

**Congressional Children's Caucus
Congressional Global Health Caucus
Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Africa and Global Health**

**Briefing on the Global Food Crisis
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A. Context and introduction

UNICEF welcomes the Government of the United States' proposed assistance to alleviate the impact of the developing high price commodities crisis. The proposed additional \$770 million for food assistance will not only help address the immediate food needs and prevent nutritional deterioration among the most vulnerable, but also prevent the indirect consequences such as violence and social unrest among communities. This crisis is both a short-term and long-term problem, and UNICEF is encouraged by the U.S. Government's approach to be flexible – that is, ensure support for long-term agricultural sustainability while at the same time addressing the potential short-term consequences of this crisis.

The most vulnerable will be most significantly affected by rising food prices in the short-term. The crisis will undoubtedly affect many countries globally but some countries will be affected more than others. Using evidence-based criteria, it is important to identify those more vulnerable countries. UNICEF, together with partner agencies such as the World Bank, WFP, and FAO, is identifying priority countries where children and women are at highest risk from significant food prices increases. In particular, UNICEF works closely with WFP to do a joint analysis of vulnerable countries. Criteria relevant for identifying these priority countries include high levels of child mortality, countries experiencing protracted crisis, countries with existing high levels of malnutrition, countries with a high proportion of the population living below the poverty line, proportion of the population reliant on food procurement, countries with high levels of disparity, countries with limited national capacity for social protection programmes, and countries emerging from conflict and/or countries with complex programming environments.

Within these priority countries, there will be specific population groups that are most affected. These may differ by country, but an increase in food prices will most significantly affect those who spend a significant proportion of household income on food, those with limited opportunity to diversify their livelihoods, those who already face significant risk of becoming malnourished, and those who lack formal and informal social safety nets to support them. *In all these situations, children are the most nutritionally vulnerable to any changes in the household food availability and food quality.* This is well documented. Women too are often the most vulnerable, given that they frequently face socio-cultural challenges in terms of accessing food and have their own specific nutritional needs during and before pregnancy.

Collaborative partnerships are key to effectively addressing the needs of this crisis – agencies cannot work in isolation from each other. As the custodian of the Millennium Development Goals and the champion of human security worldwide, the United Nations, along with key sister organizations such as the World Bank and the IMF, as well as relevant non-governmental organizations, all need to increasingly work together to meet the emerging challenges rationally, comprehensively and in a coordinated way. A common picture is being developed of what the needs are, what the different resources and capacities of the agencies and organizations are, and how to make the best use of every organization’s comparative advantages. At the UN level, at a meeting of UN agency executives held in Bern last week, the Secretary-General announced the creation of an inter-agency Task Force to bring together the key institutional actors on food security and to develop a common strategy and framework for coordinated action. This will be an opportunity to transcend the traditional gap between food aid and food security, as well as other sectors, and to identify a range of immediate and complementary actions in food aid, social protection and safety net measures, short-term productivity boosts, and support to governments to facilitate imports. The Task Force will also address medium- and long-term issues. UNICEF is committed to working closely with FAO, WFP, and other UN agencies, as well as scale up its own responses where necessary.

Need to support and further strengthen existing national systems for monitoring and responding to food insecurity and vulnerability. Many of the countries that are and will be affected by increases in food insecurity have systems in place to identify and monitor conditions, as well as respond to the needs of the most vulnerable.

- For example, in Mozambique a key strategy is to expand and scale up existing government programs. This is of particular importance to ensure the proposed interventions come into effect in the very short-term and are in line with Government priorities and policies. In Somalia, FAO, UNICEF, WFP, and other partners support an inter-agency Food Security Assessment Unit that is well established and provides regular updates of nutritional risk. This system must be further strengthened to assess the impact of increases in food prices.

As an international community, we must strive to further strengthen and where necessary adapt these national systems. This crisis must not create parallel structures nor undermine those systems and national capacities to address them. This is an opportunity to strengthen these systems.

UNICEF’s approach encompasses a broad nutrition security framework. UNICEF’s nutrition security perspective is that children must have secure access to food, coupled with a healthy environment that includes access to health care, water, and adequate care. Adequate food is necessary, but insufficient on its own to prevent nutritional deterioration. UNICEF’s conceptual framework for causes of malnutrition, and which has informed policies and programs almost two decades, is relevant to the current crisis.

B. Critical issues for UNICEF and partner agencies for moving forward

Establish a comprehensive framework for analysis of nutritional risk, malnutrition, and food security. A number of tools and instruments are necessary and important in order to

understand the extent and scope rising food insecurity. It is critical to create an over-arching framework for information that will enhance the analysis, interpretation, and use of data for decision-making. For example, there is a need to link findings from vulnerability mapping programs with findings from nutritional assessments led by UNICEF that measure malnutrition and direct underlying causes. UNICEF will be further strengthening its capacity to undertake rapid assessments that follow appropriate “best practices” to ensure that decision-making is evidence-based. For the past several years, UNICEF, together with other agencies, has focused on strengthening these assessments and monitoring tools, and this crisis will be an opportunity to accelerate these efforts.

There are three particular challenges that a strengthened monitoring and analysis system must address. First, these systems must measure not only the direct consequences such as malnutrition and household food shortages, but also aim to identify *indirect* consequences, seemingly unrelated, such as decreases in school attendance, reduced access to health services, increased child labor or exploitation, and increased risks to vulnerable groups of children such as refugee and displaced children and children affected by HIV/AIDS.

- In Kenya, UNICEF is strengthening its child protection monitoring systems to assess school dropouts, children affected by sexual exploitation, and the number of children abandoned in institutions. Kenya is also monitoring and assessing urban slum access to water, which is likely to become less accessible to the most poor and force households to use less safe water sources.
- In Malawi, a Government-led surveillance system is already well established, and UNICEF will further strengthen this system and expand it to monitor school attendance.
- In Niger, UNICEF and its partners meet under the leadership of Government on a regular basis to review the food security situation. The collaboration was strengthened during and after the food crisis in 2005.

Second, wasting and acute malnutrition will not necessarily be the primary consequences of food price increases. Evidence shows that in compensating as food prices rise, vulnerable households will try to avoid declines in calorie consumption and opt for a diet poorer in vitamins and minerals, shifting to more affordable but less nutritious substitutes. Other consequences of food price increases include families limiting their food consumption to one meal a day; and diminished caring and feeding practices due to pressure on caregivers to seek work or food away from home. Monitoring systems must aim to measure these trends as well as the less visible types of malnutrition, including micronutrient deficiencies such as anemia. This is a significant challenge.

- In Bangladesh, UNICEF is advocating for harmonizing the existing, well-established Helen Keller surveillance system (which monitors micronutrient deficiencies as well as nutritional status) more closely with the food security surveillance system implemented by FAO and WFP.

Third, these assessments will need to be implemented more frequently to ensure timely analysis, at least two to three times a year. This will require resources and expert capacity.

Where there are anticipated shortages in food assistance needs, immediate and short-term safety net programs, such as supplementary feeding programs, will need to be put in place. Needs for food aid assistance are likely to exceed availability, especially given the emergence of new vulnerable groups requiring food assistance. There may be anticipated and unexpected shortfalls in the food aid pipeline. UNICEF and its partners must put in place programs to ensure that women and children nutritional needs are met. These may require putting in place blanket supplementary feeding programs until more long-term more sustainable programs are put in place.

- For example, in Mozambique, UNICEF, working with WFP, is expanding its supplementary feeding programs to additional vulnerable rural districts, as well as an expansion into urban areas.

School-feeding programs in many situations can provide a valuable safety net, and UNICEF will continue to support the effectiveness of these programs through strengthening community participation. Other types of interventions are necessary to reach others who are nutritionally vulnerable, for example children under three years old, and children who cannot go to school. Strengthening breast-feeding programs will be important to protect very young children.

Social protection interventions can protect basic needs and prevent further asset depletion.

In consultation with national authorities and other partners, UNICEF will develop adequate social protection programs to address the short- and medium- term impacts of the crisis on vulnerable children and women. In some situations, cash transfers may be considered as long as conditions are met to ensure these programs maximize benefits and impact on impact on women and children.

- In Mozambique, an inter-agency response is considering expanding already existing cash transfer programs.
- In Malawi and Pakistan, UNICEF is assessing the feasibility of expanding pilot cash transfer schemes, based on evidence that these have positive impacts for children.

Cash cannot necessarily replace essential items for survival that may not necessarily be available such as impregnated bed nets to prevent malaria.

Increased preparedness for scaling up nutritional interventions where there is evidence of a deteriorating nutritional situation (e.g. therapeutic feeding, micronutrient interventions).

Where there is evidence of increases in malnutrition, UNICEF and its partner agencies will ensure scaling-up of treatment programs such as community-based treatment of severe acute malnutrition. Stockpiling of appropriate commodities as well as support for local production of ready-to-use therapeutic foods (RUTF) where appropriate, will be essential.

- In Pakistan, UNICEF is exploring with WFP and other partners joint capacities for scaling up emergency nutrition interventions in the most vulnerable districts, including fortified supplementary food rations. In addition, UNICEF will support multiple vitamins and mineral supplementation to children under five, and pregnant and lactating women, to prevent and control micronutrient deficiencies.

Ensuring continued participation, access to and delivery to social services. Poor urban households allocate a greater share of their income on food than any other group in society.

Rising food prices will thus come at a detriment to their non-food expenditure. As noted earlier, food price rises can lead to lower school attendance (due to inability to pay for school fees or children being pulled out of school to care for younger siblings), reduced access to health care (inability to pay for user fees), and decreased access to clean water sources. Therefore, it will be critical to ensure that policies and programmes are put in place to ensure the most vulnerable have access to these services. Equally important, UNICEF is concerned that the health and education social services will be negatively affected as a result of poor quality of delivery of services if teachers and health care providers themselves are not able to continue to provide the same services - as they choose more lucrative livelihoods as a means to cope.

Advocacy for national policy reform e.g. social protection, safety nets, boosting agricultural production. UNICEF in collaboration with its partner agencies will advocate with national governments to remove structural obstacles and to improve market conditions so that increases in consumer prices are passed on to farmers. While UNICEF is not directly involved in addressing these structural issues, nor is the lead agency for agricultural policy reform, we support our sister agencies such as FAO to ensure agricultural policies are designed to have the maximum positive impacts on women, children, and their families.