

**Open working group exchange of views 'Food security and nutrition, sustainable agriculture, desertification, land degradation and drought'**

**Save the Children briefing note 21 May 2013**

All people should be able to access a healthy, nutritious, affordable and culturally appropriate diet. However, there are huge, inter-related challenges in realising this aim: persistent poverty, unsustainable agricultural practices, an inequitable food system, inappropriate governance and power structures, growing fresh-water scarcity and climate change are just some of the many problems.

The MDG focus on hunger has meant the global child malnutrition crisis has been largely hidden from view. Every hour of every day, 300 children die because of malnutrition. It's an underlying cause of more than a third of children's deaths – 2.3 million every year. Those that survive often suffer from stunting, a condition that affects both their physical and cognitive development and undermines their potential to be socially and economically productive later in life.

We could be the generation to end poverty and ensure food and nutrition security for all, but to do so will require concerted global action to address persistent poverty and the inequities and unsustainability of the global food system. In this briefing note, Save the Children highlights the key areas that must be dealt with in a holistic post-2015 sustainable development agenda as a matter of urgency by the Open Working Group in its discussions on food and nutrition security.

### **1. A universal framework with poverty eradication at its core**

Our vision<sup>i</sup> is for one set of universal, sustainable development goals that will address the priority human development needs of poverty eradication, hunger, nutrition, education, health, and protection, while also tackling the environmental threats that are already undermining human health and prosperity. Achieving these multiple objectives will require:

- A human-rights based approach, based on the principles of universality, equality and inalienability;
- concerted action by developed and developing countries as appropriate to their national circumstances,
- a resolute focus on eliminating social *and* economic inequalities,
- an integrated approach that balances the economic, social and environmental dimensions of each of the priority areas; and,
- Strong governance, accountability and financial mechanisms.

### **2. Persistent global income poverty**

Although much progress has been achieved in recent years in reducing levels of extreme and absolute income poverty, 1.3 billion people still live below the global US\$1.25 a day absolute poverty line, and a further 1.18 billion people on between \$1.25-2 per day. Low incomes remain a real barrier to reducing hunger and improving nutritional outcomes: in developing countries food can comprise up to 80% of household expenditure<sup>ii</sup>. Renewing efforts to tackle hunger and poverty through inclusive and sustainable economic growth and decent jobs and social protection would therefore help to ensure that people have the necessary resources to enable them to access and sustain affordable, nutritious and diverse diets, and to live in healthy and sanitary environments, even when disaster strikes. In particular, we know that growth in the agricultural sector can have powerful effects on reducing malnutrition and in supporting rural livelihoods.

As well as being an effect of poverty, malnutrition is a cause: reducing people's future potential and locking in inequalities. Eliminating malnutrition is therefore an essential objective, not just for improving the health and wellbeing of individuals, but also for economic growth and poverty reduction. Save the Children estimates that the lost productivity of today's stunted children under the age of 5 could cost the global economy \$125 billion by 2030.

### **3. An unequal and unfair global food system**

Food, nutrition and water are basic requirements for every human being. The world has made significant progress in reducing hunger. However, to achieve the scale of ambition required to realise global food and nutrition security while respecting environmental limits, nothing short of transformation of the global food system is required. The problems with the current system mean that too many people still suffer unnecessarily from malnutrition and hunger. Despite the fact that the world today produces enough food to feed every man, woman and child, one in eight people go to bed hungry every night and globally one in four children under the age of 5 is malnourished. Children are not always malnourished because there is no nutritious food available, but often because their families cannot afford to buy it<sup>iii</sup>.

Hunger and malnutrition are symptomatic of the fact that for many, the food security pillars of access, availability, utilisation and stability are not met. Systemic issues mean that increased productivity does not necessarily translate into improved access to food (for example if food prices have also increased), and inequality in food security and nutrition outcomes has worsened over the last couple of decades<sup>iv</sup>. Concerted effort is needed to ensure that actions aimed at improving people's access to, and utilisation of, nutritious foods focus on the poorest groups and on reducing these inequalities.

Food prices are rising and becoming more volatile. The drivers are numerous and complex but include increasing demand due to a growing global population and rising consumption, the use of land to grow biofuels rather than food, increasing oil prices, the dynamics of currency and commodity markets, and climate change. These global trends are threatening to push up prices in domestic and local markets, and countries with the highest rates of malnutrition are most vulnerable.<sup>v</sup> Action is needed at the global level to address the underlying drivers of volatility, and to protect the most vulnerable children from the impacts of higher and more volatile prices.

International governance structures must be reviewed and strengthened to improve coordination, reinforce accountability and limit the power of any one actor in the market. The Committee on World Food Security constitutes the foremost inclusive intergovernmental platform for developing policy guidance to improve food and nutrition security. This governance body should be strengthened, and its structure, which includes a mechanism for civil society inputs, should be maintained.

### **4. Unsustainable production and consumption patterns**

Food production is indelibly tied to the environment. To ensure that we *can* feed a world of 9 billion or more people in 2050, urgent attention is needed to address the growing environmental threats of declining freshwater quality and increasing scarcity, biodiversity loss, land-degradation and desertification and climate change. The food system itself has a major environmental impact and is an important driver of many of these issues. It accounts for 30% of the world's total energy consumption, agriculture alone accounts for at least 30% of greenhouse gas emissions, and 70% of all freshwater withdrawals<sup>vi</sup>. Tackling food system production and consumption processes to make them more efficient and less environmentally damaging would therefore make a major contribution to reducing the threats to food production. For example, a third of the food produced for human consumption is currently lost or wasted during the pre or post-harvest stages<sup>vii</sup>. This is a huge missed opportunity to improve global food (and water) security<sup>viii</sup>.

However, as we already know, having enough food doesn't necessary mean food and nutrition security for everyone, and without structural changes to the food system we can expect that the distribution issues and other challenges noted above are only likely to increase. Making the shift to *sustainable* production and consumption involves more than just reducing the environmental footprint of the food system.

### **5. Prioritising what works**

There are many systemic factors contributing to the global challenges affecting food and nutrition. But there are also some things that we know clearly work.

Nearly 75 percent of the world's poor and undernourished children live in rural areas and depend on agriculture for their livelihoods. To overcome global food insecurity, and address the challenge of increasing nutritious food production for a growing population, we must prioritise the productivity, resilience, and

sustainable production of small-scale food producers - especially women who produce much of the world's food and whose role is proven to ensure children are well-nourished. Ensuring women have access to land tenure and riparian rights, reduces inequalities and increases production and nutrition.

Coupling agricultural and nutrition objectives is essential to reaching the populations who need both simultaneously and experience has shown us that including a distinct focus on nutritional outcomes on the front end of investments in agriculture and livelihoods works in improving food security. More investment in agriculture is however needed, with a much greater focus on improving nutritional outcomes, and on training the next generation of farmers and workers across the agricultural value chain.

Freeing the world from hunger would cost an estimated US\$42.7 billion per year<sup>ix</sup> and addressing malnutrition through direct nutrition interventions (eg. iodised salt, vitamin A and zinc supplements) in the 36 highest burden countries, would cost an estimated \$10 billion a year.<sup>x</sup> Given the devastating human and economic impacts of malnutrition, such investments are however an excellent way to save the lives of millions of children, spur inclusive economic growth, and are central to development. Investment must be transparent and well-regulated to ensure that it is for the benefit of poor people and supports sustainable and equitable livelihoods and economic growth while eliminating negative impacts.

Social protection systems also have a positive impact on food security and nutrition outcomes in times of stability, and in times of crisis<sup>xi</sup>. They can tackle the immediate and underlying causes of malnutrition, thereby avoiding the lasting damaging effects that malnutrition has on children's lives. Social transfers in particular, enable families to increase their food expenditure and dietary diversity, strengthen investments in productive assets as well as stimulate demand in local markets. However, coverage in developing countries remains low, and more investment is needed to both strengthen and scale up social protection programmes in general, and social transfer programmes more specifically (as determined by national priorities)<sup>xii</sup>.

#### 4. Conclusion

In conclusion, food and nutrition security are among the most basic of human needs and are central to the sustainable development agenda. However, current global food system practices and processes are unsustainable, unfair and inadequate, and transformative action is needed to ensure that every person, everywhere has access to the food, water, and nutrition that they have a right to, and require, to live healthy, prosperous lives. To achieve this will require a much more human-rights focused approach, and prioritising what we know already works, including a focus on women's empowerment and small-scale farmers, nutrition and sustainable agricultural practices. It will require greater investment in agricultural systems, direct nutrition interventions, and in social protection. Concerted global action to address growing environmental threats, and to make production and consumption processes more environmentally and socially sustainable will be critical. Most important however, is the need for robust transparent and participatory governance and accountability mechanisms, and for these to be applicable to all duty-bearers, including the private sector, governments and civil society.

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<sup>i</sup> Our comments are based on our Save the Children report: Ending Poverty in our Generation: Save the Children's vision for a post 2015 framework, and Save the Children's submission to the e-consultation on hunger, food and nutrition security. See [here](#)

<sup>ii</sup> Banerjee, A., Duflo E (2007) The Economic Lives of the Poor. The Journal of Economic Perspectives Vol 2 (1) Cited in A High Price to Pay: the impact of rising and volatile food prices on children's nutrition and food security. Save the Children.2012.

<sup>iii</sup> Save the Children 2012 *A Life Free from Hunger*, Save the Children Fund.

<sup>iv</sup> Save the Children, 2012 Food Security and Nutrition in the Post-2015 Development Agenda. Save the Children's submission to the e-consultation on hunger, food and nutrition security.

<sup>v</sup> Save the Children 2012 *A high price to pay; the impact of rising and volatile food prices on children's nutrition and food security*. Save the Children Fund

<sup>vi</sup> FAO 2012 Towards the Future we want: end hunger and make the transition to sustainable agricultural and food systems. FAO at Rio+20.

<sup>vii</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>viii</sup> FAO 2013 Food wastage footprint: impacts on natural resources summary report. FAO.

<sup>ix</sup> J Schmidhuber, and J Bruinsma, Investing towards a world free from hunger: lowering vulnerability and enhancing resilience, in A Prakash (ed), *Safeguarding Food security in volatile global markets*. FAO 2011

<sup>x</sup> IF campaign 2013: Enough Food for Everyone: The need for UK Action on global hunger.

<sup>xi</sup> Save the Children 2012 *A chance to grow: how social protection can tackle child malnutrition and promote economic opportunities*. Save the Children Fund.

<sup>xii</sup> *Ibid*