximise opportunities for sustainable and durable impact, pursuing the ultimate objective of self-reliance for victims of food crises.

¹⁰ See DG ECHO's Funding Guidelines for Humanitarian Protection; 21 April 2009

EU humanitarian food assistance will therefore uphold Linking Relief Rehabilitation and Development (LRRD) principles and facilitate LRRD objectives, in accordance with the 2001 Commission Communication on LRRD¹¹, with the 2007 EU Humanitarian Aid Consensus¹², and within the stipulations of the Framework Partnership Agreement¹³.

5. SCOPE OF HUMANITARIAN FOOD ASSISTANCE ACTIONS

In order to achieve the objectives outlined above, the core role of humanitarian food assistance work is defined as saving lives, through delivering assistance to meet basic humanitarian food and nutrition needs. However, it also aims to fulfil supportive functions, specifically contributing to reducing risk and vulnerability, and improving the appropriateness and effectiveness of humanitarian food assistance through capacity-strengthening and advocacy.

5.1. The operational scope of the Commission's Humanitarian Food Assistance

The Commission can trigger a humanitarian food assistance response where:

- (1) due to inadequate food consumption, emergency¹⁴ rates of mortality or acute malnutrition have been reached or exceeded, or are anticipated, on the basis of firm forecasts¹⁵; or
- (2) compromised livelihoods or extreme coping strategies (including sale of productive assets, stress migration, resorting to unsafe or insecure survival practices) pose, or are firmly anticipated to pose, a severe threat to life, or a risk of extreme suffering, whether arising from, or leading to, inadequate food consumption.

Recognising that a food crisis sometimes begins, and should be reacted to, before nutritional status deteriorates, the Commission will not necessarily wait for rising rates of acute malnutrition before providing humanitarian food assistance, but will also respond to well defined humanitarian risks that pose a threat to life. Nor does the Commission require a formal disaster declaration in order to respond.

In considering whether and how to respond to a given food crisis, the Commission will pay close attention to the comparative advantages and disadvantages of its humanitarian instruments. This will be founded on a careful analysis of the needs and causes; on consideration of the type of response that will best tackle those needs in the most appropriate way without doing harm; and on a close review of the alternative funding sources available.

The Commission recognises that its humanitarian instruments do not have a comparative advantage in addressing chronic food insecurity. In principle, it will not use humanitarian food assistance to address chronic food insecurity, except: where non-intervention poses

¹¹ EC Communication on LRRD, 2001: *Conclusions*.

¹² EU Humanitarian Consensus, 2007: Section 2.4, Article 22; Section 3.4, Article 53; Section 5; Annex.

¹³ DG ECHO Framework Partnership Agreement 2008: *Article 8*.

¹⁴ The EC defines an emergency based on a combination of absolute thresholds (eg Sphere, WHO etc) and relative indicators set against a contextual norm.

¹⁵ Such "anticipation" should be based on early warning indicators that show a critical inadequacy or deterioration in food consumption which, unless prompting an early response, will become life-threatening within a timeframe consistent with the EC's humanitarian remit.

immediate or imminent humanitarian risk¹⁶ of significant scale and severity; where other more appropriate actors, including its own development instruments, are either unable or unwilling to act, and cannot be persuaded to act; and where, in spite of its comparative disadvantages, positive impact can be expected within the time limitations of its intervention. In such cases, the Commission will only engage humanitarian food assistance on the basis of dialogue, coordination and advocacy with potential development players, where they exist, and with a clear and realistic exit-strategy defined, ensuring coordinated transition and thus avoiding uncoordinated overlap.

The Commission will consider phasing out its humanitarian food assistance interventions when indicators of acute malnutrition, mortality and extreme coping (linked to inadequate food consumption or poor food utilisation), are stable below emergency levels¹⁷, or are expected to stabilise below such levels independently of the Commission's humanitarian support. This should result from the majority of the crisis-affected population achieving, for a sustained period and for the foreseeable future, improvements in food consumption and food utilisation, without resorting to detrimental coping strategies.

The Commission will also consider phasing out its humanitarian support where non-humanitarian players (e.g. state or development actors) are able to cover the population's food gap or where the humanitarian needs of the population are fully covered by other humanitarian donors and actors.

The Commission will at all times evaluate its humanitarian exit strategies on the basis of its comparative advantages relative to other available actors, and will avoid creating disincentives to the engagement of other more appropriate actors arising from its own delayed exit. It will advocate for the engagement of the most appropriate actors across the relief and development spectrum, according to the context and needs.

The Commission will also consider exiting from humanitarian food assistance operations where the core principles of humanitarian food assistance cannot be respected, and particularly when the risk of doing harm outweighs the potential benefits of remaining engaged.

5.2. Meeting Basic Food and Nutrition Needs of Crisis Affected Populations

The EU and its Member States will respond to the diverse symptoms and underlying causes of transient food insecurity and acute malnutrition with a variety of activities and tools to directly address problems of food availability, food access and food use. They will facilitate complementary, multi-sectoral and integrated programming to ensure that humanitarian food needs are addressed holistically and effectively.

The choice of the most appropriate intervention and transfer instrument (e.g. cash-based or in-kind) must be context-specific and evidence-based, and be regularly reviewed. The relevance and comparative advantage of the proposed option –or the combination of tools to be used – must be demonstrated, based on needs assessments and causal analyses that are as accurate and up to date as possible.

¹⁶ See Glossary in Annex A of accompanying Commission Staff Working Document

¹⁷ See footnote 14

Humanitarian food assistance will pay particular attention to providing beneficiaries with timely access to safe and well balanced food, of sufficient quantity and quality¹⁸ to meet their dietary requirements. Where possible, food assistance should also conform to local dietary preferences and be acceptable to beneficiaries.

The reinforcement or protection of agricultural and non-agricultural livelihoods (e.g. providing veterinary services for vulnerable livestock herds, or improving agricultural crop storage) is a legitimate and appropriate emergency response in some humanitarian contexts, so long as it is prompted by emergency needs and meets humanitarian objectives within an appropriate and finite timeframe.

Alongside food assistance measures that directly address food consumption requirements, complementary measures (e.g. public health measures) are considered vital, even though they do not impact directly on food availability, access or use. They have a critical influence on how the human body is able to utilize food and thus influence nutritional outcomes. The EU and its Member States recognise the special food and nutritional needs of specific groups within their overall beneficiary caseloads (e.g. young children, particularly children under two¹⁹, pregnant / lactating women, the elderly, people living with HIV/AIDS²⁰). Where these groups are included in humanitarian food assistance operations on the basis of their food or nutrition needs, the response should take into consideration their particular requirements by providing sufficiently nutritious and adapted foods.

5.3. Supportive Actions

EU humanitarian food assistance interventions must consider opportunities for mainstreaming disaster risk reduction (DRR), preparedness, mitigation and prevention, within the limits of the humanitarian mandates, regulations and food-assistance objectives. The Commission's humanitarian food assistance strategy should be informed by the strategy contained within the Commission Communication on an EU Strategy for DRR in developing countries²¹.

The Commission recognises that Disaster Risk Reduction initiatives (such as Early Warning Systems and Strategic Food Stocks) often demand long-term support, national or regional ownership, and careful consideration of economic and political perspectives. Therefore routine support for them is deemed to be beyond the comparative advantage of humanitarian actors. However the Commission's humanitarian action may pursue simultaneous risk reduction outcomes whilst delivering food assistance, and may also participate in short-term reinforcement, piloting and scaling-up of DRR initiatives, in collaboration with development actors. Respecting the “do no harm” principle, actions should avoid increasing beneficiaries’ vulnerability and risk-exposure to other crises.

¹⁸ Quantity, as measured in energy composition, and quality, as measured in food safety and its protein, macro-nutrient and micro-nutrient composition. SPHERE / WHO standard for food quantity / energy requirement is 2100 Kcal per person per day, averaged across all age groups. WHO/UNICEF/World Food Programme (WFP)/United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) have agreed standards for food quality /micronutrient composition (*see Food and Nutrition Needs in Emergencies, Nov 2002*) although these are currently under review.

¹⁹ Children under-2 being those that are most at risk of illness and malnutrition, and for whom a window of opportunity exists to ensure long-term health and cognitive benefits through adequate nutrient intake.

²⁰ Please see DG ECHO's HIV Guidelines, adopted October 2008.

²¹ See COM(2009)84

The limited experience and skill-set of humanitarian actors often constrains the use of the most appropriate food assistance interventions. Therefore the EU and its Member States recognise the need to invest in strengthening the capacity of the humanitarian system to deliver more varied and more appropriate forms of food assistance.

Increasing levels of chronic food insecurity equate to an increasing number of people vulnerable to future crises. If unchecked, this will multiply the demands on limited humanitarian resources. Coordination and advocacy are therefore needed to influence the public-policy debates and the resource-allocation decisions of national governments and development actors towards meeting food-security objectives. Advocacy must be directed at state actors to fulfil their fundamental responsibility in safe-guarding the food-security of their people. Advocacy must also be directed at development actors (including governments) in relation to the developmental needs of populations in crisis contexts.

Effective integration of humanitarian and development assistance must be promoted through LRRD, ensuring that the international aid system operates consistently, coherently and transparently to address hunger and vulnerability. Advocacy should ensure that collective efforts span emergency, transitional and developmental needs simultaneously, and promote enabling conditions linked to good governance and conducive national and international policies (e.g. for trade and migration).

The EU and its Member States support the idea of inclusive coordination of Humanitarian Food Assistance under strong and capacitated governance and leadership. This includes close coordination with relevant and viable national humanitarian actors. Within the framework of UN and Humanitarian Reform, the Commission endorses the cluster approach to coordination, and supports all efforts to make it work effectively for the food and nutrition sectors, ensuring that it also links with the global architecture for governance of agriculture, food security and nutrition.