



AMERICAN JOURNAL OF SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT AND ENTREPRE- NEURSHIP (AJSDE)

ISSN: 2836-0702 (ONLINE)

VOLUME 5 ISSUE 2 (2026)



PUBLISHED BY
E-PALLI PUBLISHERS, DELAWARE, USA

Food Diplomacy and International Relations: A Review of Food Aid, Agricultural Assistance and Soft Power

Sarah Machero^{1*}, Khalil Daniel Mukhammadovich¹, Ebassola Clyde Hyacinthe¹, Mohammad Haroon Rahmani¹

Article Information

Received: July 24, 2026

Accepted: October 01, 2026

Published: October 14, 2026

Keywords

Agricultural Cooperation, Food Aid, Food Diplomacy, Humanitarian Assistance, International Relations, Soft Power

ABSTRACT

Food assistance is a means of humanitarian intervention and a mechanism of international relations through which states and international organizations communicate solidarity, pursue tactical interests, and cultivate diplomatic influence. This review examines how food aid, humanitarian crisis response, and agricultural assistance operate as forms of food diplomacy and potential sources of soft power. A structured literature review guided by the Synthesis Without Meta-analysis approach was conducted using 52 peer-reviewed studies published between 1978 and 2023. The evidence was organized into four themes: food aid as foreign policy and soft power; humanitarian assistance in conflict and famine; effectiveness, targeting and market consequences; and agricultural assistance and South–South cooperation. The research findings show that food assistance does not automatically produce diplomatic goodwill. Food assistance thus builds soft power only when it is timely, legitimate, locally informed, and recognized by recipients. Although it can reduce hunger and strengthen diplomatic relations, political conditions, commercial interests, restricted access, and diversion can damage both humanitarian outcomes and donor credibility. The effectiveness of cash, local procurement, and in-kind aid depends on the local context. Furthermore, agricultural cooperation creates lasting value when it promotes local ownership, shared knowledge, and equal partnerships. Soft power is therefore earned through effective humanitarian action, not donor publicity.

INTRODUCTION

Food is a basic human right, a strategic commodity, and a means of communicating political intent. Food diplomacy therefore extends beyond cuisine and national branding to include emergency food aid, nutrition financing, food-aid systems, and agricultural knowledge transfer. These activities can relieve suffering while signaling solidarity, competence, and reliability. Soft power explains how such assistance may shape preferences without coercion, while public diplomacy concerns how foreign publics interpret donor identity and motives (Nye, 1990, 2008). Food is thus governed through international institutions and shared knowledge, while humanitarian organizations remain political actors despite their commitment to impartiality (Barnett, 2005; Hopkins, 1992; Nau, 1978). The diplomatic value of food assistance is closely tied to its allocation. Although donors respond to humanitarian need, they may also pursue commercial, security, ideological, and institutional interests. Strategic alignment influences aid distribution, while a country's temporary position in multilateral institutions can affect the assistance it receives (Alesina & Dollar, 2000; Dreher *et al.*, 2008). Disaster relief and food-aid decisions may likewise reflect foreign-policy priorities and domestic political incentives (Drury *et al.*, 2005; Neumayer, 2005). Food assistance can therefore generate goodwill, but selectivity, conditionality, delay, and perceived self-interest may weaken donor credibility. These concerns become most urgent during famine, armed conflict, displacement, and state fragility. Famine

rarely results from food shortage alone; it also develops through political exclusion, market disruption, violence, restricted movement, institutional failure, and delayed action. The Somalia famine showed that early warning cannot prevent mass mortality without timely financing, humanitarian access, and political intervention (Howe, 2018; Maxwell & Fitzpatrick, 2012). Ending mass starvation therefore requires political accountability as well as food availability (de Waal, 2018). Conflict further disrupts production, distribution, prices, and humanitarian access, making food insecurity both a consequence and a potential instrument of war (Kemmerling *et al.*, 2022). Food diplomacy in crises should therefore be judged by its timeliness, accessibility, protection of civilians, and sensitivity to conflict—not simply by the volume of aid delivered.

This review examines how food aid, agricultural assistance and crisis response function within international relations and diplomacy. Its objectives are to identify the foreign-policy and soft-power logics that shape food assistance; assess evidence on humanitarian effectiveness, targeting, market effects and conflict risks; compare emergency relief with longer-term agricultural cooperation; and develop principles for assistance that is both operationally effective and diplomatically legitimate. The review builds on empirical syntheses of food-aid outcomes and innovation in assistance instruments, while connecting them to the politics of South–South agricultural cooperation (Awokuse, 2011; Lentz, Barrett, *et al.*, 2013; Bräutigam & Tang, 2009; Scoones *et al.*, 2016). It differs

¹ Department of Theory and History of International Relations, Peoples' Friendship University of Russia (RUDN) named after Patrice Lumumba, 117198, Moscow, Russia

* Corresponding author's e-mail: Sarhmachero@gmail.com

from studies that treat food aid primarily as a technical transfer, examine foreign aid without distinguishing food's strategic and life-sustaining characteristics, or reduce food diplomacy to culinary promotion. By integrating famine politics, humanitarian action, aid allocation, agricultural capacity building and recipient perceptions in one international-relations framework, the review places human security and diplomatic legitimacy at the centre of analysis.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Food Diplomacy and Soft Power

Food diplomacy, as used in this review, refers to the cross-border use of food assistance, agricultural cooperation and food-related institutions in humanitarian and political relationships. It differs from gastrodplomacy, which uses cuisine to communicate a country's culture and image. Food assistance has a direct material function: it can support consumption during a crisis or contribute to agricultural production over a longer period. At the same time, decisions about its allocation and delivery can convey political priorities. Food has consequently been a subject of international negotiation and institutional coordination, as well as a commodity exchanged through markets (Nau, 1978; Hopkins, 1992). Food diplomacy should be distinguished from soft power. Nye (1990,

2008) uses soft power to describe influence associated with attraction rather than coercion. Food assistance may contribute to such influence, but the provision of aid and the creation of goodwill are separate events. A recipient may value assistance without knowing its source, may credit a national government or local organization for delivering it, or may appreciate the intervention while opposing other policies of the donor. Food diplomacy describes the activity and the relationships through which it occurs; soft power describes a possible effect on perceptions and preferences. This distinction is especially relevant to humanitarian action. Relief agencies may work according to principles of need and impartiality while negotiating with governments, armed actors and donors to reach affected populations. Their operations therefore take place within political relationships even when their purpose is to relieve suffering (Barnett, 2005). The diplomatic meaning of an intervention cannot be determined solely from the donor's intention. It also depends on how assistance is allocated, how it is delivered and how the people affected experience it. Figure 1 summarizes how food assistance and agricultural cooperation may lead to humanitarian and diplomatic outcomes, depending on allocation, access, delivery and recipient conditions.

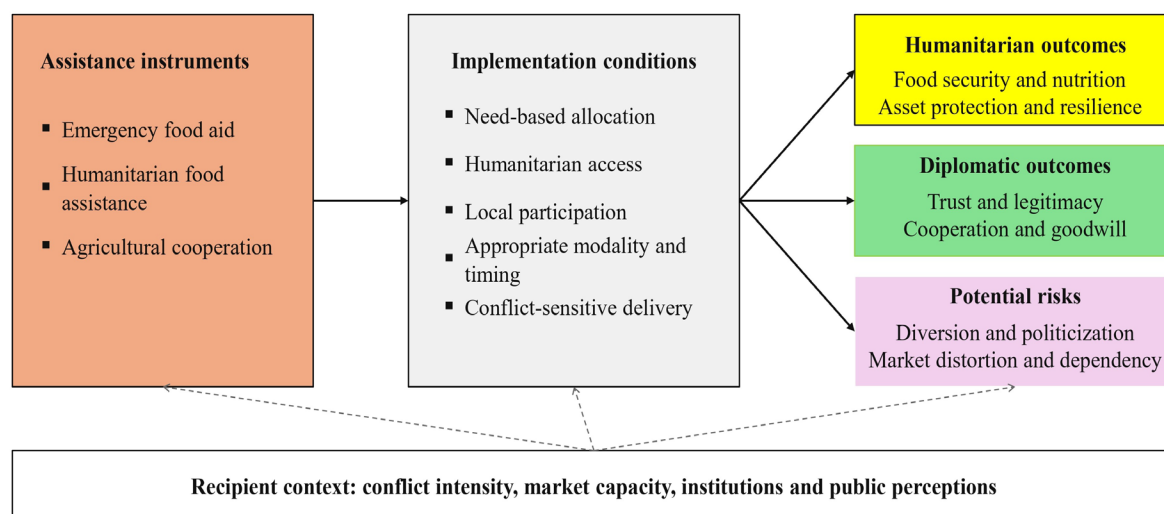


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework Linking Food Assistance, Agricultural Cooperation, Humanitarian Outcomes and Diplomatic Soft Power

Donor Motives and the Allocation of Food Aid

The allocation of food aid reflects more than one consideration. Humanitarian need is a reason to provide assistance, but decisions are also shaped by donor institutions and foreign-policy interests. Studies of United States PL 480 food aid identify political, economic and humanitarian motivations, while domestic constituencies and policy processes influence the form that assistance takes (Ball & Johnson, 1996; Diven, 2001). In a study of food-aid allocation across donors, Neumayer (2005) found some evidence of donor-interest bias, particularly preferential treatment of geographically close countries.

These findings do not mean that aid sent for strategic reasons provides no humanitarian benefit. They show that a genuine need for food and a donor's interest in a particular relationship can coexist. Research on foreign aid more generally provides context for these choices. Political and strategic relationships help explain development-aid patterns, and studies have examined associations between aid and voting or temporary membership in international institutions (Alesina & Dollar, 2000; Dreher *et al.*, 2008; Kuziemko & Werker, 2006). Because those studies cover aid beyond food assistance, their results should not be presented as food-aid estimates. They do, however,

identify incentives that may be relevant when food-related programmes are funded through the same foreign-policy institutions.

Emergency responses are also uneven. Research on disaster and humanitarian assistance examines the influence of donor priorities, media coverage and organizational processes on which crises receive attention and resources (Drury *et al.*, 2005; Fink & Redaelli, 2011; Olsen *et al.*, 2003). A food emergency may therefore be severe without receiving an equally prompt or visible response. The gap between need and assistance is a question for empirical investigation: it cannot be explained by assuming either that donors ignore need or that every difference in funding is justified by need. Commercial relationships add another dimension. Falkowski (2018) examined United States food aid and exports to recipient countries during the Cold War. That historical relationship does not describe every food-aid programme, but it shows why food assistance can be connected to trade and agricultural policy. Taken together, the allocation studies suggest that claims of humanitarian impartiality should be evaluated against actual patterns of need, funding and delivery. The presence of donor interests does not settle whether an intervention helped recipients; the humanitarian and diplomatic outcomes must each be assessed.

Assistance, Public Opinion and Diplomatic Influence

Whether assistance improves a donor's reputation is an empirical question. Foreign-aid studies indicate that effects on public attitudes depend partly on whether people know who financed a project and how they interpret its benefits (Blair *et al.*, 2022; Goldsmith *et al.*, 2014). Blair *et al.* (2022) investigate aid and soft power in the context of Chinese and United States engagement in Africa. Their study concerns foreign aid broadly. Its findings inform possible mechanisms of food diplomacy, but they cannot establish the effect of a particular food distribution or agricultural programme. Experimental work makes the difference between donor recognition and political influence clearer. Dietrich *et al.* (2018) studied responses to information about a United States-funded health project in Bangladesh. Explicit information about the funding slightly improved general perceptions of the United States and increased confidence in local authorities but did not change views on substantive foreign-policy issues. The intervention was not food aid. Its relevance here lies in the distinction between knowing a donor's identity, feeling more favourably toward it and adopting its policy preferences. It also illustrates that a recipient government may share in the legitimacy associated with a foreign-funded project.

Aid may also be interpreted against an unfavourable political background. Tokdemir (2017) questions the assumption that foreign assistance reliably reduces anti-American sentiment. Assistance that recipients view as selective, self-serving or inconsistent with other donor policies may have limited reputational value. Conversely,

an intervention can be valued for its practical results without producing a measurable change in diplomatic alignment. The literature therefore supports treating donor visibility, recipient approval and foreign-policy influence as distinct outcomes rather than successive stages that always occur. For food diplomacy, this means that favourable attitudes cannot be inferred from the amount of food delivered or the prominence of a donor's name. Research needs to establish what recipients know about the intervention, how they evaluate its conduct and whether any change in attitude persists.

Famine, Political Action and Humanitarian Access

Famine research challenges accounts that explain mass starvation by food supply alone. Severe hunger can develop through interacting pressures on livelihoods, markets, political inclusion and people's ability to move or obtain assistance (Howe, 2018). De Waal (2018) emphasizes the role of political action in preventing mass starvation. Plümper and Neumayer (2009) examine political incentives that may contribute to governmental inaction during a famine threat. These studies do not dismiss drought, crop failure or other shocks. They ask why a shock produces extreme mortality for particular populations and why authorities sometimes fail to prevent it. The 2011 Somalia famine illustrates the limits of warning without an effective response. Early warnings existed, but the mobilization of resources and the delivery of assistance faced serious obstacles. Accounts of the crisis examine delays in action, conflict, restricted access and the difficulties of operating in affected areas (Hillbruner & Moloney, 2012; Maxwell & Fitzpatrick, 2012; Menkhaus, 2012).

Conflict can disrupt food systems through several routes. It may interfere with production and trade, restrict movement, raise risks for traders and aid workers, or affect who controls access to land and food. The relationship between warfare and food insecurity thus extends beyond damage to agricultural output (Kemmerling *et al.*, 2022). Food-related violence can itself be part of a humanitarian crisis, shaping which communities can produce, buy or receive food (Dowd, 2023). An adequate response requires attention to these conditions as well as to the volume of assistance available. Protracted crises further complicate a model based on repeated short-term deliveries. Maxwell *et al.* (2010) question whether established food-security responses are fit for prolonged emergencies. Immediate consumption support remains essential, but a population may continue to face insecurity because livelihoods and institutions have been damaged. This is not an argument for postponing relief until development programmes can be established. It is an argument for understanding why emergency needs recur and for assessing whether a response reaches people despite the political and operational barriers surrounding them.

Food Assistance in Armed Conflict

Food assistance can protect civilians during conflict while

also affecting the environment in which conflict occurs. Relief supplies may be diverted or taxed, and decisions about distribution sites can alter movement and local authority (Lischer, 2003). These are risks examined in programme design, not grounds for assuming that the absence of assistance would leave food-insecure people better off. The consequences of aid must be assessed at more than one scale: household welfare and the behaviour of armed actors are different outcomes. Quantitative studies report conflicting results. Nunn and Qian (2014) used variation in United States food-aid shipments to estimate an increase in the incidence and duration of civil conflicts. They found no robust effect on the onset of civil conflict or on interstate conflict. Mary and Mishra (2020), using a different measure of humanitarian food aid and a different sample, estimated a reduction in civil-conflict incidence. Koppenberg *et al.* (2023) reviews the debate and the methodological choices that affect its interpretation. The appropriate reading is that findings vary across definitions, settings and research designs; neither an invariably harmful nor an invariably pacifying effect has been established.

Household and programme studies provide evidence about benefits that national conflict measures cannot capture. Food aid and household food security were examined in conflict-affected northern Uganda (Tusiime *et al.*, 2013). In Mali, a quasi-experimental evaluation found that food assistance increased food and non-food expenditure and micronutrient availability among the populations studied (Tranchant *et al.*, 2019). Several effects on consumption and child height were concentrated in areas away from the immediate vicinity of conflict, while some benefits were also observed in villages where armed groups were present. The findings demonstrate both a protective role for assistance and variation in its effects according to conflict exposure and programme conditions. Who receives aid, and who decides, can be especially contentious where access is restricted. Community participation may bring knowledge of local needs into targeting, but local power relationships can also influence selection. Participatory targeting therefore requires attention to accountability as well as inclusion (Maxwell *et al.*, 2011). Evidence from Yemen shows another difficulty. Following the announcement of a food emergency, food assistance expanded and increased more in regions identified as closer to famine, yet improvement in food access was modest; the study also faced the limits of surveying mobile-phone users (Tandon & Vishwanath, 2021). These studies support examining coverage, exclusion and distribution practices rather than judging a response only by its total scale.

Responsiveness, Production and Local Markets

The timing and location of food aid are central to its effectiveness. Barrett (2001) assessed whether food aid stabilizes food availability, while Barrett and Heisey (2002) examined the responsiveness of multilateral assistance to changing needs. Donor coordination and the relationship

between allocations and recipient-country conditions are also examined by Kuhlitz *et al.* (2010). These studies address a basic problem: resources pledged to a crisis are useful only to the extent that they reach affected people when they can still prevent or reduce harm. Effects can continue beyond the transfer itself. The dynamic consequences of United States food aid were studied by Barrett *et al.* (1999), while a broader review by Awokuse (2011) considers empirical approaches to assessing impacts in recipient countries. Food may influence prices, household decisions and future expectations. Yet food aid is often directed toward places already experiencing a shock. An observed decline in production or change in prices cannot simply be attributed to assistance without considering the conditions that prompted its delivery. One longstanding concern is that donated food could lower local producer prices and discourage farming. The evidence is more specific than that general claim. Abdulai *et al.* (2005), using national-level evidence from sub-Saharan Africa, did not find a general disincentive effect on food production. Tadesse and Shively (2009) examined prices and producer incentives in Ethiopia and argued for attention to how assistance is targeted in relation to production. Different markets and levels of analysis need not produce identical results. The studies support assessing the timing, quantity and location of aid alongside local supply and demand rather than presuming that producer harm always occurs or never occurs.

Assistance Modalities and Humanitarian Outcomes

Imported food, local or regional procurement, cash and vouchers offer different ways of meeting food needs. Their suitability depends on such conditions as available supply, market functioning, delivery time and the programme's nutritional objective. Comparative work emphasizes the importance of choosing an instrument for the context rather than assuming that one form of transfer is best everywhere (Lentz, Barrett, *et al.*, 2013). Local and regional procurement can offer advantages in timeliness and cost, but purchasing food nearer to recipients still requires attention to supply and prices (Lentz, Passarelli, *et al.*, 2013). Canada's experience with untying assistance illustrates how donor procurement rules influence the options available to programmes (Cardwell & Ghazalian, 2020). The measure used to judge effectiveness is equally important. An increase in national food availability does not necessarily show that vulnerable households received food, and higher household consumption does not by itself establish an improvement in child nutrition. Gilligan and Hoddinott (2007) studied whether the effects of emergency food aid on consumption, food security and assets persisted in rural Ethiopia. Quisumbing (2003) examined food aid and child nutrition in the same country, addressing an outcome shaped by more than the quantity of food entering a household. At a broader scale, Kuhlitz and Abdulai (2012) investigated the relationship between food-aid allocation and malnutrition across developing

countries. The studies ask related questions, but their outcomes and units of analysis are not interchangeable. Conflict makes these distinctions more consequential. Assistance in Yemen expanded substantially after an emergency announcement and helped maintain food access amid repeated shocks, while the measured improvement in access remained limited (Tandon & Vishwanath, 2021). In Mali, benefits differed according to conflict exposure and the forms of assistance households received (Tranchant *et al.*, 2019). A programme may consequently be necessary and beneficial while still falling short of its intended coverage or nutritional effect. Its diplomatic visibility cannot substitute for evaluating those humanitarian results.

Agricultural Cooperation and South–South Relationships

Agricultural assistance differs from emergency relief in duration and purpose. It may involve research, training, demonstration projects and institutions intended to support production over time. China’s engagement in African agriculture has taken varied forms rather than following a single uniform model (Bräutigam & Tang, 2009). The priorities and decisions of African governments and other local actors are part of those programmes, not merely conditions encountered after a donor has designed them. Studies of Chinese and Brazilian engagement call for similar attention to the specific relationships involved. Scoones *et al.* (2016) identify political and economic drivers, as well as contested roles for states and businesses. Their analysis cautions against assuming either that the label South–South cooperation guarantees an equal partnership or that all engagement follows the same pattern of external control. Whether cooperation is responsive to local priorities depends on how a project is negotiated, implemented and governed. Knowledge itself is a subject of negotiation. Agricultural Technology Demonstration Centers involve decisions about which methods are promoted, whose expertise is recognized and how techniques are adapted to local conditions (Xu *et al.*, 2016). Training and demonstration can create continuing professional and institutional contact, but the presence of a centre does not establish that its knowledge is appropriate everywhere it is introduced. Assessing its value requires attention to what farmers and partner institutions can use, change or reject

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Review Design and Search Strategy

This study employed a structured literature review guided by the Synthesis Without Meta-analysis (SWiM) approach (Campbell *et al.*, 2020). SWiM was appropriate because the selected studies differed substantially in their research designs, geographical settings, assistance modalities and reported outcomes, making statistical meta-analysis unsuitable. Scholarly searches and targeted journal and publisher searches were conducted using combinations of the terms “food diplomacy,” “food aid,”

“humanitarian food assistance,” “agricultural assistance,” “foreign policy,” “international relations,” “soft power,” “hunger,” “famine,” “conflict,” and “humanitarian crisis.” The review also examined reference lists to identify additional relevant studies, and verified DOI records and publication details. The review covered literature published between 1978 and 2023, and the search and bibliographic verification were completed in August 2026.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Studies were included when they were peer-reviewed, written in English and directly examined food aid, humanitarian food assistance, agricultural cooperation, hunger, famine, or food insecurity within an international-relations or diplomatic context. Empirical, theoretical, historical and review studies were eligible when they addressed donor motivations, foreign-policy interests, humanitarian outcomes, conflict, aid allocation, public opinion, soft power, market effects, or agricultural cooperation. Studies concerned only with domestic food policy, culinary tourism, national cuisine promotion, or technical agricultural and nutritional issues without an international or diplomatic dimension were excluded. News articles, opinion pieces, duplicated records and publications with unverifiable bibliographic information were also excluded. Applying these criteria produced a final corpus of 52 studies.

Data Organization and SWiM Synthesis

Information was extracted on the study’s publication year, geographical context, form of assistance, principal actors, diplomatic purpose, humanitarian outcome and identified risks or limitations. The studies were organized into four analytical categories: food aid as foreign policy and soft power; humanitarian assistance in conflict and famine; effectiveness, targeting and market consequences; and agricultural assistance and South–South cooperation. Following SWiM, the findings were synthesized narratively by comparing the direction, consistency and contextual conditions of reported outcomes rather than combining numerical effect estimates. Particular attention was given to areas of agreement, conflicting findings and differences between emergency food relief and longer-term agricultural assistance.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Dual Character of Food Diplomacy

The literature suggests that food diplomacy is neither a simple transfer of resources nor a diplomatic message that donors can control. Assistance has an immediate material consequence for people who receive it, but it is organized through relationships among donors, governments, humanitarian agencies and local communities. Food entered international bargaining and developed a specialized aid regime partly because access to it is consequential and its distribution requires institutional decisions (Nau, 1978; Hopkins, 1992). Those decisions influence both humanitarian outcomes and the

political meaning attached to assistance. The coexistence of humanitarian and donor interests is central to this interpretation. Food aid allocated in accordance with a donor's strategic or commercial priorities may still meet genuine needs. Yet differences in the treatment of comparable crises can place claims of impartiality under scrutiny. Research on United States food-aid policy documents political and domestic influences, while cross-donor analysis identifies some donor-interest bias in allocation (Ball & Johnson, 1996; Diven, 2001; Neumayer, 2005). Historical research also connects food aid with export relationships in a specific Cold War setting (Falkowski, 2018). These findings do not reduce every intervention to self-interest. They show why the purpose of an allocation cannot be established from humanitarian language alone.

The same caution applies to claims of soft power. Assistance may affect public attitudes, but aid, donor recognition, favourable opinion and support for a donor's policies are distinct outcomes. Studies of foreign aid and public opinion provide evidence that attribution and context matter; they do not establish an automatic reputational return from food aid (Blair *et al.*, 2022; Goldsmith *et al.*, 2014). Dietrich *et al.* (2018), for example, found that information about a United States-funded health project in Bangladesh slightly improved general perceptions of the United States and confidence in local authorities without changing views on substantive foreign-policy issues. From these findings, the most defensible theoretical inference is that diplomatic influence depends partly on recipient interpretation. It cannot be treated as a commodity delivered alongside food. This interpretation also gives recipient governments and local organizations a more active place in food diplomacy. They may negotiate programmes, help determine access, deliver assistance and receive public credit for its benefits. Conversely, an external donor may be visible but viewed as pursuing its own interests. Diplomatic analysis should therefore ask not only what a donor intended, but whose actions recipients recognized and whether the intervention was considered useful and legitimate.

Famine and Conflict Expose the Limits of Reputation as a Goal

In famine-risk settings, the first question is whether assistance helps prevent deprivation and death. Famine studies show why identifying a food shortage or issuing an early warning does not itself secure that outcome. Political exclusion, delayed decisions, restricted access and the loss of livelihoods can determine who remains exposed to severe hunger (de Waal, 2018; Howe, 2018; Plümper & Neumayer, 2009). Accounts of the 2011 Somalia famine demonstrate the operational importance of financing and access after warning signs have been identified (Hillbruner & Moloney, 2012; Maxwell & Fitzpatrick, 2012; Menkhous, 2012). A donor's willingness to supply food matters, but its effectiveness depends on whether people can be reached in time. Conflict adds risks

that cannot be resolved by measuring aggregate deliveries. Assistance may protect household consumption while armed actors' tax or divert resources, or while distribution arrangements affect civilian movement and local authority (Lischer, 2003). The quantitative literature itself is unsettled. Nunn and Qian (2014) estimated that increased United States food aid raised the incidence and duration of civil conflicts, whereas Mary and Mishra (2020) estimated a reduction in conflict incidence using a different measure of humanitarian food aid and research design. Koppenberg *et al.* (2023) show why definitions, mechanisms and methods are central to interpreting this disagreement. It would be unwarranted to conclude that food aid is invariably conflict-producing or invariably peace-promoting.

Evidence about recipients supplies another part of the picture. Research in northern Uganda addresses household food security during conflict (Tusiime *et al.*, 2013). In Mali, food assistance increased household expenditures and micronutrient availability among the populations studied, although several effects varied with exposure to armed conflict and the forms of assistance received (Tranchant *et al.*, 2019). A programme can therefore have protective effects for households even when the wider consequences of its distribution require monitoring. This distinction argues for conflict-sensitive design and evaluation, not for assuming that withdrawal is the safer choice. A reputation-centred programme could create additional tensions if visibility influenced where or to whom aid was delivered. The cited studies do not establish that donor publicity has distorted every such decision; rather, their findings make independent assessment and transparent targeting important safeguards. Humanitarian organizations already work within complex relationships with states and security actors (Barnett, 2005). Where access is contested, diplomacy can be useful in negotiating routes and permissions, while eligibility for life-saving assistance should remain grounded in need.

Effectiveness Depends on the Whole Delivery Process

The literatures give little support to judging effectiveness from the amount of food pledged or shipped. Allocation must respond to changing needs, assistance must arrive on time, and intended recipients must be able to obtain it. Studies of food availability and multilateral aid examine how well assistance responds to fluctuations in need; work on donor coordination identifies further scope to improve needs-based allocation (Barrett, 2001; Barrett & Heisey, 2002; Kuhlgtatz *et al.*, 2010). At the point of distribution, participation may improve knowledge of vulnerability, but it also requires attention to local inequalities and exclusion (Maxwell *et al.*, 2011). Evidence from Yemen shows that a substantial increase in assistance after a food-emergency announcement helped maintain access amid shocks, while the improvement in measured food access remained modest and targeting information was incomplete (Tandon & Vishwanath, 2021). The choice of

transfer instrument should follow the intended outcome and operating conditions. Cash and vouchers require attention to whether people can purchase adequate food; imported in-kind food, local procurement and regional procurement raise different questions about timing, cost, supply and prices. Research on innovative instruments explicitly considers several outcomes that may compete or reinforce one another, including timeliness, market effects, food quality and recipient satisfaction (Lentz, Barrett, *et al.*, 2013).

Local and regional procurement can offer advantages over transoceanic shipment, but its appropriateness depends on conditions in the markets where food is purchased (Lentz, Passarelli, *et al.*, 2013). Untying assistance can widen procurement choices, although the consequences still require evaluation in context (Cardwell & Ghazalian, 2020). Attention to markets is equally important after delivery. Food aid does not have a universal effect on domestic production: national-level research found no general production disincentive in sub-Saharan Africa, while work in Ethiopia examined circumstances in which price and producer effects warranted more careful targeting (Abdulai *et al.*, 2005; Tadesse & Shively, 2009). Nor does an increase in food availability necessarily translate into the same improvement in every welfare measure. Studies of emergency assistance have assessed consumption, assets, food security, malnutrition and child nutrition—outcomes affected by different processes (Gilligan & Hoddinott, 2007; Kuhlitz & Abdulai, 2012; Quisumbing, 2003). Programme evaluation should specify which of these outcomes it intends to change and measure them accordingly.

Linking Relief and Agricultural Cooperation

Emergency assistance and agricultural cooperation address different time horizons. Relief can protect immediate consumption; research, training, storage and productive capacity may affect future vulnerability. In a prolonged crisis, these activities can be connected without making urgent assistance conditional on participation in a development project (Maxwell *et al.*, 2010). This is an implication for programme design rather than a finding that every combined intervention succeeds. Agricultural partnerships also require a different account of diplomatic influence. Studies of Chinese and Brazilian engagement in African agriculture describe negotiated and contested relationships involving governments, firms and local actors (Bräutigam & Tang, 2009; Scoones *et al.*, 2016). Agricultural Technology Demonstration Centers illustrate that technical cooperation also involves decisions about expertise and adaptation (Xu *et al.*, 2016). A partnership may create repeated institutional contact but contact alone does not demonstrate that farmers benefit or that public attitudes toward a donor improve. Those outcomes need separate evidence. The discussion thus supports a human-security interpretation of food diplomacy: diplomatic credibility is more defensibly assessed alongside timely access, recipient welfare and

partner agency than by visibility alone. This is a normative conclusion drawn from the combined literature, not a claim that existing studies have identified one formula for generating soft power.

Theoretical and Policy Implications

Theoretical Implications

The review suggests treating food diplomacy as a relational process. Donors supply resources, but recipients and partner institutions help determine how those resources are used and understood. This refines a straightforward application of soft-power theory to humanitarian aid. Attraction may result from an intervention, yet its emergence depends on perceptions of the donor's conduct and on who receives credit for the outcome (Nye, 1990, 2008; Dietrich *et al.*, 2018; Blair *et al.*, 2022). The material effects of food assistance also matter: people may assess a programme through access, price, quality and fairness, not through its diplomatic message alone. The framework should consequently keep four concepts separate. Humanitarian effectiveness concerns whether assistance improves conditions for affected people. Attribution concerns who they believe provided or enabled it. Public approval concerns their evaluation of an actor. Diplomatic influence concerns whether preferences or relationships change. A programme may achieve one of these outcomes without achieving the others. Treating them separately makes food diplomacy more testable and reduces the risk of describing a visible intervention as soft power without evidence about recipient attitudes.

Policy Implications

For policy, the findings favour needs-based allocation and prompt action supported by transparent decisions. Research on donor interests does not prove that all deviations from need are avoidable, but it makes the reasons for allocation relevant to accountability (Ball & Johnson, 1996; Neumayer, 2005). Famine research adds that early warning should be connected to decisions about financing and access while action can still prevent severe harm (Hillbruner & Moloney, 2012; Menkhaus, 2012). Programme managers also need the flexibility to select assistance according to market, nutrition and security conditions. Procurement restrictions or a predetermined preference for one transfer type can narrow that choice (Lentz, Barrett, *et al.*, 2013; Cardwell & Ghazalian, 2020). In conflict, evaluation should include who was excluded, whether assistance was diverted or taxed, whether prices changed and whether recipients faced new risks. Those measures would supplement, rather than replace, standard measures of food security and nutrition. Finally, cooperation with affected communities and partner institutions should influence decisions, not merely provide a means of publicizing them. Participation can inform targeting in complex emergencies, and agricultural partnerships involve choices about whose knowledge is used (Maxwell *et al.*, 2011; Xu *et al.*, 2016). The evidence

supports examining those choices; it does not justify assuming that every participatory process is representative or every technology transfer is locally useful.

Recommendations

1. Make allocation decisions explainable: Donors and coordinating agencies should state the vulnerability indicators, funding priorities and access constraints used to allocate assistance. Where a severe crisis receives less support than comparable crises, the reason should be documented. This recommendation follows from evidence that humanitarian need is one influence among several on aid allocation (Neumayer, 2005; Fink & Redaelli, 2011).

2. Connect warning to action: Famine-risk indicators should trigger timely decisions about financing, procurement and access negotiations. The Somalia literature shows the limits of identifying danger without overcoming the barriers to response (Hillbruner & Moloney, 2012; Maxwell & Fitzpatrick, 2012; Menkhaus, 2012).

3. Choose and review modalities in context: Agencies should assess supply, prices, security, nutrition and delivery time before choosing among cash, vouchers, local or regional procurement and imported food. They should revisit that choice if markets or access change. Comparative literature identifies multiple relevant outcomes and does not support one instrument for every setting (Lentz, Barrett, *et al.*, 2013; Lentz, Passarelli, *et al.*, 2013).

4. Measure benefit and risk at different levels: Monitoring should include recipients' food security and nutrition as well as exclusion, diversion, taxation, market effects and threats associated with distribution. Household benefits and wider conflict effects should not be treated as interchangeable findings (Lischer, 2003; Koppenberg *et al.*, 2023; Tranchant *et al.*, 2019).

5. Give partners decision-making roles: Affected communities should have accessible ways to inform assessments and challenge eligibility decisions. In longer-term agricultural cooperation, partner research institutions and farmer organizations should help choose, adapt and evaluate the knowledge being transferred (Maxwell *et al.*, 2011; Scoones *et al.*, 2016; Xu *et al.*, 2016).

6. Evaluate diplomacy separately from delivery: If a programme claims to strengthen trust or legitimacy, evaluation should measure recipient perceptions and attribution directly. Aid volume, donor branding and short-term publicity are insufficient measures of soft power (Goldsmith *et al.*, 2014; Dietrich *et al.*, 2018).

Limitations and Future Research

This review draws principally on English-language, peer-reviewed scholarship published between 1978 and 2023. It may therefore miss relevant non-English research, agency evaluations, local accounts and more recent evidence. The literature discussed is also uneven across places and actors: major donors and prominent crises receive more

attention than many smaller providers and less visible emergencies. These features limit how far conclusions from particular settings can be generalized. The sources use different concepts, methods and outcomes. Historical analyses of donor policy, cross-country estimates of conflict, household evaluations of food security and surveys of public opinion do not measure the same effect. This review does not calculate a pooled estimate or present formal study-level quality scores. Its conclusions should be read as a narrative synthesis of mechanisms, agreements and disagreements. In particular, studies of foreign aid and public opinion should not be counted as direct evidence that food aid changes attitudes unless the intervention studied was food related. Research could make the relationship between humanitarian and diplomatic outcomes more precise. Studies that follow a specific intervention from allocation through delivery could measure recipient welfare, knowledge of the provider and subsequent attitudes in the same setting. Comparative work could test whether these relationships differ across cash, vouchers, in-kind aid and agricultural cooperation. Longer observation periods would help determine whether changes in trust or institutional relationships persist after a project or emergency ends. More evidence is also needed from affected populations and local institutions. Research could examine how women and men experience targeting differently, how communities respond to diversion or exclusion, and how partner institutions assess the usefulness of agricultural knowledge. Conflict, climate-related shocks, sanctions and restrictions on access raise further questions about how assistance reaches people and how its effects are interpreted. These are research priorities, rather than outcomes established by the studies reviewed here.

CONCLUSION

Food diplomacy links urgent needs for food with relationships among donors, governments, institutions and recipients. Assistance can protect consumption and support longer-term productive capacity, but its results depend on allocation, timing, access, delivery and local conditions. The literature also shows that donor interests and humanitarian purposes can coexist, while evidence on aid's relationship with conflict remains contested. The diplomatic conclusion must be kept narrower than the humanitarian claim. Effective food assistance may contribute to trust, but providing aid does not itself establish recognition, approval or political influence. A credible food-diplomacy strategy would therefore assess whether people receive appropriate assistance and retain a meaningful role in decisions, while measuring any reputational effect separately. This approach gives both humanitarian outcomes and diplomatic claims an evidentiary basis.

REFERENCES

- Abdulai, A., Barrett, C. B., & Hoddinott, J. (2005). Does food aid really have disincentive effects? New

- evidence from sub-Saharan Africa. *World Development*, 33(10), 1689–1704. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2005.04.014>
- Alesina, A., & Dollar, D. (2000). Who gives foreign aid to whom and why? *Journal of Economic Growth*, 5(1), 33–63. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1009874203400>
- Awokuse, T. O. (2011). Food aid impacts on recipient developing countries: A review of empirical methods and evidence. *Journal of International Development*, 23(4), 493–514. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jid.1680>
- Ball, R., & Johnson, C. (1996). Political, economic and humanitarian motivations for PL 480 food aid: Evidence from Africa. *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, 44(3), 515–537. <https://doi.org/10.1086/452230>
- Barnett, M. (2005). Humanitarianism transformed. *Perspectives on Politics*, 3(4), 723–740. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592705050401>
- Barrett, C. B. (2001). Does food aid stabilize food availability? *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, 49(2), 335–349. <https://doi.org/10.1086/452505>
- Barrett, C. B., & Heisey, K. C. (2002). How effectively does multilateral food aid respond to fluctuating needs? *Food Policy*, 27(5–6), 477–491. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0306-9192\(02\)00050-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0306-9192(02)00050-7)
- Barrett, C. B., Mohapatra, S., & Snyder, D. L. (1999). The dynamic effects of U.S. food aid. *Economic Inquiry*, 37(4), 647–656. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1465-7295.1999.tb01454.x>
- Blair, R. A., Marty, R., & Roessler, P. (2022). Foreign aid and soft power: Great power competition in Africa in the early twenty-first century. *British Journal of Political Science*, 52(3), 1355–1376. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123421000193>
- Bräutigam, D. A., & Tang, X. (2009). China's engagement in African agriculture: "Down to the countryside." *The China Quarterly*, 199, 686–706. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741009990166>
- Campbell, M., McKenzie, J. E., Sowden, A., Katikireddi, S. V., Brennan, S. E., Ellis, S., Hartmann-Boyce, J., Ryan, R., Shepperd, S., Thomas, J., Welch, V., & Thomson, H. (2020). Synthesis without meta-analysis (SWiM) in systematic reviews: Reporting guideline. *BMJ*, 368, Article l6890. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.l6890>
- Cardwell, R., & Ghazalian, P. L. (2020). The effects of untying international food assistance: The case of Canada. *American Journal of Agricultural Economics*, 102(4), 1056–1078. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ajae.12084>
- de Waal, A. (2018). The end of famine? Prospects for the elimination of mass starvation by political action. *Political Geography*, 62, 184–195. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2017.09.004>
- Dietrich, S., Mahmud, M., & Winters, M. S. (2018). Foreign aid, foreign policy and domestic government legitimacy: Experimental evidence from Bangladesh. *The Journal of Politics*, 80(1), 133–148. <https://doi.org/10.1086/694235>
- Diven, P. J. (2001). The domestic determinants of US food aid policy. *Food Policy*, 26(5), 455–474. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0306-9192\(01\)00006-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0306-9192(01)00006-9)
- Dowd, C. (2023). Food-related violence, hunger and humanitarian crises. *Journal of Peace Research*, 60(6), 935–950. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00223433221099309>
- Dreher, A., Nunnenkamp, P., & Thiele, R. (2008). Does US aid buy UN General Assembly votes? A disaggregated analysis. *Public Choice*, 136(1–2), 139–164. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11127-008-9286-x>
- Drury, A. C., Olson, R. S., & Van Belle, D. A. (2005). The politics of humanitarian aid: U.S. foreign disaster assistance, 1964–1995. *The Journal of Politics*, 67(2), 454–473. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2508.2005.00324.x>
- Falkowski, J. (2018). U.S. food aid and American exports to recipient countries during the Cold War. *Agricultural Economics*, 49(5), 659–668. <https://doi.org/10.1111/agec.12450>
- Fink, G., & Redaelli, S. (2011). Determinants of international emergency aid—Humanitarian need only? *World Development*, 39(5), 741–757. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2010.09.004>
- Gilligan, D. O., & Hoddinott, J. (2007). Is there persistence in the impact of emergency food aid? Evidence on consumption, food security and assets in rural Ethiopia. *American Journal of Agricultural Economics*, 89(2), 225–242. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8276.2007.00992.x>
- Goldsmith, B. E., Horiuchi, Y., & Wood, T. (2014). Doing well by doing good: The impact of foreign aid on foreign public opinion. *Quarterly Journal of Political Science*, 9(1), 87–114. <https://doi.org/10.1561/100.00013036>
- Hillbruner, C., & Moloney, G. (2012). When early warning is not enough—Lessons learned from the 2011 Somalia famine. *Global Food Security*, 1(1), 20–28. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gfs.2012.08.001>
- Hopkins, R. F. (1992). Reform in the international food aid regime: The role of consensual knowledge. *International Organization*, 46(1), 225–264. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818300001491>
- Howe, P. (2018). Famine systems: A new model for understanding the development of famines. *World Development*, 105, 144–155. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2017.12.028>
- Kemmerling, B., Schetter, C., & Wirkus, L. (2022). The logics of war and food (in)security. *Global Food Security*, 33, Article 100634. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gfs.2022.100634>
- Koppenberg, M., Mishra, A. K., & Hirsch, S. (2023). Food aid and violent conflict: A review and empiricist's companion. *Food Policy*, 121, Article 102542. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.foodpol.2023.102542>
- Kuhlgatz, C., & Abdulai, A. (2012). Food aid and malnutrition in developing countries: Evidence from global food aid allocation. *The Journal of Development Studies*, 48(12), 1765–1783. <https://doi.org/10.1080/>

- 00220388.2012.723126
- Kuhlgatz, C., Abdulai, A., & Barrett, C. B. (2010). Food aid allocation policies: Coordination and responsiveness to recipient country needs. *Agricultural Economics*, 41(3–4), 319–327. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1574-0862.2010.00448.x>
- Kuziemko, I., & Werker, E. (2006). How much is a seat on the Security Council worth? Foreign aid and bribery at the United Nations. *Journal of Political Economy*, 114(5), 905–930. <https://doi.org/10.1086/507155>
- Lentz, E. C., Barrett, C. B., Gómez, M. I., & Maxwell, D. G. (2013). On the choice and impacts of innovative international food assistance instruments. *World Development*, 49, 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2013.01.016>
- Lentz, E. C., Passarelli, S., & Barrett, C. B. (2013). The timeliness and cost-effectiveness of the local and regional procurement of food aid. *World Development*, 49, 9–18. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2013.01.017>
- Lischer, S. K. (2003). Collateral damage: Humanitarian assistance as a cause of conflict. *International Security*, 28(1), 79–109. <https://doi.org/10.1162/016228803322427983>
- Mary, S., & Mishra, A. K. (2020). Humanitarian food aid and civil conflict. *World Development*, 126, Article 104713. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2019.104713>
- Maxwell, D., & Fitzpatrick, M. (2012). The 2011 Somalia famine: Context, causes and complications. *Global Food Security*, 1(1), 5–12. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gfs.2012.07.002>
- Maxwell, D., Webb, P., Coates, J., & Wirth, J. (2010). Fit for purpose? Rethinking food security responses in protracted humanitarian crises. *Food Policy*, 35(2), 91–97. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.foodpol.2009.10.002>
- Maxwell, D., Young, H., Jaspars, S., Frize, J., & Burns, J. (2011). Targeting and distribution in complex emergencies: Participatory management of humanitarian food assistance. *Food Policy*, 36(4), 535–543. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.foodpol.2011.03.010>
- Menkhous, K. (2012). No access: Critical bottlenecks in the 2011 Somali famine. *Global Food Security*, 1(1), 29–35. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gfs.2012.07.004>
- Nau, H. R. (1978). The diplomacy of world food: Goals, capabilities, issues and arenas. *International Organization*, 32(3), 775–809. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818300031933>
- Neumayer, E. (2005). Is the allocation of food aid free from donor interest bias? *The Journal of Development Studies*, 41(3), 394–411. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0022038042000313309>
- Nunn, N., & Qian, N. (2014). US food aid and civil conflict. *American Economic Review*, 104(6), 1630–1666. <https://doi.org/10.1257/aer.104.6.1630>
- Nye, J. S., Jr. (1990). Soft power. *Foreign Policy*, 80, 153–171. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1148580>
- Nye, J. S., Jr. (2008). Public diplomacy and soft power. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 616(1), 94–109. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716207311699>
- Olsen, G. R., Carstensen, N., & Høyen, K. (2003). Humanitarian crises: What determines the level of emergency assistance? Media coverage, donor interests and the aid business. *Disasters*, 27(2), 109–126. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-7717.00223>
- Plümper, T., & Neumayer, E. (2009). Famine mortality, rational political inactivity and international food aid. *World Development*, 37(1), 50–61. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2008.05.005>
- Quisumbing, A. R. (2003). Food aid and child nutrition in rural Ethiopia. *World Development*, 31(7), 1309–1324. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0305-750X\(03\)00067-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0305-750X(03)00067-6)
- Scoones, I., Amanor, K., Favareto, A., & Qi, G. (2016). A new politics of development cooperation? Chinese and Brazilian engagements in African agriculture. *World Development*, 81, 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2015.11.020>
- Tadesse, G., & Shively, G. (2009). Food aid, food prices and producer disincentives in Ethiopia. *American Journal of Agricultural Economics*, 91(4), 942–955. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8276.2009.01324.x>
- Tandon, S., & Vishwanath, T. (2021). How well is humanitarian assistance targeted in fragile environments? Evidence from the announcement of a food emergency in Yemen. *Food Policy*, 102, Article 102071. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.foodpol.2021.102071>
- Tokdemir, E. (2017). Winning hearts & minds (!): The dilemma of foreign aid in anti-Americanism. *Journal of Peace Research*, 54(6), 819–832. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343317708831>
- Tranchant, J.-P., Gelli, A., Bliznashka, L., Diallo, A. S., Sacko, M., Assima, A., Siegel, E. H., Aurino, E., & Masset, E. (2019). The impact of food assistance on food insecure populations during conflict: Evidence from a quasi-experiment in Mali. *World Development*, 119, 185–202. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2018.01.027>
- Tusiime, H. A., Renard, R., & Smets, L. (2013). Food aid and household food security in a conflict situation: Empirical evidence from Northern Uganda. *Food Policy*, 43, 14–22. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.foodpol.2013.07.005>
- Xu, X., Li, X., Qi, G., Tang, L., & Mukwereza, L. (2016). Science, technology and the politics of knowledge: The case of China's Agricultural Technology Demonstration Centers in Africa. *World Development*, 81, 82–91. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2016.01.003>