

Working to achieve the vision of a world free from hunger

Investment in social protection is a vital component of initiatives to end hunger and malnutrition

By Ertharin Cousin, executive director, World Food Programme

The world stands ready for a new development agenda. Every country should seize this opportunity to set a course for development that is transformative, universal and sustainable. As the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) unified the world around a set of discernible priorities, the new post-2015 goals and targets discussed and ultimately agreed upon by members of the United Nations will inspire global debates, inform policymaking and influence government, as well as private sector investments, for decades to come. For the world's hungry, undernourished poor, the final goals must generate the political will to realise a world free from hunger within our lifetimes.

The UN secretary general's Zero Hunger Challenge provides the foundation for translating this vision into reality. The vision brings together five elements: eliminating stunting in children under two years of age, guaranteeing universal access to adequate and nutritious food, ensuring that all food systems are sustainable, increasing smallholder productivity and income by 100 per cent, and eradicating food waste and loss.

A number of countries have achieved some or all of the MDGs. However, reducing the global rate of hunger and malnutrition has proved to be one of the most difficult development challenges faced by governments and civil society. Some 38 countries will achieve the MDG hunger target, yet 842 million people remain undernourished around the world. These numbers starkly reflect the daunting challenge.

Nutrition assistance

In addition to the chronically undernourished, a further two billion people suffer from micronutrient deficiencies. The impact of this undernutrition will be felt for decades to come. Some 165 million children endure the effects of stunting. Furthermore, poor

nutrition causes half of the 3.1 million deaths of children under five years of age that occur each year. Developing and implementing adequate nutrition assistance programmes for maternal, newborn and early child health can prevent millions of these deaths. Undernutrition and micronutrient deficiencies result in lifelong educational and cognitive developmental impacts with detrimental consequences for the child and his or her family, community and indeed country. If the global community fails to act now, these consequences will remain far-reaching.

No one organisation or government alone can end hunger or fully meet the challenges of chronic undernutrition. To truly address the causes and consequences of hunger, the world needs a renewed partnership that builds the capacity of governments, communities, civil society and individuals working together. How can such a partnership be achieved?

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It is neither a question of simply increasing agricultural production or delivering increased levels of assistance, although such programmes offer a part of the solution. A renewed partnership can be achieved by approaching this work in a manner that addresses the immediate hunger and nutrition needs while simultaneously designing, when appropriate, solutions that develop resilience and the capacity of the most vulnerable to ultimately feed themselves.

Working together, we must implement programmes that ensure nutritious food is

not only available but also regularly accessible, particularly to those most in need. The new sustainable development agenda offers the opportunity to fully integrate this twin-track approach.

Ensuring that nutritious food is fully accessible to the most vulnerable requires that universality and equity are embedded in the new goals and targets. Recent research confirms that reducing poverty rates through income growth does not translate directly into equivalent reductions in the rate of hunger and malnutrition. Although rising incomes have helped to reduce hunger and malnutrition at national levels, inherent inequalities and social exclusion have often prevented the benefits of economic growth from reaching the most vulnerable.

To realise the long-term vision of Zero Hunger, therefore, concrete steps must be taken to ensure that economic growth translates into long-term benefits for everyone in society.

Food safety nets

Investments in social protection programmes are a key element in enabling the equitable elimination of hunger and malnutrition. These mechanisms include food-based 'safety net' programmes. Indeed, safety nets have been central to food security and nutrition policy in many countries since at least the beginning of the last century. Historically, these programmes played, and continue to perform, a vital role in ensuring that the most vulnerable people, as well as those unexpectedly affected by shocks, are protected from hunger and undernutrition.

According to recent data from the World Bank, more than 98 developing and emerging countries have implemented safety net programmes. Many of these programmes provide targeted cash, voucher or food transfers to the most vulnerable. Assistance is often conditional on participation in special programmes that increase access to health and other basic services, restore or create productive community assets, or improve livelihood opportunities for the poorest. In many cases, these programmes also seek to address the special concerns of marginalised groups, including women and minorities.

Ethiopia's Productive Safety Net Programme illustrates how investments



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in social protection can both address the underlying structural causes of hunger and meet the immediate food needs of people affected by climatic and other livelihood-affecting shocks. Every season, the size of the response is calculated using the Livelihoods, Early Assessment and Protection tool. This tool was developed by the Ethiopian Government with support from the World Food Programme (WFP) and other partners. By monitoring rainfall patterns and predicting crop yields, it is possible to adjust the size of the programme and to scale up assistance before households are affected by seasonal food shortages, avoiding gaps between meeting nutritious food needs and programme service delivery.

Whether in developing or developed economies, the effectiveness of safety net programmes is well established. As income levels have risen in India, Indonesia and Nigeria – among other countries – governments have increasingly adopted safety nets that place food security and nutrition at the centre of national development strategies. Evidence from a number of countries indicates that safety nets have been an instrumental means to invest in development outcomes and reduce inequality. For example, South Africa's Child Support Grant has reduced the Gini coefficient by three per cent.

Well-designed safety nets can also contribute to wider poverty reduction goals. The second series of research papers published in *The Lancet* in June 2013 demonstrates the positive impacts of safety net programmes with integrated nutrition objectives. Nutrition-focused safety nets can dramatically accelerate progress in reducing undernutrition and raising economic productivity. Recent research findings indicate that children who benefited from a nutritional safety net programme in Guatemala earned nearly 50 per cent more as adults.

The power of markets

In rural communities, investments in social protection programmes also have the power to transform economies. The evidence demonstrates that reliable markets stimulate agriculture by creating the financial demand for local production. Reliable commercial or government markets will not develop overnight.

To address this gap, WFP is now implementing a patient procurement platform initiative. Through this programme and using its purchasing power, WFP will serve as an initial catalyst market. Working with developing country smallholder farmers, the private sector and national governments, together with partners such as the Food and

Agriculture Organization and International Fund for Agricultural Development, WFP will increase the agricultural value chain and ultimately identify conglomerates of commercial and government buyers to provide long-term, sustainable and durable market access. WFP and its partners will also work directly with agricultural cooperatives to explicitly link smallholder production to safety net programmes. The key to the success of this initiative is the effective utilisation of WFP's purchasing power to kick-start local ventures.

Each of the programmes described here helps WFP and the world achieve the goal of Zero Hunger. We can fully harness their power when, combined with other efforts, they form a wholly integrated approach. The global ability to ensure that people do not have to choose between nutritious food today and their health or education requirements of tomorrow depends on the global community's ability to address hunger and nutrition challenges successfully, sustainably and durably. In setting the post-2015 goals, world leaders must embrace the proven potential of safety nets and other social protection tools. By establishing such equitable, universal investments, we can achieve sustainable development and realise the vision of a hunger-free world in our lifetime. ■