

Meeting the challenge of global malnutrition

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As part of its broad program of addressing major global issues, The Copenhagen Consensus 2008 (CC08) *Challenge Paper on Hunger and Malnutrition* makes an important contribution to the global discussion of nutrition issues. It is timely because recent rapid increases in the price of food worldwide are drawing a great deal of attention to the failures of the global food system.

However, the group's analysis is flawed in several ways. For example, it is based on the premise that there is a global pot of money that could be used to deal with problems of hunger and malnutrition. It asks how that money could be allocated most efficiently. The reality is that different types of hunger and malnutrition problems attract money in different ways from different sources. The funds are not fungible, meaning they cannot be readily transferred from one use to another. For example, the funds that are available for the preparation of therapeutic foods could not easily be reallocated to breastfeeding promotion. Similarly, if food aid funds were required to be used for purchases at the destination rather than in the donating countries, the level of funding made available by donating countries would be sharply reduced. They would be reduced even further if the purported beneficiaries were to decide how the money should be spent. Humanitarian assistance generally cannot be untied without reductions in the total amounts available. The Copenhagen Consensus (CC) group identifies "solutions" to problems of hunger and malnutrition by identifying those courses of action that are most likely to be cost-effective. We have been told these things many times before, by Lancet, UNICEF, and others. The CC group focuses on what could be done to solve the problems, but it does not give enough attention to what it would take to actually get them done.

The CC08 website says "More than 55 international economists, including 5 Nobel Laureates, will assess more than 50 solutions and assemble a list of priorities for everyone involved in solving the world's biggest challenges." This is not an auspicious start. Who gave these 55 wise people the authority to assemble a list of priorities for everyone? The CC is a consensus among a small number of intellectuals, based on the naïve assumption that everyone wants to have these problems solved, and that there is some unique best way to solve them that all will accept. Theirs is an engineering approach, devoid of political analysis. Are those who would have to take the action sufficiently motivated? We should not assume that those who control the resources are eager to get on with the work, and are just waiting to be told the "solutions". In many cases, the costs would have to be borne by one group while another group enjoys the benefits. The evidence we have so far indicates that those who have the resources do not really care enough about those who have the problems.

The CC people, like the World Bank and others, use misleading language about "investment" in solving nutrition problems. Yes, there might be a high benefit to cost ratio from, say, the iodization of salt to prevent goitre, but if I am interested in buying a bigger car, I am not going to "invest" in salt iodization programs on the other side of the world. Investment normally means pulling some money out of my pocket in order to get a larger amount of money into my pocket a while later. When the benefits go to someone else, that is not anything like investment as normally understood. The conclusion of the CC08 paper says, "there is no question that intervention in nutrition is highly desirable and highly beneficial." For whom? Is it beneficial for the factory owner who benefits from the cheap labour that hungry

people are willing to provide? Is it beneficial to consumers who enjoy products made with cheap labour—including food? If solving nutrition problems really were beneficial to all, there would be no trouble in raising funds for nutrition interventions, even for those that might be second best. Let's not fool ourselves in a way that conceals the real challenges that need to be addressed. The language of "investment" in relation to nutrition interventions masks the disconnect between those who have the power and those who have the problem. If we don't look at that disconnect in a straightforward and honest way, we are not dealing with the realities that need to be addressed.

The CC group has focused on interventions whose impacts are not likely to continue long after the intervention has ended. It is really not difficult to find ways of helping to overcome malnutrition now. If a child is seriously deficient in a particular nutrient, you provide that nutrient. The real puzzle, however, is to figure how that nutrient could be provided after you are gone. How does one create sustainable impacts? That question cannot be addressed by looking only at household level or clinical level interventions. One must begin to look at societal forces, economics, and politics. The answers must deal with institutional arrangements, and find ways to replace those structures that endlessly reproduce poverty and malnutrition. You can end hunger in the world by providing sandwiches for everyone, but that sort of answer really misses the point.

The CC group speaks as if there were a need to identify which of several alternative approaches to nutrition problems is the best globally. Why do that? Would it make sense to study which is the best material for building houses globally? Choices need to be attuned to local circumstances. There is no need for a single global choice. Such choices should be made locally to the extent possible, with full participation of the people who are supposed to benefit from them. The CC group has prepared an elegant analysis, but on the wrong question.

There are things that should be done at the global level to facilitate the making of good choices locally. However, there has been little serious global planning and management to deal with hunger and malnutrition. The Millennium Development Goals are not really global at all; they place all the responsibility on the separate national governments. If the CC people really were able to come up with "solutions" to the world's nutrition problem, to whom would it hand those answers? There is no agency in place ready to receive and act on such advice. There is little actual global planning and management to deal with nutrition issues, and little capacity for such activities. This is partly due a broad aversion among the nations of the world to global governance or global government of any kind. As the problems continue to get worse, however, it becomes increasingly clear that we will have to overcome that aversion. The current wave of increases in the price of food highlights the need for doing something to fix the global food system. Official responses so far seem to be more concerned with quelling the food riots than with addressing the deeper problems. If more and more people are falling off the edge of a cliff, we have to do more than put them back up on that cliff edge. We need to address the fact that there are so many millions of people so close to that edge all the time. So far there has been no serious global conversation about how to fix the global food system. Instead of presenting their own views, the world's intellectual leaders would do a greater service by facilitating a well designed broadly participatory global planning process for fixing the badly broken global food system.