

Fundamentals of Distribution

Distribution Modalities

When assisting an affected population, delivery of physical goods is not the only possible response. Based on needs, different transfer modalities can be used:

In-kind - Beneficiaries receive the goods directly in the form of end products such as [kits and rations](#).

Cash/Voucher - Beneficiaries receive a convertible value unit which can be used to acquire the necessary goods.

Cash/ Voucher interventions have unique considerations to be taken into account that are not the purpose of this guide. Information about Cash and Voucher Assistance (CVA) can be found through [The Cash Learning Partnership \(CaLP\)](#) network.

Distribution Methodologies

Generally speaking there are three different methodologies for managing distribution, and while each share the same ultimate goal they have different approaches, methods and objectives. This guide can be used by all the possible actors involved in a distribution, but it is assumed that distribution will be managed by an agency or one of its partners.

Government-Managed Distribution

The government may at different levels be the receiver and distributor of goods, using or coordinating with public distribution systems. For agencies involved in distribution, *"maximum use should be made of existing organisations and structures within the affected localities, with adaptations and redeployment as necessary"* (WFP, 1991). Government intervention frequently involves mechanisms for ensuring price stabilisation, such as sale of food through public distribution systems or subsidised NFI sales through fair price shops. Sale of commodities may be preferential to large-scale free distribution which usually is distributed to selected vulnerable groups through schools, social welfare, clinics, or other common coordination mechanisms.

The extent of government involvement in relief operations varies considerably from one emergency situation to another. Whereas in some countries the emergency response could be entirely in the hands of the government, other governments with lower capacity may be less or completely not involved.

Community-Managed Distribution

A variety of distribution methods have been termed "community-managed distribution". In some cases of community-managed distribution all aspects of the distribution process are managed by the community, whereas in others the community only manages part of the program.

- In entirely community managed programs, traditional leaders register beneficiaries and distribute items to families according to their perception of need.
- In partly community managed programs, community representatives manage one aspect of the program or participate through committees. For example, an agency may register beneficiaries and monitor, whilst the community distributes. Alternatively, community

representatives may register beneficiaries and an aid agency distributes. In both cases, committees may participate in planning and monitoring the distribution.

Agency-Managed Distribution

An agency-managed distribution process entails commodity distribution direct to families or individuals by an agency or a trusted partner organisation. Agency-managed distribution requires registration of beneficiary families, sometimes limited to beneficiary lists, but often linked with the issuing of ration cards. A family member may need to present a ration card, ID or some other form of biometric information, and collect the distributed item. The item is usually, measured, weighed or counted by agency staff to match the entitlement and distribution plan.

Many variations on agency-managed distribution systems are possible. A compromise between what is ideal and what is possible may have to be made if no registration is possible.

Types of Distributions

The context of each distribution informs decisions on the types of distribution that best reach the desired objectives. The contextual factors include the geographic and cultural factors, the type of emergency, the vulnerabilities present in the population, and the nature of the distributed items.

By Set Up	Mobile Distribution	Portable distribution setups usually assembled out of vehicles to assist in multiple locations or areas without a permanent location. <i>Example: Open areas designed with ropes, trucks.</i>
	Fixed Distribution	Permanent or Semi-permanent distribution locations where basic infrastructure will be available for distributions. <i>Examples: MSUs, Community Centres.</i>
By Commodity Type	Recurrent Distribution	The same population is served several times by the same pool of commodities in a well-defined period of time. <i>Example: Food distribution.</i>
	Single Distribution	A group of people or location is served once for the distribution of a specific type of supplies. <i>Examples: NFIs, vaccination.</i>
By Population	Blanket Distribution	In certain geographical locations, all populations within a specific group will receive supplies. <i>Example: Any children of school age receive educational supplies.</i>

Beneficiaries are selected by specific criteria generally based on vulnerability and needs.

Conditional Distribution *Examples: Families with three or more children receive a complementary mosquito net.*

Distribution Systems

Distribution systems can be classified according to whom the commodities are given. There are three broad categories of distribution system.

Community Leaders

System Description	Commodities are given in bulk to a representative of a group of beneficiaries who further divide it among the group.
Type of situation in which these systems have been used	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Early days of an emergency.• Mass influx of refugees.• No formal registration.• Large populations.
Advantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Limited staff needed.• Community leadership structures already in place. The beneficiaries themselves can act as monitors of the distribution process.• Can be used in first stages of a large influx with limited space for distribution.• Can be implemented without registration or ration cards.• Distribution is relatively quick to get started.
Disadvantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Easy for community leadership and/or the 'strongest' to abuse their position and discriminate against parts of the population.• There may be many levels of re-distribution, from the leadership to many layers of "sub-leaders" until it reaches the individual household.• Distribution may not be equal. Based on the communities' own norms, certain groups or individuals (not at risk) may receive more than others.• Can be difficult for the most at risk to receive proper portions.• Lack of control on beneficiaries' figures.• Difficulty in monitoring the distribution.• If women are not properly represented in the leadership, they may have difficulty of access.

Prerequisites for Success	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good understanding of the social and cultural dynamics. • Spot checks and monitoring to ensure that distribution is equitable. • A strong information system. • An effective complaint mechanism.
Group of Heads of Family	
System Description	All of the commodities for the group of families are handed over to a representative of the group. The commodities are then immediately redistributed to the individual family heads by the representatives.
Type of situation in which these systems have been used	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When people are settled. • When registration is done and ration cards are available. • Homogeneous groups. • Can be used in camps with small or large populations.
Advantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promotes social interaction within the refugee community and enhances social adjustment to the new situation and environment. • Influence over the selection of leaders, or introduce new community leadership structures, ensure the representation of women etc. • Shares responsibility for distribution with the beneficiaries. • The beneficiaries themselves act as monitors of the distribution process. • Requires a small number of distribution staff • Quick implementation. • Security problems related to crowd control are minimised by the presence of the family group representatives.
Disadvantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Needs registration and substantial administration to organise family groups. • An extensive information campaign is needed. • Best suited for homogeneous group of beneficiaries. • Needs reliable and verified population figures. • Abuses by family group representatives may happen. • Monitoring of the final re-distribution within the groups is needed when this is taking place away from the agency distribution site.
Prerequisites for Success	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Heads of groups must be chosen by the community. • Spot checks and monitoring to ensure that distribution is equitable. • Strong information system. • Effective complaint mechanism(s).

Individual Heads of Family

System Description	Commodities are handed over directly to each family head.
Type of situation in which these systems have been used	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Settled population. • Registered population. • Beneficiaries living in camps, settlements or integrated within the local population.
Advantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Retain control over the whole delivery process right to family level. This may be important in situations where there are inadequate community structures. • Makes it possible to target at risk groups. • Transparency. • Commodities reach the beneficiaries directly. • Easy to monitor that female headed households, and vulnerable families have proper access.
Disadvantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very staff intensive. • Needs a large amount of infrastructure. • Needs registration and a substantial administration. • Takes away most of the responsibility for distribution from the beneficiaries themselves. • Can be difficult for the beneficiaries themselves to act as monitors of the distribution process. • Not applicable in early stages of an emergency. • Scooping could prove difficult to monitor.
Prerequisites for Success	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Registration and entitlement cards. • Effective complaint mechanism(s).

Adapted from [UNHCR Commodity Distribution Guide](#)

Distributing agencies should always ensure that those who lack the traditional family structures - such as unaccompanied minors, unsupported elderly or disabled people - also receive assistance, and should establish a distribution system that can accommodate this. This might mean grouping vulnerable people into “households” for the purposes of receiving assistance.