

# Halving Hunger: Still Possible?

Building a rescue package to set the MDGs back on track



Women wash their hands in an irrigation channel in the lands of Djoudé's women cooperative, Mauritania. © Tomás Abella/Intermón Oxfam

**While time is running out, the global crises push the MDGs desperately off course. The only chance of avoiding failure is a rescue plan for all MDGs that includes the necessary measures, both political and financial. Halving hunger is still possible if developing countries take the lead with the right policies and investments, donor countries increase dramatically their aid to agriculture, food security and social protection under nationally and regionally-driven plans, and the global issues affecting food security are collectively addressed.**

# Summary

Ten years after the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) agreed by world leaders became the greatest-ever commitment for a 'more peaceful, prosperous and just future', progress is slow and many hard-won achievements have been undone after the global food, fuel and economic crises. Unless an urgent rescue package is developed to accelerate fulfillment of all the MDGs, we are likely to witness the greatest collective failure in history.

Along with the goals on maternal health and water and sanitation, MDG 1 - eradicate extreme poverty and hunger - is one of the most off-track MDGs. The fact that these goals remain so far from success puts the whole MDG initiative at risk. Halving hunger must be one of the top priorities for urgent action at this year's MDG Summit in September.

In 2009, the number of people going to sleep hungry every day reached an all-time high of more than 1 billion, -most of them children and women- in a world with the capacity to produce enough food for everyone. Decades of under-investment in agriculture and misguided trade policies have undermined small farmers' capacity to produce, and have made poor people in developing countries extremely vulnerable to food insecurity.

The August 2010 increase in food prices, due in part to export restrictions in the Russian Federation, highlights the fragility of a world food system subject to extremely volatile prices. Another food price crisis may yet happen, as the structural causes are still latent: stimulus to biofuels, speculation on commodities, a growing demand for meat and energy in emerging countries, and stagnated agricultural productivity, especially in sub-Saharan Africa. Political insecurity in many states jeopardizes development and is another driver of food insecurity. Furthermore, climate change is rapidly pushing the world's poorest people - those least responsible for it and with least resources to tackle it - to the limits of subsistence.

Around the world, millions of families cannot buy or produce enough food, and many of them receive no help or protection from their governments. A longer-term food crisis looms, with very serious consequences for world stability. Each day of inaction brings us closer to failure and has a tremendously high cost in human lives and suffering.

If promises could feed people, there would not be one single hungry person left on Earth. Political leaders are much more willing to announce commitments than to fulfil them with concrete action - much less to be held accountable for delivering their promises. A raft of summits and declarations took place in 2008 in response to the food crisis. But beyond the rhetoric of tackling hunger and despite more resources having been made available, the actions have fallen far short of what is needed - a coherent and co-ordinated global response.

Not only is the quantity of aid insufficient, but the quality and effectiveness of aid has not improved enough either. The Rome Principles for Sustainable Global Food Security<sup>1</sup> (designed to ensure national leadership, co-ordination and predictable funding) are far from being implemented in the field, and aid agencies are still reluctant to abandon the project approach.

Halving hunger is still possible. Some countries have achieved tremendous advances in hunger reduction through a combination of effective policies and investment. Malawi, for example, is no longer dependent on food aid and has even become an exporter after it facilitated access to subsidized seeds and fertilizers to small producers. And Brazil has made the fight against hunger a state policy, combining social protection programmes with support for family-based agriculture.

Developing countries must lead a revitalized global effort to halve hunger by adopting the right policies and plans and increasing their own public investment in key sectors, including agriculture. Governments have a legal obligation to guarantee their citizens the right to food and sustainable livelihoods. But they cannot do it alone.

Based on data from the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), Oxfam estimates that an annual increase of \$75bn is needed to invest in agriculture and rural development, food security, social protection, nutrition programmes and food assistance to achieve the MDG target on hunger. Donors should provide half of this amount as ODA, with developing countries contributing the other half from national budgets. This should be part of a global rescue package for all the MDGs.

To achieve the target of halving hunger by 2015, Oxfam recommends that all governments, North and South, and international agencies:

- Co-ordinate action under a twin-track approach:
  - in the short term, provide assistance to people who suffer from hunger through nutrition programmes, food assistance and safety nets;
  - in the long term, strengthen people's resilience and capacity to produce food, improve the functioning of the market and establish social protection programmes.
- Support the reformed Committee on World Food Security (CFS) as the key forum for policy guidance and co-ordination of global action to address global food governance and the root causes of hunger and malnutrition;
- Establish a co-ordination and accountability mechanism for global financing, guided by the CFS;
- Recognize and strengthen the fundamental role of women in food security and nutrition;
- Regulate food commodity markets, to reduce speculation and price volatility;
- Prioritize actions based on existing structures, avoiding the creation of new mechanisms that fragment efforts to reduce hunger.

Developed country governments have a key role to play. They should:

- Dramatically increase Official Development Assistance (ODA) for agriculture and rural development, food assistance, nutrition and social protection by at least \$37.5bn a year, without taking resources away from other sectors that are key to achieving the MDGs;
- Align with national and regional priorities, improve co-ordination and support capacity building to ensure efficient delivery of aid, channeling through budgetary support wherever possible;
- Contribute individually to this collective effort based on each country's own financial capability;
- Leverage additional financing now to boost MDG 1, and other off-track MDGs, through innovative sources such as a tax on international financial transactions. For MDG 1 also create funding by phasing out the most trade-distorting types of agricultural subsidies in rich countries, and ending subsidies and tax exemptions for biofuels;
- Foster coherence by undertaking reforms in agricultural, trade, energy and investment policies, both domestically and internationally;
- Make immediately available the funds needed for adapting to climate change in developing countries, over and above existing ODA commitments.

In addition, Oxfam recommends that developing country governments:

- Increase public spending on agriculture and rural development, food security, nutrition and social protection, targeting women, smallholders and the most vulnerable consumers;
- Develop (or enhance) national and regional action plans describing (1) specific actions to reduce hunger and malnutrition, (2) how these will be financed by domestic resources, and (3) what financial and technical assistance is required internationally;
- Fully include the voice and participation of civil society stakeholders - in particular, women, smallholders, agricultural workers and the poorest groups in decision-making;
- Adopt policies on food and agriculture, social protection, trade and investment that respect the right to food and are coherent with hunger reduction objectives.

Time is running out. The forthcoming United Nations (UN) Review Summit on the MDGs is an opportunity that cannot be allowed to slip through our fingers. It is time to put a series of concrete and bold measures on the table that will halve hunger, and speed up the fulfilment of all the MDGs.

# Note

- <sup>1</sup> 'Rome Principles for Sustainable Global Food Security', Declaration of the World Summit on Food Security, 16–18 November 2009, Rome, FAO, [http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/templates/wsfs/Summit/Docs/Final\\_Declaration/WSFS09\\_Declaration.pdf](http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/templates/wsfs/Summit/Docs/Final_Declaration/WSFS09_Declaration.pdf) (last accessed July 2010).

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