



A MILLENNIUM FREE from HUNGER

World Food Day
and TeleFood 2000 –
the vision and the challenge



With the theme “A Millennium Free from Hunger”, World Food Day 2000 invokes both a vision and a challenge. The vision is to live in a world where everyone has enough to eat, every day. The challenge is to make the vision a reality, liberating nearly 800 million people from chronic hunger and the fear of starvation.

Meeting the challenge and realizing the vision will not be easy. To make the new millennium free from hunger, urgent action must be taken on many fronts not just to provide food for the hungry but to eliminate the underlying causes of hunger worldwide – rapidly, sustainably and permanently.

Ending hunger and food insecurity is not simply a matter of growing more food. The world already produces enough to provide an adequate diet for everyone, if the food were distributed equitably. It is not. In many poor countries in the developing world, for example, average food availability amounts to less than 2 100 calories per person per day. In the wealthy countries of the North, on the other hand, the average is more than 50 percent higher, topping 3 200 calories per day.

Overall, about 20 percent of the people in the developing world struggle to survive on diets that do not provide the basic energy they need to be active and productive. If all these people were gathered together, they would represent a continent of the hungry with a population greater than those of North America and Western Europe combined.

Hunger not only cuts short the lives and hopes of individuals but also the peace and prosperity of nations. Studies suggest that hunger and micronutrient deficiencies decrease children's learning capacity by up to 10 percent and cost developing countries up to \$128 billion per year in productivity losses alone.

THE VISION – FOOD FOR ALL

Hunger does not exist in isolation. It is both a cause and a result of many of the other scourges that plague humanity, such as poverty, war, environmental degradation and discrimination.

Because hunger is so closely connected to other problems, eliminating it will almost inevitably contribute to – and require – reducing and eventually eradicating many other causes of human suffering. It is not unreasonable to expect, for example, that a world without hunger will probably also be:

- a world without extreme poverty – the World Bank estimates that about 1 500 million people struggle to survive on less than US\$1 per day. Most of the world's hungry people are also counted in the ranks of those suffering from absolute poverty;
- a world without the extremes of wealth reflected in the cruel inequality in the distribution of food – today, the richest one fifth of the people eat 45 percent of all meat and fish; the poorest one fifth get just 5 percent;
- a world without war – conflict invariably disrupts food production and distribution, uproots families and communities, and creates highly vulnerable populations of refugees;
- a world without widespread environmental degradation – hunger and poverty increase pressures on fragile environments. Millions of impoverished people and the productivity of agricultural systems are threatened by desertification, erosion, salinization and loss of biodiversity;
- a world without inequalities based on gender or ethnicity – while women produce most of the world's food, a substantial majority of hungry people are female. Studies show that improvements in women's education and status have been responsible for more than half of the reduction in undernutrition since 1970.

Freeing humanity from hunger would contribute enormously to eradicating most of these other scourges.

THE CHALLENGE – MAKING NUTRITIOUS FOOD AVAILABLE TO ALL

Putting an end to hunger necessarily starts with ensuring that enough food is available for everyone. To achieve that, food production will need to increase substantially over the next 50 years, as the world's population grows from 6 billion today to 8.9 billion in the year 2050.

Past experience suggests that this should be possible. Over the past 40 years, the population of the world doubled, but food production grew even more rapidly. At a global level the amount of food available per person increased by almost 20 percent.

However, simply growing enough food has not eliminated hunger in the past and will not guarantee its eradication in the future. Recent studies suggest that four out of five malnourished children in the developing world live in countries that boast food surpluses. The larger challenge is making sure that food gets into the hands and mouths of the people who lack it now – the poor, girls and women, isolated rural communities, ethnic minorities living on the economic margins of society, victims of war and natural calamities.

The vast majority of these hungry people live in countries where agriculture is the main source of employment and income. A central part of the strategy against hunger must be to increase rural incomes and access to food by improving agriculture and the rural economy. Whether or not food surpluses exist at the global or national level, the failure to develop agriculture and to increase food production locally often lies at the heart of local food insecurity problems. The long-term goal may be to reduce dependence on agriculture and pressure on strained agricultural resources. But the road to that goal may well lead through an initial phase emphasizing improved agricultural productivity.

Global shifts taking place far from the control of farmers also play a major role in the food security of the developing world. Increasing globalization of trade, the WTO negotiations, falling commodity prices, declining agricultural aid, growing debt and the proposed strategies for reducing/cancelling debt all influence people's ability to produce and buy food.

Farmers' lives and families' food security will also be affected by scientific and political developments involving biotechnology and genetically modified foods. These new technologies hold great potential for improving yields and nutritional quality. But they also pose potential risks to the

health of humans and the environment. A cautious, case-by-case approach will be required to ensure that technologies are applied in ways that address human needs and minimize risks.

MAKING IT HAPPEN

Ending hunger will require action in all of these areas – increasing agricultural productivity and raising the incomes of rural communities, improving access to food by those most in need, ensuring that developing countries' needs and contributions get a fair accounting in global trade, research and investment, giving priority to the 'hidden hunger' resulting from micronutrient deficiencies – at a level of commitment never seen before. But commitment is the only resource in short supply.

We know what needs to be done. The Plan of Action of the World Food Summit sets out a roadmap for achieving a world without hunger. There is little mystery about many of the key areas of action under that Plan, which includes commitments to

- poverty-reducing economic growth
- policies to enhance the employment and income-earning opportunities of the poor
- safety nets to protect the most vulnerable and marginalized
- adequate attention to agriculture and rural development

We also know the price that will have to be paid if we fail to take decisive action. The latest figures show that the number of hungry people was reduced by 8 million per year during the first half of the 1990s. That represents real progress ... but at less than half the rate needed to reach the goal set by the World Food Summit of reducing the number of hungry people by half by the year 2015. If we continue to follow this "business-as-usual" course, nearly 700 million people will still suffer from chronic hunger in the year 2015, locked in a vicious cycle of human deprivation and societal stagnation.

But that does not have to be the end of the story. With a commitment to make full use of the tools we already have in our hands, we can create a new cycle – a 'virtuous cycle'. It would start with well-fed, healthy people full of the energy needed to solve the problems that have plagued and imprisoned humankind. A millennium free from hunger could then become a millennium free from environmental degradation, from inequality and discrimination, and from want and war.

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