

## G8 urged to act on food crisis and health

This month the Group of Eight (G8) industrialized nations discuss the growing global food crisis with its dire consequences and will be encouraged to fulfil past commitments, keep health on the international agenda and strengthen health systems. Fiona Fleck reports.

The global food crisis threatens to reverse hard-won gains in public health in developing countries and is already jeopardizing the health of the most vulnerable people in poor countries, particularly pregnant women, children and the elderly.

“A great deal of hard-won progress is at stake,” said WHO Director-General Margaret Chan in a speech to the United Nations food summit in Rome last month. “The world already faces an estimated 3.5 million deaths from malnutrition each year. Many more will die as a result of this crisis.”

G8 leaders gather on the Japanese island of Hokkaido from 7 to 9 July. This year's host, Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda, who showed Japan's commitment to addressing the food crisis by attending last month's UN food summit in Rome, has put food security high on the G8 agenda. He and his fellow G8 leaders are also scheduled to discuss other health-related issues, including proposals to strengthen health systems.

Strengthening health systems is a top priority for the World Health Organization (WHO) and the rest of the “H8” health organizations – the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation; the GAVI Alliance; the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, TB and Malaria; the Joint

United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS); the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA); the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF); and the World Bank. In a formal letter sent to the G8 governments on 10 June, the H8 called on the G8 to fulfil past health commitments, keep health on the international agenda and help to strengthen health systems in developing countries.

“The 2008 G8 summit presents an opportunity to protect recent gains, and address areas which lag behind, such as the failure to reduce the number of maternal deaths, improve nutrition and intensify HIV prevention,” the letter said.

Health organizations recalled that the last G8 meeting in Japan, in 2000, had helped to establish the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, TB and Malaria and spurred “real and measurable progress” in health, such as “reductions in child deaths, increased access to treatment for HIV, the reversal of the TB epidemic in many countries, progress towards polio eradication, the profound reduction in measles in Africa, success in controlling neglected tropical diseases, and increasing contraceptive use”.

“Much remains to be done. In Hokkaido, it will be important for the

G8 to build on what it has started,” it said referring to Gleneagles and other commitments, “and support the dramatic scale-up of high-impact interventions to reach the health MDGs by 2015 – a crucial step in the global effort to increase human security. Leaders should commit to new, long-term predictable financing, that is linked to results,” the letter said.

For world leaders, the global food crisis presents a new health challenge. Soaring prices of basic foodstuffs, such as rice, maize and wheat, in the last couple of years has had a profound effect on people's health and well-being, and there are signs it will exacerbate undernutrition (under-eating) and malnutrition (bad eating) worldwide. In coming months, poorer populations may be forced to switch to cheaper, less nutritional food. Meanwhile, people in countries that are dependent on food imports, particularly in urban areas, are likely to eat fewer meals. Children may drop out of school earlier to work to earn more to buy food for their families, missing nutritious school dinners.

Combating the food crisis effectively will require substantial pledges from the international community. According to United Nations estimates, governments and other donors would need to spend more than US\$ 15 to US\$ 20 billion every year for several years to ensure adequate food supplies for people across the globe. To feed their populations the United Nations says countries would have to increase food production by 50% by 2030. Otherwise they would be unable to satisfy growing demand.

The United Nations has had difficulty finding funds for its food programmes. The World Food Programme (WFP) had to lobby the international community for several months to raise an additional US\$ 755 million to send food aid to countries in greatest need. In the end, a substantial transfer from Saudi Arabia closed the gap. Its sister organization, the Food and Agriculture Organization is still trying to raise the US\$ 1.7 billion it wants to procure seeds and agricultural assistance to increase food production in poor countries.

WHO officials believe the food price crisis could set back progress in reducing poverty by seven years.



Claire Schofield/WHO

Malnourished child in South Africa.

WHO/P. Viot



Rice, a staple in many countries, is becoming increasingly expensive.

“WHO can, and must, prevent further loss of progress by strengthening health and nutrition responses. This will require a concerted effort to channel national and international efforts, strengthen social safety nets, and monitor the health status of vulnerable populations,” said Dr Eric Laroche, who chairs the WHO Task Force responding to the Food Price crisis.

WHO has identified 21 countries that are already facing high levels of acute and chronic undernutrition: Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, the Central African Republic, Chad, the Comoros, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Eritrea, Ethiopia, India, Lao People’s Democratic Republic, Madagascar, Mali, Myanmar, Nepal, the Niger, Nigeria, Pakistan, Somalia, the Sudan, Timor-Leste and Yemen.

“WHO will help countries assess the health and nutrition effect of the global food crisis, as well as to design and implement measures to alleviate its impact among the most vulnerable populations.”

*Dr Daniel López-Acuña*

WHO is contributing to the work of the High-Level Task Force on the Global Food Crisis led by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon. The Task Force comprising UN agencies and the World Bank aims to promote a unified response to the current food



WHO/P. Viot

Child in China eating rice. The price of rice rose by 46% in 2006 and 2007, according to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.

crisis as well as long-term food security challenges. WHO is also helping to monitor the impact of the food crisis on nutrition, health and poverty as well as its effect on the health- and nutrition-related Millennium Development Goals. This work will provide government policy-makers with a sound evidence base, so that they will know how to target the populations that are most in need.

Dr Daniel López-Acuña, Director Recovery and Transition Programmes,

said that WHO will help countries assess the health and nutrition effect of the global food crisis, as well as to design and implement measures to alleviate its impact among the most vulnerable populations.

“It is critical to underscore the human face of the global food crisis, because there is an impact on the levels of nutrition and health to the population, and also it may delay the attainment of the health-related Millennium Development Goals”, López-Acuña said. ■



WHO/P. Viot

Prices of staples at a food market in India. In 2006–2007, the price of vegetable oils increased on average by more than 97%, that of grains by 87%, dairy products by 58% and rice by 46%, according to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (source: [http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/user\\_upload/foodclimate/HLCdocs/HLC08-inf-1-E.pdf](http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/user_upload/foodclimate/HLCdocs/HLC08-inf-1-E.pdf)).