

Elisabeth Linusson. *An Evaluation of Three Types of Swedish Emergency Foods for Supplementary Feeding During the Famine in Mauritania, West Africa*. Stockholm: The Swedish Red Cross, 1975, 49 pp.

This booklet, which describes a food evaluation project sponsored by the Swedish Red Cross, fails to make any contribution to the already sadly neglected subject of emergency food aid. Three types of food – ‘PRO-milk 500’ (soya/milk/carbohydrate/cocoa), ‘Swedish Emergency Food’ (wheat/milk/fish protein concentrate/fat/sugar/vitamins and minerals) and ‘Semper I’ (wheat/oats-milk-fish protein concentrate/fat/sugar) – were assessed in terms of nutritional effectiveness, acceptability and packaging. A supplement of approximately 2000 kJ/day/child was given to three groups mainly of malnourished children, between the ages of one and three years, who were assessed anthropometrically before and after two months of feeding, with the object of observing changes in nutritional

status. No control group was included, although only the smallest amount of information was available on the other food sources available to the children. During the course of the study, the average weight of each group of children increased, and particularly so with 'Semper I', an observation which leads the author to the conclusion that 'emergency supplementary feeding' "favourably affects the nutritional status of children 1–3 years of age". However, this conclusion is hardly supported by the facts. No statistical test results appear in the text, but sufficient data is presented to allow these to be done, with the result that no statistically significant improvement was demonstrated in the main anthropometric index used, that of weight for height ( $\text{Chi}^2$ , 1, D.O.F.). More encouraging results were obtained from recording the velocity of weight gain, and although many children lost weight some did show a rate of increase compatible with 'catch up' growth.

That the question as to the nutritional effectiveness of the three foods remains substantially unanswered, is, however, the least of the criticisms to which this report is open. More fundamentally, no answers are given to two other questions. First, why is it necessary to manufacture these curious food mixtures at all for this age group? No evidence is presented to suggest that the normal Mauretanian diet is nutritionally inadequate – indeed, it is clear from the booklet that the opposite is the case. Second, why import such foods? Whilst Mauretania may have been suffering from an overall food shortage, there is no evidence to suggest that this was sufficiently great to make the ingredients of 'supplementary foods' unavailable within the country. The report does not attempt to answer either of these, but a partial answer to the first point may be inferred from the fact that 'Semper I' was the best accepted of the three, and that, served as a gruel, it was "very similar to the local 'boullie', and considered real food for babies and children".

Nutritional science has contributed little to the subject of disaster relief, and, if this booklet

is typical of the approach of nutrition as a 'practical science', to the problem of famine, that is perhaps hardly surprising. The view which it seeks to promote is one of food shortage and resulting starvation, which although true enough in the most restricted sense, evades the real complexity of the problem in human terms, and thus falls badly wide of the mark.

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