



# Speakers' Corner

## The missing global strategy

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Any child knows how to solve the hunger problem. Just give the hungry something to eat! Indeed, if we provide sandwiches for all who are hungry on the first day of 2015, we will have fulfilled the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) of ending hunger by 2015. Of course we then have to explain that that is not what we mean. We are really seeking something else, a sustainable answer to the problem of malnutrition in all its forms. This means there must be some changes to the institutional arrangements through which society is governed. However, we have not yet figured out how to do that. We have barely asked the question. We need to state the goal more carefully.

The world's understanding of the issues surrounding hunger is reflected in the major international conferences and agreements that have addressed the issue. Chronologically, these efforts have been recorded in the following documents, among others:

- The *Manifesto* of the Special Assembly on Man's Right to Freedom from Hunger, held in Rome in March 1963
- The *International Undertaking on World Food Security* and the *Universal Declaration on the Eradication of Hunger and Malnutrition*, issued by the World Food Conference held in Rome in 1974
- The *Plan of Action on World Food Security* of 1979
- The *Agenda for Consultations and Possible Action to Deal with Acute and Large-scale Food Shortages* of 1981
- The *World Food Security Compact* of 1985
- The *Plan of Action for Implementing the World Declaration on the Survival, Protection, and Development of Children*, issued by the World Summit for Children held at the United Nations in New York in September 1990, included a major section on reducing children's malnutrition
- The *World Declaration and Plan of Action on Nutrition* of the International Conference on Nutrition held in Rome in December 1992
- The *Plan of Action* that came out of the World Food Summit of 1996, and its follow-up meeting, World Food Summit; five years later
- The United Nations Standing Committee on Nutrition's *Strategic Plan* of April 2000
- The World Health Organization's *Global Strategy on Infant and Young Child Feeding* of 2003.
- The *Voluntary Guidelines: to Support the Progressive Realization of the Right to Adequate Food in the Context of National Food Security*, adopted by the FAO Council in November 2004 (Food and Agriculture Organization 2005)
- The Millennium Development Project's *Halving Hunger: It Can be Done*, (Sanchez et al 2005)

The track record of these summits is not impressive. Then Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, addressing the World Food Conference in Rome on November 5, 1974, declared the bold objective that, "within a decade, no child will go hungry, no family will fear for its next day's bread, and no human being's future and capacity will be stunted by malnutrition." At the World Food Assembly held in 1984 in Rome, nongovernmental organizations reminded the world that the promise had not been kept.

In 1996, the World Food Summit adopted the goal of reducing the number of undernourished people by half, to 400 million, by 2015. The subsequent review conference, World Food Summit: *five years later*, conceded that the world was not on track to reach that target.

Referring to the World Summit for Children held in 1990, the Secretary General of the United Nations Boutros Boutros-Ghali reported in 1996:

Despite the commitments made in 1990, there has been little progress in reducing child malnutrition. In sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, the number of malnourished children is actually rising. Almost a third of all children under five in developing countries are malnourished, and malnutrition still contributes to more than half the deaths of young children in these countries.

Ten years later, the Secretary General could give a similar report. Not much has changed, even though commitments supposedly were reaffirmed at the Millennium Development Summit of 2000. What happened? What didn't happen?

The recommendations that have come out of global summits on hunger have shared common weaknesses:

- They generally view hunger as an original state of nature, and not as something that is endlessly recreated by major social forces
- They often fail to make important distinctions among different types of food insecurity or malnutrition, and often neglect some types
- They fail to articulate a clear vision of a future world without hunger
- They focus on short-term interventions and assistance, with little coordination
- They do not appreciate the need for substantial commitments of resources and long-term strategies
- There is no arrangement for course corrections on the path to the goal
- Intergovernmental organizations are viewed mainly as facilitators, not as major actors
- The focus has been mainly on the formulation of national plans of action, not a comprehensive global plan of action. They do not give adequate attention to the role that the international community must play if hunger is to be sharply reduced

Are these stories about strategies that failed? Whether one is trying to reach a social goal or trying to build a bridge across a river, a good strategy is one for which there is a serious commitment of resources, a clear management structure, and a programme of action that could sensibly be expected to result in achievement of the goal. By this standard, there has not been any serious strategy for achieving sharp reductions in hunger and other forms of malnutrition around the world.



The World Bank has been publishing annual *Global Monitoring Reports* on the Millennium Development Project since 2004 (World Bank 2006a). While there has been some progress, the monitoring reports generally observe that, for many of the goals, progress has not been adequate to ensure the achievement of the MDGs by the target dates. A similar MDG progress report from the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs acknowledges that the number of people going hungry is increasing (DESA 2006, p. 5).

One has to wonder about these assessments of the progress on hunger when the UN Millennium Project Task Force on Hunger published its final report, *Halving Hunger: It Can be Done* only in 2005 (Sanchez et al 2005). How can one assess progress during the year that the plan is released, or just a year or two after that? What is being assessed? Are they monitoring the impacts of particular programmatic actions, or are they just monitoring trends that would have been followed regardless of the Millennium Development Project?

Indeed, what is the meaning of a global progress report when there really is no systematic global program of action toward the goal? The Millennium Development Project has been misleading because *there never has been any real global program of action*. This is not the story of a failed strategy; it is about the absence of strategy. Despite the lofty rhetoric of the Millennium Development Project and all the summits and agreements on hunger that preceded it, there never has been a truly global program of action to address the problem. It has always been treated as a collection of national problems. As the World Bank observes, "The development community, and the world as a whole, has consistently failed to address malnutrition over the past decades" (World Bank 2006b, p. 128).

The World Bank says that countries have not invested enough, but at the same time it acknowledges that, "between 2000 and 2004 its investments in the short route interventions that improve nutrition fastest amounted to not more than 3.8 percent of its lending for human development—and less than 0.7 percent of total World Bank lending (World Bank 2006b, pp. 16-128)." Surely, if the global community wants individual countries to devote more of their scarce resources to addressing problems of malnutrition, the international agencies should follow the same advice.

In paragraphs 21 through 28, *General Comment 12* is explicit about the need for strategy at the national level to assure implementation of the human right to adequate food. It says:

...the Covenant clearly requires that each State party take whatever steps are necessary to ensure that everyone is free from hunger and as soon as possible can enjoy the right to adequate food. This will require the adoption of a national strategy to ensure food and nutrition security for all, based on human rights principles that define the objectives, and the formulation of policies and corresponding benchmarks. . . . (UNCESCR 1999).

*General Comment 12* speaks about the obligation for strategizing at the national level. There is no reason why that obligation should be limited to the national level. Systematic strategies need to be formulated and implemented at every level if the goal of fulfilling every person's human right to adequate food is to be achieved.

What strategies have been proposed? If someone asked you how to build a house, you would not tell them simply to collect a bunch of wood, and then do lots of hammering and sawing, and nothing more. You would not walk away without saying where the wood is to come from, or who would pay for the hammer and the saw, or how the carpenters would be paid, or what sort of hammering and sawing is needed. If the job is to get done, one needs a far more complete answer as to how it is to be done. So far none of the global "strategies" relating to malnutrition would lead one to expect that the goal would be reached.

Serious strategies for addressing malnutrition would offer more than a few scattered recommendations. They would describe stepwise plans of action designed to reach the goal. There should be clear incentives for the actors to do what needs to be done, and there should be institutional mechanisms in place to assure that all actors are held accountable for doing their jobs. Just as the construction of a building or a bridge is only possible with detailed planning and periodic course corrections during the process of working toward the goal, the human right to adequate food can only be fully realized through carefully designed and implemented programs of action.

Historically, the story is not only about the absence of global plans; it is also about the absence of real global commitment. Where are the current manifestations of the promises made at all the summit conferences? It has been claimed that the global community made a commitment for the achievement of the MDGs by 2015, but where is the program of action now? The United Nations Millennium Campaign that is now in place is really only a small advocacy organization that "supports citizens' efforts to hold their government to account for the Millennium promise (Millennium Campaign 2006)." If a town wants a bridge built across a river, it is not going to get it simply by organizing an advocacy campaign for it. This would not signify true commitment. We would believe that those in power really wanted a bridge only if they had someone prepare a detailed plan for building it and laid down the money to cover its costs.

There are no scientific mysteries about how to end hunger in the way there might be with difficult diseases. People need food, education, and decent opportunities to do productive work. The challenge is to devise ways to assure that everyone always has these things.

The human right to adequate food means that there is an obligation to reach the goal of ending hunger and assuring food security for all. These obligations fall primarily on national governments, but they are shared by all of us. There are choices that can be made with regard to means, but there is no choice with regard to the obligation to move decisively toward the goal.



Thus, concrete obligations for assuring realization of the human right to adequate food for all can be specified through the formulation of a concrete strategy for realizing that goal. Once one knows what steps are required to reach the goal, then there is an obligation to take those steps. If there are several different ways to reach the goal, choices may be made among them, but there is an obligation to choose some path that can realistically be expected to reach the goal.

There have been many global plans for responding to the hunger problem, but they propose only to work around the edges of the problem, not to end it. There is a need for a global strategy and program of action that really could be expected to end malnutrition in all its forms as a major public policy issue in the world. Not only moral considerations but also a fair interpretation of human rights law and principles require such a strategy and program of action.

The challenge of ending malnutrition must be addressed at the global level, and not only on a nation-by-nation basis. Ultimately, global obligations regarding the human right to adequate food may be identified through the formulation of appropriate global strategies for realizing that right.

The final report of the Millennium Task Force on Hunger says that developed countries should contribute more generously to development in poor countries (Sanchez et al 2005). However, it does not suggest that they should have a legal obligation to fund the program to any particular level. Reducing the role of the global community to that of an occasional donor or lender leaves the challenge almost entirely to the separate nations. This amounts to an evasion of responsibility. With their greater capacity, it falls primarily on the developed countries of the world to assure realization of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* article 28: "Everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration can be fully realized."

A child may be born into a poor country, but that child is not born into a poor world. That child has rights claims not only against its own country and its own people; it has claims against the entire world. If human rights are meaningful, they must be seen as universal, and not merely local. Neither rights nor obligations end at national borders. While national governments have primary responsibility for assuring the realization of the human right to adequate food for people under their jurisdiction, all of us are responsible for all of us, in some measure. The task is to work out the nature and the depth of those global obligations.

The material of this article is drawn from the forthcoming book *Global Obligations for the Human Right to Food* to be published by Rowman & Littlefield in 2007, George Kent (ed.).

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### Nutrition news from Iran: *Overweight and obesity in Asian populations*

In Iran and the rest of the Middle East, we are not only facing a sharp increase in the trend of obesity, but as it turns out the associated weight gain may imply higher health risk among the Asian population than it does among an European population. The BMI classification of overweight and obesity in Asian populations has been controversial, and investigating whether the accepted BMI cutoff points are appropriate for identifying increased health risks is an important challenge for Asian countries health systems. A WHO Expert Consultation on 'Appropriate body-mass index for Asian populations and its implications for policy and intervention strategies' in 2004 reviewed scientific evidence, which suggests that Asian populations have different associations between BMI, percentage of body fat (BF%) and health risks than do European populations, and concluded that the proportion of Asians with a high risk of type II diabetes and CVD is substantial at BMIs lower than existing WHO cutoff point for overweight (i.e., BMI > 25 kg/m<sup>2</sup>) (see Shiwaku et al. in *Lancet* 2004, 363:157-63). Current research at the Jundi-Shapour University of Medical Sciences published in the October issue of the *European Journal of Clinical Nutrition* is investigating overweight measurements (BMI, %BF, BIA (Bioelectrical impedance analysis)) among more than 600 adult Iranian women. About one-half were found to be overweight or obese, and more than one-fifth had central obesity which, in turn, is a key risk factor for metabolic syndrome in the later life.

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