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## **Halving Hunger: It Can Be Done**

### **An Action Plan for Implementing *The Millennium Development Goal on Hunger***

**Final Report of the  
Millennium Project Hunger Task Force**

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## Preface

This Final Report sets out to identify priority interventions that the world can address immediately to achieve the task of halving hunger by 2015. We strongly recommend immediate endorsement of the recommendations, and the forming of international partnerships to quickly implement these priorities.

The *Hunger Task Force* builds on the many attempts to eliminate world hunger in the past, that resulted in cutting the proportion of hungry people in the world from 33 to 18% during the past 40 years. Still about 840 million people go to bed hungry every night. Most of the current plans share the view that it is entirely feasible to bring about rapid reductions in hunger and malnutrition. What is needed now is translate their recommendations into action on a scale commensurate with the size of the problem. In other words, a *business plan* that, in addition to *what* the recommended interventions are, outlines *how* they will be implemented, *where* are the priority areas of intervention, *which* organizations should implement, *how much* are the interventions going to cost and what the benefits will be.

On 5 July 2004 the Secretary General of the United Nations addressed heads of African States and senior members of the international community at a presidential-level seminar on hunger in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. He deplored “one of the most serious problems on earth – the plague of hunger”. He stated, “Hunger is a complex crisis. To solve it, we must address the interconnected challenges of agriculture; health care; nutrition; adverse and unfair market conditions; weak infrastructure; and environmental degradation”. He called for a “uniquely African Green Revolution in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century” to spearhead the fight against hunger.

This document sets out measures to respond to the Secretary General’s call for concerted action to reduce hunger – in Africa and throughout the world. It differs from other global initiatives mainly in its response to the Millennium Development Goals, its interdependency with the recommendations of the nine other task forces addressing the other millennium development goals, and the more “business plan” approach, going beyond what should be done. It seeks to identify the priority actions needed now that will lead to short- and medium-term effects and will establish the base for the eventual total elimination of hunger. The interventions recommended in this document are based on science-based approaches, policies and technologies that exist, are proven, are understood and are effective.

The Hunger Task Force was charged by the Millennium Project to be conceptually right, analytically strong and politically bold. The independent nature of the Task Force with all members acting in their personal capacity and requested to “leave their institutional baggage at the door”, coupled with a secretariat and set of associates that produced the analysis and fresh experience with country case studies and extensive travel in hungry countries. The seven recommendations and the interventions embedded in each one often challenge the status quo and will may make some practitioners uneasy. The time has come for major changes in both in attitudes and resources in order to reach the hunger MDG.

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Food Programme for which we are very grateful.

Our conclusion is that hunger can be halved by 2015, and eventually eradicated from our planet, with the deliberate and timely implementation of the recommendations of this report. It can be done.

Pedro A. Sanchez and M. S. Swaminathan,  
Co-chairs, Hunger Task Force  
15 December 2004

## Summary for Policymakers

In the past twenty years, the proportion of the world population that is hungry has declined from one fifth to one sixth, and the absolute number of hungry people has been slightly reduced. But there are still 840 million people in the world who are chronically or acutely malnourished. Most of them are in Asia, particularly India (214 million) and China (135 million). Africa, with 198 million chronically undernourished has the highest proportion of hungry people (over 40% in some areas), and is the only region of the world where malnutrition is rising. This report therefore emphasizes the needs of Africa while also addressing the global perspective.

Hunger continues to be a global tragedy. It requires a concerted and persistent worldwide effort to reduce and ultimately eliminate it. The Hunger Task Force is convinced that it is possible to halve hunger by 2015. Indeed, the Task Force will not be satisfied with attainment of that goal; instead it sees the achievement of the Hunger MDG as an important milestone in the global effort to eliminate hunger completely.

### ***Setting the Stage***

Hunger is both a cause and effect of poverty, and the presence of widespread hunger holds back economic growth and limits progress in poverty reduction. Economic growth alone is insufficient for eliminating hunger because so many hungry people live in deep “poverty traps” beyond the reach of markets. Poor and hungry people often face both social and political exclusion, and are unable to demand their rights. They have little access to education, health services, safe drinking water. Hunger is, therefore, closely linked with the other MDGs. Reducing hunger will help speed progress toward other MDGs, and vice versa. Appropriate political action to reduce hunger should address hunger, poverty and disease simultaneously.

***The kinds of hunger:*** Hunger occurs in three different forms: it can be acute, chronic and hidden. Much of the world has seen haunting images of starvation in the media during famines and disasters. But those representing from such acute hunger represent only a small portion – approximately 10% - of the world’s hungry. The vast majority of the hungry, over 90%, are chronically undernourished. Chronic undernourishment is caused by a constant or intermittent lack of access to sufficient quality and quantity of food, good health care and improved maternal caring practices. Chronic hunger results in underweight and stunted children as well as high child mortality brought on by associated diseases. In addition, more than two billion people around the world suffer from hidden hunger, caused by a lack of essential micronutrients (vitamins and minerals) even when they consume adequate amounts of calories and protein. The world has demonstrated its generosity in helping the victims of acute hunger. Unfortunately chronic and hidden forms of hunger are not as dramatic, and receive much less global attention and support.

***The causes of hunger:*** People are hungry despite an abundant world food supply, because they are unable to get a sufficient quantity or quality of food to meet their nutritional requirements. There are many reasons for being unable to get enough food. Adequate feeding begins at the household level, where gender discrimination, social practices and inadequate nutrition awareness can limit the intake of women and children. Women and girls are often expected to eat last, finishing what remains after men and boys have eaten.

The first two years of nutrition are critical to children's physical and mental development, and the damage caused by undernourishment during this key period is irreversible. The best nourishment for small children is exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months, then breastfeeding plus complementary foods through their first two years. However, women are often unable to breastfeed due to their own hunger or heavy labor requirements. Many women have limited education, become mothers at a young age, and lack awareness of basic nutrition and child nurturing.

Micronutrient deficiencies affect about two billion people throughout the world. This is often due to limited diets based on basic starchy foods, with little in the way of animal products, vegetables and fruits. Undernourished young women often become anaemic when they are pregnant due to lack of iron in the diet; this increases the risk of low birth weight in their babies, perpetuating a vicious cycle of malnourishment.

Good health is vital for maintaining adequate nutrition. Common infectious diseases prevent people from absorbing and utilizing food properly, and parasites compete for everything that is eaten. The concurrent threats of hunger and HIV/AIDS in parts of the world are leading to complex humanitarian crises where people affected by AIDS are unable to be sufficiently productive to grow food or work for a living. At the same time, malnourishment weakens the immunity and strength of HIV/AIDS victims, making them succumb more quickly to the disease.

***Who are the hungry?*** Many households simply are unable to get enough food to feed the family. Often they are too poor to afford sufficient food, or household income must be used for other needs such as paying for health care and school fees. The Hunger Task Force estimates that a large proportion of the hungry are in smallholder farming households that are unable to grow enough food to meet their families' food requirements, or generate the income to buy sufficient food. Adequate employment opportunities are seldom available off the farm in rural areas for reducing purchasing power for the hungry farmers, landless, and urban dwellers. Hunger spurs many to leave stagnant and isolated rural economies, migrating to cities where they join the already large mass of urban poor. A smaller group of the hungry are pastoralists, fisher-folk and people who depend upon forests for their livelihoods. For them, the conservation of their environment is vital to their sustained nutrition. While accurate data is difficult to find, estimates indicate that the vast majority of hungry people live in rural areas. This report emphasizes interventions to address problems of rural hunger, though some of the recommendations are equally applicable to urban areas.

***Where are the hungry?*** The Hunger Task Force has identified "hunger hotspots" where chronic hunger is most persistent and severe, based on the prevalence of underweight children under five years of age. Hunger hotspots are defined as the sub-national units (province, district) that have more than 20% of underweight children less than five years of age, in quantities of 100,000 or more. Based on the available data, out of 371 subnational units in Africa, 73 hunger hotspots were identified; these include approximately 68% of the total population of underweight under-five children. Likewise out of 180 subnational units in Asia, 55 hunger hotspots were identified; they include approximately 96% of the total population of underweight under-five children. In Latin America and the Caribbean, only 113 subnational units were identified due to limited data. Within these units, only two hunger hotspots were identified. These include approximately 9% of the total population of underweight under-five children, indicating that hunger is more geographically diffuse than in Asia and Africa. The 130 hunger hotspots encompass 87% of the underweight children under five years of age in poor countries (117 million out of a world total of 135 million). They

therefore help indicate priority regions for intervention. The Hunger Task Force recommends that national governments refine this analysis with up to date local data. Governments may choose to give priority to high prevalence areas (> 20%) that do not meet the 100,000-population criterion.

**Vulnerability:** Hungry people are highly vulnerable to events and influences that they are unable to control. These include insecure rights to land, water, trees, fisheries and other natural resources, lack of appropriate improved agricultural technology, poor health, variations in the weather (especially droughts and floods), limited availability of different kinds of food, few opportunities to earn income, market failures such as catastrophic collapse of price when bumper crops are harvested, and widespread environmental degradation. An understanding of these elements of vulnerability leads to defining the priority actions recommended by the Hunger Task Force.

Two key factors exacerbate vulnerability in hungry countries: gender inequality and HIV/AIDS. When examining vulnerability, it is important to recognize that women are often disproportionately vulnerable. Women produce more than 80% of Africa's food, and over half of the food in Latin America and South Asia. Yet agricultural programmes systematically bypass them. Women are responsible not only for the bulk of agricultural production, but for most of the household economy as well. They need to be systematically empowered and given the tools to strengthen their roles as food producers, household nutrition manager, and marketers. Gender equity is not simply a socially desirable state; it is a central and vital plank of the fight against hunger. The HIV/AIDS pandemic is exacerbating existing vulnerabilities in millions of chronically hungry households. There is urgent need for the recommendations of this report to be applied in areas of AIDS-affected famines as part of concerted programmes of action against AIDS. It is important that the interactions of drought, hunger and AIDS are better understood by decision-makers, and that agriculture, health and other sectors recognize their joint roles and take action in combating complex crises. Our recommendations include specific interventions that empower women and help farming families cope with HIV/AIDS.

To address the factors that create hunger at the local level, the Hunger Task Force has identified the following priorities for action:

Lack of improved agricultural technology and poor access to resources require actions that increase the agricultural productivity of food-insecure farmers, including fishers, herders and forest dwellers.

The limited availability of nutritious food, social exclusion and ill health require actions that we improve the nutrition of the chronically hungry.

Humanitarian crises and crop failures due to conflict, drought and flood require actions to reduce acute vulnerability through productive safety nets.

The lack of income-earning opportunities and the prevalence of market failures require actions that increase income for the food insecure and make markets work for the poor.

Widespread environmental degradation leads to a need to restore and conserve the environment for the food insecure.

However these interventions will not be successful without mobilizing political action to improve governance and commit resources; and reforming policies to create an enabling environment for hunger alleviation efforts.

## ***The Action Plan: Seven recommendations***

The Millennium Project focuses on the simple but powerful concept of making the MDGs the centerpiece of world development policy and practice. This entails a focusing on the MDGs as minimum policy targets, then developing an action plan to meet them by 2015. Practical planning requires assessment of the scope of the problem, development of a strategy to address it, and identification of the resources needed to carry out that strategy – drawing from both government budgets and official development assistance. Within the overall framework put forward by the Millennium Project to achieve the MDGs, the Hunger Task Force calls for simultaneous action in seven priority areas at three different geographical levels.

### ***Global level***

***Recommendation 1. Move from political commitment to action.*** Political commitments to end hunger have been made, and reiterated, numerous times. A commitment to halving world hunger was made by all member countries of the United Nations at the World Food Summits of 1996 and 2001, at the Millennium Summit of 2000, at the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development and the 2002 Monterrey Summit on Development Finance. The Hunger Task Force recommends taking the next step: *political action at all levels of society*. Recommended interventions include 1) putting intergovernmental agreements into action by adopting and financing implementation of the Hunger Task Force recommendations; 2) strengthening the contribution of donor countries and developing-country governments to activities that combat hunger; 3) building widespread public awareness of the scale and nature of world hunger, broadening the focus beyond famine to include chronic hunger; 4) strengthening advocacy organizations to generate political action, public awareness, and effective programs, and 5) putting adequate monitoring and evaluation mechanisms in place to ensure transparency and accountability among those responsible for implementing anti-hunger programs.

### ***National level***

***Recommendation 2. Reform policy and create an enabling environment for hunger alleviation efforts.*** Every poor country, and especially countries that are off-track in meeting the MDGs, should prepare a national action plan to meet the Hunger MDG. This should be integrated into an MDG-based Poverty Reduction Strategy (or other national planning process), and address strategies for meeting the MDG in both the medium term (3 years) and the long term (10 years). In cases where such strategy papers already exist, these should be revisited to integrate appropriate Hunger Task Force recommendations. In middle-income countries with significant pockets of chronic and acute hunger, strategies will need to focus on ways to reach those populations in greatest need. In all cases the human and institutional capacity to attain the MDGs will need to be strengthened.

Other key government policy reforms directly related to hunger are as follows:

1. Promote an integrated policy approach to hunger reduction
2. Restore budgetary priority to the agricultural and rural sectors

3. Build developing country capacity to achieve the hunger MDG
4. Link nutritional and agricultural interventions
5. Increase poor people's access to productive resources
6. Empower women and girls
7. Strengthen agricultural and nutrition research
8. Remove internal and regional barriers to agricultural trade
9. Increase the effectiveness of donor agencies' hunger-related programming
10. Create vibrant partnerships among all stakeholders to ensure effective policy implementation.

## ***Community level***

The Hunger Task Force recommends five interventions at the community or district level in hunger hotspots or other priority areas in poor countries. These interventions are to be carried simultaneously to take advantages of many synergies that results among them as well as with community level actions recommended by other task forces. The five recommended interventions are:

**3. Increase agricultural productivity of food insecure farmers.** Agricultural productivity (from crops, livestock, forests and fisheries) remains low in many hungry countries. This is because soils are widely depleted of nutrients, water is unavailable, poor farmers do not have the means of using improved plant varieties and animal breeds that are suitable to their forms of agriculture, and extension services are moribund and not linked to modern agricultural research. To increase smallholders' production of basic food crops, the Task Force recommends public investments in improving soil health (combining mineral fertilizers, agroforestry, green manure and cover crops, returning crop residues to the soil and putting in place soil conservation practices), expanding and improving small-scale water harvest and management, and increasing the supply of improved crop varieties. The next step is diversifying crops into higher value livestock, vegetable and tree products to generate income and off-farm employment. The Task Force recommends increasing investment in national and international agricultural research, expanding research on human nutrition, and revitalizing agricultural extension services with trained paraprofessionals at the village level.

**4. Improve nutrition for the chronically hungry vulnerable groups.** A life-cycle approach is recommended that ensure adequate nutrition for chronically hungry people at various sensitive ages. Particular attention needs to be focused on children under the age of two, and on pregnant and lactating mothers. Conditions need to be improved for pregnant and lactating women so that they are enabled to provide the nurturing and nourishment their children need. Nutritional supplementation and increased consumption of fruits and vegetables are enormously important to eliminate micronutrient deficiencies. Parallel health measures are needed to eliminate the diseases that rob people of nutrients.

**5. Reduce vulnerability of the acutely hungry through productive safety nets.** National governments, together with the international community, should enact measures to protect people from acute hunger caused by disasters and economic shocks. This includes strengthening early warning systems and emergency response systems, strengthening the capacity of both national and international systems for providing emergency relief, and the establishment of strategic food reserves. Wherever possible, relief food should be purchased locally, to stimulate the local economy and provide balanced meals made from culturally appropriate food. There are many ways of helping communities to build their resilience to shocks, including investment in asset-building strategies such as community grain banks.



Safety net programmes, such as food for work schemes, can provide employment during times of distress while creating investment in productive infrastructure. Credit, insurance and various community coping mechanisms can all reduce vulnerability.

**6. Make markets work for the poor and increase income of the food insecure.** Another reason for chronic hunger is the lack of functioning agricultural input and output markets to serve the rural poor. Farmers are unable to get the fertilizer, seed and other inputs for their crops, and the lack of a market for their harvest reduces incentives to increase production. The isolation of rural communities from markets leads to depressed rural economies with few opportunities for off-farm employment in processing, other value-adding activities and the provision of services. Actions to increase income from agricultural production include reducing the costs of purchased agricultural inputs (such as fertilizer, water management systems, and improved seeds) through targeted vouchers system; providing smallholder farmers with effective access to credit; promoting and strengthening farmer associations and networks of agro-dealers or rural input traders. In addition, access to off-farm employment activities needs to be increased. This can be achieved by expanding education and training to build employment skills at the local level; strengthening the bargaining power of the rural and urban poor in the labor market; and promoting employment opportunities in rural industry. In China, rapid growth in agricultural productivity moved people out of farming and into rural enterprises, reducing the farm labor force from 80 to 50% from 1952 to 1997, while rural enterprises grew from 4 to 50% of the labor force during that period.

**7. Restore and conserve natural assets for the food insecure.** Poor rural people depend heavily upon the state of natural resources and the health of ecosystems. Many such agroecosystems are badly degraded and the productivity of land has been largely lost. Action is needed to enable communities to restore their natural assets. The establishment of credible rights to land, water, forests and fisheries is vital for facilitating investment in conservation and restoration. There are growing opportunities for communities to build up “green enterprises” trading in forest products, natural medicines and certified sustainably exploited timber. Opportunities are expanding for communities to be paid for services to the global environment, for example by helping to sequester carbon, preserve biodiversity, and restore watershed functions.

## ***Implementing the Action Plan***

**A changing paradigm:** Enacting the Hunger Task Force recommendations will require major international commitment, including considerable additional resources and improved governance from national governments and their development partners. Over the past 25 years, it has become clear that supply-led, top-down approaches to development by themselves are not effective for eliminating hunger and poverty. Instead, the world’s poor and hungry still lack the means to increase their productivity; to access markets and off-farm employment; and to benefit from adequate nutritional safety nets. A much greater emphasis on agriculture and nutrition is needed, together with strategies to stimulate rural economies, generate jobs, and establish social services and safety nets that reach those who need them most.

A multi-sectoral approach is needed to enact programs that can generate synergistic benefits for the hungry and extreme poor. An example of such an approach is homegrown school feeding programs, which can generate multiple benefits. The programs can provide fortified meals for students and pre-schoolers; take-home rations for families, and educational and

nutritional support for adolescent girls to prepare them for childbirth. In addition to the already-documented benefits of such programs on school enrolment and quality of learning, they can provide a useful stimulus for the local farm economy if the food is bought from local farmers. Other examples of synergistic programs include income generation programs for women, watershed restoration programs, and the use of agroforestry fertilizer trees to boost crop production and provide fuelwood.

***The way forward:*** Within the seven broad recommendations presented in this report, there are 42 proposed interventions. Clearly, not every intervention will be appropriate for every setting. An important step at the national level will be to identify the priority interventions for the conditions that prevail locally. Further analysis is needed at the national level to identify hungry populations and the driving factors of their situation.

To mobilize a coordinated effort for hunger elimination, governments should design and implement national anti-hunger strategies. These should be developed with broad stakeholder participation and international support, based on sound policy design, incorporated into the PRS or other national policy planning process, and monitored publicly to strengthen accountability. To achieve rapid progress toward the MDGs on a broad scale, many countries will need to invest in strengthening their human, technical and institutional capacity. Donors will need to actively assist this process, and shift their strategy to emphasize local ownership and leadership of development processes at all levels.

Much of the investment that is needed will need to be directed towards enabling people to meet their own development challenges. All of the actions to reduce hunger ultimately boil down to people acting locally to deal with problems. Policy reform will be needed to empower people and entrust them with the means of managing their development. Reforming public policy to help empower and address the needs of women, and building public awareness about the damaging effects of gender discrimination, should be central to the campaign to halve hunger by 2015.

The Hunger Task Force has written this report based on the firm belief that it is possible to reduce and ultimately eradicate hunger. It recognizes that there are compelling moral imperatives behind the drive to reduce hunger and that the human and economic costs of hunger are unacceptable. Beyond that, the economic costs of hunger – in terms of reduced human capital and depressed economic opportunities for developed and developing countries alike – are substantial. Finally, the cycle of hunger and violent conflict can devastate local communities and affect regional and global stability. Taken together, these are all compelling reasons for an immediate and expanded global campaign against hunger.