

Policy Brief

**A New Look at Child Hunger
Save the Children's Response to Increased Global Food Prices**

It will take more than food to fight child hunger. While the escalation in food and fuel prices in recent months, exacerbated further by recent global financial turmoil, has created a global food crisis, Save the Children views this challenge as a moment of opportunity. The needs of chronically food insecure children around the world have gained worldwide attention making it possible to mobilize governments and civil society to deliver what we know works for children. This spotlight on hunger provides Save the Children and the humanitarian community an opportunity to focus additional resources and experience on tackling child hunger and reducing child mortality. An enduring solution to child hunger will take leadership and policy change both at the global and national level. Such change is required for families to weather stressful circumstances, to enhance their ability to grow and purchase food, to access basic services and thus to emerge from poverty.

Scope of the Problem

Over the past three years, spikes in food prices and global as well as local climatic events have had a dramatic impact on the health and well-being of children worldwide. Although food prices have now declined somewhat from their peak in April-June 2008, they are expected to remain 35-60 percent higher than the average over the past ten years. That increase poses no small challenge to the poor.

In developing countries, nearly one quarter of people live on less than \$1.25 USD per day¹ and families often spend between 60 to 80 percent of their disposable income on food. Save the Children country offices confirm that many families are facing increased stress:

- Parents report cutting back on the number of meals they can serve their children each day;
- More nutritious foods that are more expensive are being replaced with less nutritious food in children's diets;
- Some parents are keeping children out of school because they can't afford to pay the fees or because they need their children to work and help put food on the table;
- Others are spending what money they have on food rather than medical care for childhood illnesses or ante-natal care.

Among the poorest, crop failure coupled with an increase in the price of staple foods can mean the difference between eating three meals a day, and eating one. In some places, even

¹ Chen, S. and Ravallion, M., 2008. The Developing World is Poorer than We Thought, But No Less Successful in the Fight Against Poverty, The World Bank Development Research Group. Policy Research Working Paper 4703.

middle class families are selling productive assets, curtailing spending, and looking for ways to secure additional income.

Food price spikes are making a shocking situation for children, even worse. The World Bank estimates that the total number of undernourished people has increased by 44 million in 2008² making a total of 963 million undernourished people globally³, and 50 million are children.⁴

In the developing world, malnutrition is responsible for one third of all deaths of children under the age of five.⁵ Malnutrition in early childhood, moreover, has lifelong consequences both for individuals and society at large in the form of compromised immune systems, impaired physical and cognitive development, and lower productivity when these children enter adulthood. As family coping mechanisms stretch to the limit, other risks to children's well-being include the loss of opportunities to learn and develop and the need to engage in work that may be inappropriate or even dangerous for them.

The underlying causes of this child hunger crisis are numerous and global in scope. Many of the drivers are likely to be more enduring, not transient, features of the international scene. Food supply and demand are being shaped by: fluctuating energy prices, bad weather (linked with climate change), poor harvests and dwindling food stocks, underinvestment in agricultural production in the developing world, diversion of key food crops to support sharply increased production of biofuels, decreases in arable land as a result of urbanization and outmoded aid and trade policies. In addition, improved economic conditions in highly populated countries such as India and China have contributed to shifts in dietary habits as more households are able to afford higher priced foods such as meats, dairy and value-added/packaged products. Production of these higher value foods also puts new pressure on marginalized lands. These forces have created the most challenging global hunger crisis for children in decades, but one that can be addressed with leadership, smart policies and proven programmatic interventions.

Although the impact of rising food prices is global in scope, populations in some countries have been impacted with greater magnitude and/or severity than others. In addition, some districts or provinces within some countries may be at much higher risk than others due to the fact that higher food prices exacerbate already high levels of food insecurity and/or emergency conditions resulting from natural disaster and/or conflict. Countries that Save the Children has prioritized based on engagement with those countries, a critical analysis of food insecurity and malnutrition indicators and their identification on World Food Program or Food and Agriculture Organization watch lists include: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Haiti, India, Indonesia, Malawi, Mali, Mozambique, Nepal, Niger, Pakistan, Sudan/South Kordofan, Tajikistan, Tanzania, Uganda/Karamoja, and Zimbabwe.

² The World Bank, 2008, *Rising Food and Fuel Prices: Addressing the Risks to Future Generations*. HDN&PREM.

³ Food and Agriculture Organization, December 2008, "The State of Food Insecurity in the World." <http://www.fao.org/docrep/011/i0291e/i0291e00.htm>

⁴ UN News Centre, January 2009, "Ban issues call to action to tackle 'forgotten' global food crisis." <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=29664&Cr=food&Cr1=crisis>

⁵ The Lancet, January 2008, *Series on Maternal and Child Undernutrition*.

The Global Response

Fortunately, the news is not all dire. Compared to the past, we know much more about what can be done to effectively reduce child hunger and malnutrition:

- We know the benefits of filling seasonal food gaps using cash and/or food transfers ensuring the family's ability to provide adequate nutrition for their children even when food stores are depleted.
- We know that when governments are able to support and implement social protection systems delivering regular resource transfers to the poor that children are better able to stay in school, receive health care and benefit from better nutrition.
- We know the advantages of providing the right kind of assistance to needy families (food or cash or a mixture of both) in order to sustain or even stimulate markets.
- We know that all families need both food and cash in order to thrive and that food production among smallholder farmers can provide both if quality inputs, markets and knowledge are accessible to them.
- We know how to deliver nutritional therapy for acutely malnourished children at scale using ready to use foods.
- And, we know that food security does not mean only having enough food to eat, but also requires use of good health and nutrition practices and services that ensure strong growth and development of children.

The challenge is to quickly translate this knowledge into action so that more lives can be saved and more young children can avoid the long term effects of malnutrition.

Save the Children's Response

Save the Children's programmatic response aims to ensure that families are able to feed their children adequately, send them to school, access health services when necessary and pursue livelihoods which are resilient to recurrent shocks such as this. In our priority countries we will pursue strategies which will achieve this outcome in the immediate term to ensure children's lives are saved today, but also in the long term to ensure sustainable solutions to child hunger are put in place.

Our *immediate response* includes setting up treatment programmes for acutely malnourished children and also delivering short term emergency food or cash transfer programmes to deal with the immediate effects of prices hikes, especially where these have exacerbated already-tenuous environments. For example in Ethiopia where much of the country is facing another severe drought, Save the Children now supports over 80 sites providing community-based therapeutic care to over 30,000 severely malnourished children. In Bangladesh, where over a million people are still trying to recover from the devastating Cyclone Sidr which struck the coast of this small country over a year ago, Save the Children is implementing cash and asset based livelihood recovery activities – reaching more than 25,000 families.

At the same time, we are working with governments and donors to put in place *longer term programmes, policies and systems* to prevent children from going hungry and becoming malnourished. These include:

- Working to set up or support national vulnerability assessment capacity to help governments monitor and analyze indicators of child hunger which result in early warning systems for quicker and more effective response to crises when they occur;

- Promoting the establishment of safety nets and ultimately social protection systems which deliver regular transfers to poor families;
- Working to improve access to quality treatment for malnutrition and key childhood illnesses through health system strengthening and the training of community-based health workers to treat illnesses at the household level;
- Working to improve infant and young child feeding practices such as exclusive breastfeeding through the age of six months through counseling and other proven strategies;
- Organizing smallholder farmers to benefit from economies of scale in both production and marketing so they have year round access to food; and,
- Linking these same small farm families to the range of governmental, non-governmental and private services required to sustain their access to input, capital and markets, in ways that preserve and conserve the scarce natural resources (land and water) required for their survival and success.

While the risks of malnutrition are greatest among young children under two, we also work with education systems to protect the health and nutrition of pre-school and school age children. And, because our focus is in the countries and communities which are worst affected by escalating food prices, we aim to expand our work with the vulnerable families in rural areas, in pastoralist communities as well as among the urban poor.

Our Policy Position

On a global scale, the good news is that G8 Summit leaders, the World Bank and the UN recognize the challenge and the international community is beginning to respond in a comprehensive fashion. We welcome the initiatives of the UN Secretary General and World Bank President to establish a Comprehensive Framework for Action and forthcoming plans for a Global Partnership on Agriculture, Food Security and Nutrition. These provide a sound platform for international cooperation. Save the Children has been actively engaged in the discussions around the Partnership, advocating in particular for the inclusion of (i) a food and child nutrition lens, rather than a focus on simply boosting agricultural production; (ii) long term and predictable funding, (iii) accountability and transparency and (iv) a meaningful involvement of civil society. The challenge is to ensure that additional resources are committed and then translated into vigorous, specific actions that deliver advice and resources where the problem must be solved, namely at the country level. The solutions must be tailored for specific country circumstances, and Save the Children is engaged in the target countries where we work. Sustainable solutions will require creative, concerted efforts by the international community, national governments and civil society. And it is essential that success is judged according to impacts on children.

Ensuring and enabling a supportive policy environment is crucial to delivering lasting change for children. Save the Children will advocate for policies that couple short term, crisis response measures designed to mitigate the impact of the spike in food prices and the global financial crisis combined with medium and longer term measures designed to improve the supply of food, to enable families to afford healthy diets and enhance sustainable livelihoods, and to strengthen social protection. Save the Children's policy agenda is outlined below.

Top policy priorities for the immediate term:

- Governments should ensure that the World Food Program and other aid agencies have adequate funds on an ongoing basis to enable governments to meet new and existing needs for emergency food assistance.
- Developing country governments should institute or strengthen social protection measures focused on the poorest and most food insecure families who comprise the most vulnerable populations.
- Funding to implement the response to the hunger crisis should augment, not substitute for the donor resources currently available to support child health, nutrition and education programmes in developing countries. Solving the hunger crisis requires a comprehensive, well-resourced response; zero-sum approaches will undermine progress in health and nutrition more broadly doing little to mitigate food security crisis.
- The new Global Platform on Agriculture and Food Security and Nutrition must focus attention on meeting the nutritional needs of vulnerable populations. To this end, and monitoring and performance measures must include an agreed-upon set of child health and nutrition indicators.

Top priorities for the medium and longer term:

- Donor governments, with support from the private sector, should commit to boost dramatically investment in agriculture and rural livelihood development in the world's poor countries to reverse decades of neglect. For those unable to benefit from agricultural investment, social protection systems, that are adequately funded by national and international donors, are required to protect the poorest from hunger and malnutrition.
- The U.S., EU and other major trading countries should make promotion of developing country agriculture a key goal of their trade policies. All participants should work to conclude the WTO Doha Development Round of trade negotiations as soon as possible with provisions that provide incentives, not obstacles, to increased agricultural production in developing countries. Such an agreement should provide improved access to global agricultural markets for developing countries.
- The U.S., European and other governments should revise policies toward biofuels to favor approaches that do not decrease food availability for consumption purposes.
- The United States, and other governments as appropriate, should rethink traditional approaches to emergency food assistance in order to increase its speed of delivery, effectiveness and efficiency. At a time of increased food prices and **growing child** hunger, the world cannot afford to have upwards of 40 percent of all food aid spending consumed by shipping and distribution costs.⁶
- To prepare for future hunger-related emergencies, governments should develop strong, integrated and efficient disaster risk reduction and emergency/humanitarian response capabilities. Donors should fund aid agencies and national governments to

⁶ Global estimate made by Oxfam GB, 2007. The U.S. Government Accountability Office found that the cost of transportation represents 65 percent of the total expenditures for U.S. emergency food aid. Government Accountability Office, April 2008, "Foreign Assistance: Various Challenges Impede the Efficiency and Effectiveness of U.S. Food Aid."

better understand and monitor vulnerable populations likely to be affected. Indicators about children's well-being should be incorporated into early warning systems along with the capacity to respond before the situation is critical

In sum, child hunger will not be conquered by handing out food, nor by simply increasing agricultural production. The underlying causes of this global crisis call for nothing less than taking a more integrated approach to emergency and development resources and programming, dramatically boosting investment in social protection, smallholder agriculture and value chain systems, child health and nutrition delivery systems and livelihood strengthening, and rethinking food aid.