



United Nations  
System

Standing  
Committee on  
Nutrition

# Global financial and economic crisis – the most vulnerable are at increased risk of hunger and malnutrition

**The crisis aggravates hunger and malnutrition.** Recent estimates suggest that soaring food prices coupled with the global economic crisis will increase the total number of the world's hungry people to more than one billion in 2009. The consequences on households' food consumption and nutritional status are most acutely felt in Low Income Food Deficit Countries (LIFDCs) and in the poorest population groups. The present global financial and economic crisis thus creates new challenges in achieving the first Millennium Development Goal (MDG1, Eradicate Extreme Poverty and Hunger) and is likely to have repercussions on other MDGs, especially on maternal health and child mortality (MDGs 4 and 5).

**Food quality decreases.** Experience from previous food crisis show that the first move by poor households is to reduce food expenses and cut down on non-staple food consumption. These coping mechanisms first affect the diversity (micronutrient content) and safety of diets, the size of portions and ultimately the energy intake. This is compounded by cutbacks on other expenditures, such as health costs, further jeopardizing the nutritional situation of vulnerable families.

**The number of malnourished women and children increases.** Women and children are particularly at risk, as they have special nutritional needs and are among the most vulnerable, given their low social status in many countries. Moreover, whereas women are usually the last to benefit from increased household income, they are usually the first to make sacrifices when the financial situation deteriorates.

*143 million children under five years of age were underweight in 2007<sup>1</sup>.  
Another 4 million children will be so by 2010 unless action is taken.*

**Global financial and economic crisis increases poverty.** The global economy is expected to shrink by 1.7% in 2009. Gross domestic product (GDP) growth in developing countries is expected to slow to 2.1%, and recessions are projected in developed countries. This global financial and economic crisis aggravates the consequences of the 2006-2008 rise in international food prices, that contributed towards increasing the number of extremely poor people from 130 to 155 million globally between 2005 and 2008; a shocking 53 million more expected in 2009.

**Unemployment is on the rise.** The contraction of the global economy is having major repercussions on employment. In 2008, the global unemployment rate rose to 6% with an estimated 190 million unemployed, and this will increase further in 2009. Moreover, some 90 million people will enter the labour market worldwide in 2009-2010. As job availability in richer countries decreases, informal employment and working poverty will rise and remittance flows back to developing countries from emigrated workers will decrease. In addition, foreign direct investment in, and aid to developing countries are falling, as donor countries struggle under serious financial burdens themselves.

**More working hours are needed to feed a family.** With the effects of increased food prices, in many countries the working hours needed to feed a household of five increased by 10 hours a week or more. Moreover, with increasing unemployment, the average number of family members to be supported by wage-earners is getting larger.

**Civil unrest and conflicts are on the rise.** As populations see their situation worsen and their livelihoods threatened, civil unrest and riots spark almost everywhere, in developed countries as well as in developing ones. According to the World Bank, 33 countries around the world thus faced potential conflict and social unrest because of the acute hike in food and energy prices in 2008.

**Timely actions are needed to mitigate these effects.** Malnutrition has negative consequences in both social and economic terms. It affects work capacity, the income generation potential of individuals and households, undermines the development potential of a country and increases health costs in the short and long-term. Many stakeholders at national and global levels are or should be involved.

The UN Standing Committee on Nutrition (SCN) provides a forum in which representatives from UN agencies, governments and NGO/CSOs come together to harmonize policies and programmes and coordinate activities to protect and improve nutrition. The SCN is therefore well placed to provide the information and tools required to effectively incorporate nutrition considerations into the responses to this crisis.

<sup>1</sup> Progress for Children, 2007, UNICEF as quoted in <http://www.childinfo.org/undernutrition.html>



**Nutrition matters.** The quality, and not just the quantity, of a diet determine the nutritional status. Furthermore, absence of infections and adequate capacity to care for young children is required. This is particularly crucial for pregnant and lactating women, to lay the basis for a successful birth and for the future health and development of the baby, and for young children who require appropriate breast- and complementary feeding. The adequate consumption of micronutrient-rich foods (fish, meat, dairy products, green leafy vegetables, pulses, nuts and fruits) is also crucial to prevent disease, ensure appropriate child development and prevent future diet-related diseases.

When balanced diets are not easily available, as in conflict and emergency situations, multiple-micronutrient supplementation is required to prevent irreversible failures of physical and mental growth for the children who survive. This will allow them as adults to provide themselves and their families a proper livelihood, and for girls to avoid perpetrating nutrition problems to the next generation, by giving birth to underweight babies, who will themselves be at risk of becoming malnourished.

**What can we do?** The recommendations made to respond to the food price crisis continue to be appropriate in reducing the negative effects of the global financial and economic crisis on nutrition. Governments should invest in programmes that increase the productivity of smallholders, strengthen the livelihoods of the poorest households, and supply local markets throughout the year with the affordable, safe and easy to use foods needed for a healthy diet. These need to be complemented as needed with social protection programmes, conditional cash transfers targeted to the poor, increased public employment and reinforcement of basic nutrition and health services.

Specific nutrition interventions should be developed and implemented at local level through participatory approaches and in the framework of the right to adequate food and of the right to health (cf. Right to Food Guidelines). They should include:

- The treatment of severe acute malnutrition through appropriate therapeutic foods and treatment of associated diseases;
- Multiple-micronutrient supplementation for mothers and young children as well as fortification of foods as appropriate;
- The promotion of early and exclusive breastfeeding up to six months and of improved complementary feeding practices with continued breastfeeding up to 2 years or beyond;
- Participatory nutrition education based on nutritional needs or targeted population groups, local biodiversity and indigenous knowledge;
- The development of initiatives to restore and strengthen sustainable livelihoods for poor households, in development as well as during emergencies, to speed recovery and diminish vulnerability;
- Capacity-building activities to reinforce and empower national and local institutions and communities, to ensure sustainability and local control of programs;
- Legislative action for entitlements and accountability;
- Incorporation of food consumption and mother & child nutrition indicators in Monitoring and evaluation of strategies and interventions to mitigate the impact of the crisis.

Nutrition rehabilitation and supplementary feeding programmes should be systematically combined with livelihood support of affected families. It is indeed essential to articulate food security and public health interventions and to bridge the artificial gap between development and emergencies programmes and projects.

An effective response to the hunger and malnutrition dimensions of the crisis will require joint action by stakeholders from different sectors and institutional backgrounds (government, UN agencies, bilateral partners NGO/CSOs). The SCN can facilitate this interaction at global, regional and national levels.

*For further information, please refer to the Report of the 35th SCN Annual Session (Hanoi, 2008) and to the SCN side event on Impact of High food prices on Nutrition (34<sup>th</sup> session of the Committee on Food Security, Rome, 2008)*

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The Standing Committee on Nutrition of the UN System (SCN) is a forum where UN agencies, Bilateral Partners and NGOs/CSOs come together to exchange information and discuss nutrition related issues. The SCN is not another agency but a mechanism for facilitating joint work. It aims to ensure that the system-wide response is indeed greater than the sum of the individual efforts.

The SCN is open to all and includes most of the major players in the international food and nutrition arena. Alexander Müller (Assistant Director-General, FAO) is the tenth Chair since SCN was established in 1977.