

Meeting the MDGs

Fighting hunger may be the most critical challenge of our generation. For decades the world was winning the battle against hunger and malnutrition. From 1969 to 2004 the proportion of hungry people in the world was cut in half – from 36 percent of the population to 17 percent. But we are now sliding back. Growing population, shrinking available resources and the completely inter-connectedness of our food system created a perfect storm that hit with the food and fuel price crisis in 2007 and 2008, followed by the global financial crisis, which is still affecting us now.

There are more than 1 billion hungry people today – one in every six people on earth. The first Millennium Development Goal of cutting the number of hungry in half by 2015 – just 5 years from now – is slipping through our fingers. And the bad news is that the next 5 MDGs - universal primary education, gender equality and empowerment of women, reducing child mortality improving maternal health and combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases - depend to a large degree on eradicating hunger.

But there are also two pieces of good news.

The first is that there is enough food being produced in the world today to feed everyone. As Nobel laureate Amartya Sen points out, famines are caused not by lack of food but by lack of **access** to food. In fact, during the famines in Bengal (1943), Ethiopia (1973) and Bangladesh (1974) food availability did not significantly decline, in some years it even increased. WFP was born out of an idea to take the bounty of a nation's harvest and turn a surplus problem into a blessing.

The second point is many nations have proven that hunger can be solved. Just a few generations ago, our neighbours in Ireland suffered from famine. China, Brazil, Rwanda, El Salvador, Vietnam, Malawi have broken out of the hunger trap. In all cases the key to solving hunger is when a leader declares, "Not on my watch" and then puts in a place a comprehensive program that ranges from food safety nets to increased agricultural production.

So let me tell you something about the **World Food Programme**, the United Nations frontline agency in the fight against hunger.

WFP goes wherever there is hunger and rampant malnutrition. Last year we helped deliver 30 billion food interventions to some 100 million people in over 70 countries. We have 15,000 dedicated staff members that leave behind families and comfort to serve in some of the most difficult and dangerous situations in the world.

When there's an emergency – like the earthquake in Haiti or the Palestinian crisis last year, WFP brings in life-saving food. After the emergency has passed we help communities rebuild – hopefully stronger than before and better able to withstand shocks.

I want to talk about four particular areas where WFP is working towards achievement of the Millennium Development Goals – and turning the tide on hunger.

1. A hungry world is an unstable world. Without food people have just three choices – to migrate, to revolt or to die.

As President Medvedev said at the World Grain Forum that Russia hosted last year, bringing together leaders from 40 nations to discuss food security, a world with so many hungry people is simply “immoral,” and “the civilized world no longer has the right to continue to ignore this situation.” (World Grain Forum, June 2009)

WFP welcomes the G8 nations for the \$22 billion pledged for food security last summer at L'Aquila, an effort to combat hunger that was echoed by the G20, the African Union, and many developing countries.

2. Safety Nets Programmes and School Feeding

When we talk about hunger, the challenge is so great, and the numbers so big, it is easy to forget that behind every statistic, there is a hungry person.

This is the red cup. It's like the one used all over the world by children who receive WFP food at school. We use it to illustrate that we can beat hunger by filling one cup at a time – at a cost of less than 17 pence per cup (or £33 per year), School feeding is one of the least expensive and most effective safety net programmes in the world. WFP last year fed more than 22 million schoolchildren.

When children receive food they go to school; when we send home a ration of food families that would otherwise keep their daughters home, instead choose to send them to school. A study we did with the World Bank showed that school feeding increases household incomes by as much as 25 percent.

Today there are more than 200 million malnourished children in the world, and many more are at risk. Our donors – including students like yourselves - are helping us fill this red cup with healthy porridge. From Afghanistan to Ethiopia, to Armenia, Palestine, Tajikistan and Zimbabwe, your support is saving lives and helping to strengthen food security in many countries.

With the support of 75 nations around the world, WFP reached some 100 million people last year with life-saving, and life-sustaining food and nutrition assistance.

In one village, Kisht, on the Tajikistan-Afghanistan border, the village head, Kurbon Sharipov, told us that no girl from their village has ever gone to university. With the school meal programme, he told us he was looking forward to the first “pioneer.”

Russia also helps us reach hungry people in Afghanistan. We are providing food assistance to more than 7 million people, including 2.2 million children, with a daily school meal of a micronutrient-fortified biscuit or a cooked meal.

School Feeding also brings back normality and stability to communities suffering from a disaster, such as in Haiti.

Just a couple of weeks ago, one of my colleagues spoke about the joy he saw when 400 school children were able to get a hot meal of rice and beans in a school yard at Ecole Bethlehem, outside Port au Prince. The children gathered in the schoolyard because the school had been devastated.

On health, we are supporting efforts to combat tuberculosis in Afghanistan by providing some 200,000 TB patients with food rations to ensure completion of their treatment programme. Urban areas are critical. We have just completed a pilot cash voucher programme supporting almost 60,000 people in Kabul City, so people have money to purchase food from local stores, supporting local markets, and contributing to the economy. This type of urban safety net will provide relief to the large number of displaced persons fleeing from the conflict-affected areas.

Another project is in Ethiopia, where WFP has been working with the local authorities on a project we call MERET (Managing Environmental Resources to Enable Transition), involving construction of dams, rehabilitation of land through terracing, reforestation and other measures. MERET has helped turn dusty, dry lands into productive assets, and communities benefiting from MERET have seen the food security of households increased by 50 percent. This project provides jobs, income, food, and improves the land, so that the risk of flooding, landslides and erosion is reduced, while the productivity for food and other agriculture is greatly improved.

3. New Food and Nutrition Technologies

Nutrition is one of our top priorities because the science is now clear that if children do not get the nutrition they need in the first two years, they can be sentenced to a lifetime of physical and mental impairment.

We at WFP realize the importance of meeting “modern scientific guidelines for optimum nutrition, taking into account the existing nutrition structure and traditions of the majority of the population.” This is something WFP has prioritized when responding to the nutrition challenges of hungry populations in emergencies.

In Haiti, we are scaling up targeted nutrition interventions to run alongside our general food distributions, targeting 53,000 children under five, and 16,000 pregnant and lactating mothers with specialized nutritional products to ensure they receive adequate nutrition.

Here are two of these products – high-energy biscuits and a sweet paste made with chickpeas, which WFP developed for children that are too old to breastfeed and too young for high energy biscuits. We found that in Haiti mothers chewed the biscuits and gave them to their babies. These products are critical in an emergency, like Haiti or in the flood in the Philippines, where people lack the means to cook, and access to safe drinking water is severely limited.

A mother can tear off the end of this pouch and squeeze the peanut paste into a baby's mouth, and that baby will get the nutrition he or she needs. The biscuits help ensure mothers get adequate nutrition so they can breast feed.

No preparation, no water and no cooking are needed for these products. These types of emergency nutrition interventions are so important, because we know that even before the earthquake in Haiti, one third of newborn babies were born underweight, 9 percent of children under five suffered from acute under nutrition, and 50 percent of pregnant women and two thirds of children under 5 are affected by anemia. (WFP Country Office)

We have seen the incredible potential of these products in the field. We used date bars for school children in Egypt. During the situation in Gaza in late 2008 and early 2009 when most Gazans were not able to cook, we included these biscuits in our food basket.

4. Logistics and Emergency Response

WFP heads the logs and emergency telecoms on behalf of the entire humanitarian community...

At any given time, WFP has 30 ships at sea, 70 aircraft in the skies and 5,000 trucks on the ground – but we'll do ANYTHING – including using elephants, yaks and camels – to get food to those who really need it....

Conclusion

And now the call to action!

If you would like to learn more about how to help, visit our website at www.wfp.org . You will see the Fill the Cup campaign, where we are calling on global citizens who have enough food to take action to

feed the billion who are hungry. There are one billion Internet users and one billion hungry people. If one billion people gave just £1, we could end hunger!

It was Tolstoy who wrote in 1894 that “the sole meaning of life is to serve humanity,” At this annual conference of the UN Youth and Students Association, may I paraphrase him and say: “the sole meaning of education is to serve humanity”?

Thank you for aspiring to this lofty goal!