

Ireland's Hunger Task Force Report to the Government of Ireland

A summary

Ireland's Hunger Task Force presented its report to An Taoiseach, Brian Cowen TD on 25th September 2008 at the United Nations Headquarters in New York, USA. Below is a summary of the report. A copy of the full report can be found on the Irish Aid website at: http://www.irishaid.gov.ie/uploads/hunger_task_force.pdf

Introduction

Ireland's Hunger Task Force, made up of people with experience and expertise in the area of hunger, human development and agriculture, was set up by the Irish Government in September 2006 with the brief to the particular contribution that Ireland can make to tackling the root causes of hunger, especially in Africa.

The Report of the task force was published in September 2008 records some of the most successful experiences in the fight against hunger and identifies why, despite these achievements, over 860 million people remain undernourished. It outlines a detailed programme of actions to address the issue – it outlines 3 key priorities which the members of the task Force argues can have the greatest impact in reducing, and ultimately eliminating, hunger.

These are:

- Increasing the productivity of smallholder, mainly women, farmers in Africa
- Implementing programmes focused on maternal and infant undernutrition
- Ensuring real political commitment, at national and international levels, to give hunger the priority it deserves

At the beginning of the Report, Taoiseach Brian Cowen outlines a rationale for Ireland's approach to the issue of hunger in the following terms:

"Ireland's history and experience of famine echoes through the generations and influences our approach to helping those with whom we share our humanity in the fight against poverty and hunger."

Defining Hunger

The 2005 Report of the UN Millennium Project Task Force on Hunger defines hunger as a condition in which people lack the basic food intake to provide them with the energy and nutrients for fully productive active lives. People go hungry due to an inability to obtain this basic food intake.

Mapping Hunger

The Report argues that the global hunger crisis is the most critical issue facing the world today and notes that 160 years ago, Ireland suffered first-hand the devastating effects of

crop failures and the failure of political responses. It argues that not enough has changed in the world in the intervening period and highlights 3 key points:

- *Back then, and again today, we can produce enough food for everyone*
- *Back then, and again today, it is the poor, the most vulnerable, the voiceless who starve*
- *Back then, and again today, there is an absence of political will to do away with hunger and starvation.*

At the beginning of the 21st century, more than 860 million people still do not have access to enough food and given the current sharp increase in the price of food, this number could easily reach one billion of the world's population.

Tellingly, the report notes that almost 10 million children below the age of five die every year, and that malnutrition is the underlying factor in one-third to one-half of such deaths – a denial of some of the most basic human rights outlined in the 1948 universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The report highlights some of the human costs of mass global hunger:

- 2 billion people, mostly women and children, suffer from anaemia due to iron deficiency – a major cause of maternal deaths
- 40% of all children in sub-Saharan Africa risk permanent physical and intellectual impairment because of malnutrition
- Children, especially girls, do not go to school because of hunger
- the economic costs are enormous and can amount to 10% of GDP in some cases.

The report concludes:

'Until now, international leadership and action to eradicate the scourge of world hunger have been inadequate.'

The Geography of Hunger

Millennium Development Goal 1 (MDG 1) is to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger. To reach this goal, we must achieve two targets by 2015:

- reduce by half the proportion of people living on less than US\$1 per day
- reduce by half the proportion of people who suffer from hunger.

To achieve this second hunger target we must:

- reduce by half the prevalence of underweight children under five years
- reduce by half the percentage of the world population below minimum levels of dietary energy consumption.

Today, some countries are on target to achieve or surpass this target but many others are lagging behind.

- Eastern Asia has achieved the target as a result of nutritional advances in China
- there has also been some progress in Western Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean.

But

Progress has been very slow in two regions:

- Southern Asia, where 46% of children under five are underweight, down only 7% since 1990
- Sub-Saharan Africa, which shows only a small reduction, with the percentage of children under 5 who are underweight falling from 33% to 29%.

Although in both these regions the percentages show some reduction the absolute numbers of hungry people is continuing to rise because of increasing population. As world population is expected to grow from 6.7 billion to 9.2 billion in 2050, the numbers of the hungry will increase.

The Causes of Hunger

According to the report, hunger arises from a number of causes:

- poverty
- low food production
- lack of education among mothers and fathers
- poor diversity in diet and consequent low nutritional quality
- poor water, sanitation and health facilities
- climatic shocks
- war and HIV and AIDS have been important in some areas such as sub-Saharan Africa
- In Asia the low status and poor education of women has affected child malnutrition and mortality
- the vulnerability of hungry households is also increased by gender inequality

Today, a more recent cause has been added - rapidly rising food prices will increase hunger particularly in net food-importing countries – including most of the poorest countries in sub-Saharan Africa.

A History of Unfulfilled Commitments

The report itemises a series of unrealised commitments made by both developed and developing countries in recent years to combat hunger. The report comments:

'The lack of progress in delivery on these commitments is a clear reflection of the lack of priority afforded by governments to eradicating hunger.'

For example:

- Developed countries are committed to reaching the UN target of development aid spending in the amount of 0.7% of GNI **but** very few of the developed countries

- have reached the UN target. In 2007, only Denmark, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden had reached that figure
- All governments are committed to the first UN Millennium Development Goal of reducing by half the proportion of people suffering from hunger by 2015 **but** this target is unlikely to be achieved in South Asia or in sub-Saharan Africa
 - The World Food Summit of 1996 set an even more ambitious target to reduce by half the number of undernourished people in the world by 2015 **but** this target will not be achieved
 - The Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP), adopted in Maputo in 2003, commits African governments to increasing expenditure on agriculture to 10% of their annual budget **but** indications are that progress is very slow. The latest progress report, in February 2008, indicates that although 11 countries have achieved the Maputo growth target of 6% in agriculture, only five have achieved the budget target of 10%.

The report comments:

'Despite numerous commitments, there appears to be a willingness amongst both the international community and national governments, to live with the current extent of global hunger.'

'Most importantly, hungry people themselves – disproportionately consisting of poor women and children, many of them affected by conflicts, HIV/AIDS and other chronic illnesses – have little or no voice in policy-making and little or no power in local markets.'

Success Stories

Despite the failure to meet global targets, the report notes that there have been some significant success stories that show what can be achieved with sufficient political will and with focused action.

Ghana

Ghana has more than halved its number of undernourished in a ten-year period, decreasing from 5.8 million in 1993 to 2.7 million in 2003. There have also been declines in the percentage of underweight children under five, and in the under-five mortality rate.

Most analysts attribute this success to strong economic growth, particularly in the agricultural sector. Two factors in particular are identified as contributing to a stronger agricultural performance in Ghana:

- the success of agricultural research
- more general improvement in public sector services to agriculture

New maize, yam, rice and cassava varieties have been introduced in Ghana since the 1980s, and there has been a 25% increase in cropped area. Maize yields have increased by 36% and cassava yields by over 50%. A pest-resistant cassava variety has been introduced, and cassava contributes around a third of the country's calorie intake. Growth in other sectors, including agricultural exports, has paid for increases in food

imports, also increasing food availability. Market liberalisation appears to have had a positive impact, particularly for cocoa.

However, chronic malnutrition is still relatively high and poverty is still highest amongst food crop farmers. Although Ghana is on track to meet the hunger MDG, it will be important to target interventions at particularly vulnerable groups.

China

China made progress towards the MDG target during the 1990s when the total number of hungry fell by 44 million to 150 million – a 22% decrease. This was driven to a large extent by productivity growth in agriculture, which resulted in lower food prices and a stimulus to the non-farm sector.

When production levels failed to respond to population growth, the collective farming system was broken up into individual farms. This led to rapid agricultural growth which in turn brought about poverty reduction. This institutional reform was responsible for 60% of agricultural growth up until the mid-1980s. After that time, public investment took over as the main driver of agricultural growth and poverty reduction.

Institutional capacity was key to China's ability to increase the impact of markets, while avoiding negative impact on the poor. China's food grain procurement system provided an anti-poverty lever, through variation in the procurement price. Over the last twenty years the rural economy has contributed most to reducing the number of poor in China. However, the slow rate of growth in agriculture relative to export-led manufacturing is a factor in the current slower rate of poverty reduction.

Malawi

Malawi suffered from very severe food shortages in 2001-03 and again in 2005. These shortages were predictable, resulting from the combined effects of an impoverished and under-supported smallholder agricultural economy, a poor macro-economic situation, inappropriate policies, and the ravages of the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

In the last two years, however, Malawi has experienced a dramatic turnaround with an increase in maize production from a low of 1.2 million tonnes in 2005, to 3.4 million tonnes in 2007. While favourable weather conditions played their part, the main cause of this production boost was the provision of quantity-limited subsidised fertiliser and seed to smallholder farmers. The number of Malawians who faced significant food shortages decreased dramatically from 5 million in late 2005 to 500,000 in late 2007.

One of the major arguments against fertiliser subsidy is the financial burden on governments in very poor countries. However, the reality is that poor smallholders cannot afford to buy enough fertiliser to meet household needs at world market prices. Soil fertility had declined in Malawi and fertiliser was needed to replenish soil nutrients. Therefore, at least in the short term, an input subsidy, limited in quantity and targeted at smallholder farmers, proved to be an appropriate way to address Malawi's food crisis.

Neglect of Agriculture

The report argues that agriculture has suffered decades of neglect from both national governments and aid donors. In the mid 1980s, 12.3% of overseas development assistance was spent on agriculture and by 2006, this had fallen to just 3.1%. At the same time, food aid deliveries decreased almost continuously since 1999 and in 2007 reached their lowest level since 1961.

After such neglect, the report notes, there is a need for strong and renewed focus on food security and agriculture. It is the key in many of the poorest developing countries to reducing hunger, improving nutrition, promoting growth and reducing poverty. The reasons are clear:

- Despite growing urbanisation, the majority of poor households are still rural (70% on average in the least developed countries) and a high percentage of these households are engaged in agriculture on small farm holdings
- Agriculture is a key economic sector in most of the least developed countries, generally accounting for 20-30% of GDP and about 67% of the labour force
- Agriculture is often the leading sector in stimulating broad-based development Processes
- Productivity gains in agriculture have a higher impact on poverty reduction than gains in other sectors
- Increased agricultural output lowers food prices and benefits non-farm households
- Women account for up to 80% of food production in most developing countries and improved agricultural productivity in principle enhances women's income and household food security

The report highlights a key issue regarding women:

'It is important to note that women smallholders have particular difficulty in accessing resources and, unless there is strong focus on their needs, aggregate increases in output may not translate into significant reductions in hunger.'

Looking at Nutrition

While broad-based agricultural development is a necessary basis for addressing chronic hunger, it is not sufficient, nor is it likely to be realised fast enough to prevent a repetition of food crises already witnessed in, for example, Southern Africa, Horn of Africa, Niger, South Sudan and Darfur. In these areas, highly vulnerable populations suffering acute and/or chronic malnutrition have been tipped over the edge by severe food shortages and disease. A wide range of food assistance interventions and specific nutritional interventions are needed to reduce the vulnerability of such communities.

The report quotes recent research which illustrates the stark realities:

- Maternal and child under-nutrition is the cause of 3.5 million (over one third) child deaths annually and 35% of the disease burden in children under five. Most of these deaths are preventable
- There is a critical period for effective nutrition interventions: from pregnancy to two years of age. During that critical period, continued under-nutrition causes irreversible damage for future physical and mental development
- Maternal under-nutrition is prevalent in many countries, especially in south-central Asia, and is critical in Bangladesh and India. Maternal under-nutrition is a major risk factor during pregnancy, and is associated with poor growth in the uterus. Malnutrition can be inherited in the womb
- In 2005, 32% of children under five were stunted, with particularly high rates in eastern Africa (50%) and central Africa (42%); however India has the highest absolute number of stunted children (61 million)
- 10% of all children globally (55 million) are wasted. The highest rate is in south-central Asia (29 million); of these, 19 million children are severely wasted, a situation often needing emergency interventions, including therapeutic feeding
- Micronutrient deficiencies, particularly of vitamin A, iron and iodine are major public health nutrition issues. Goitre, which results from a deficiency of iodine, affects 13% of the world's population, while as many as 30% have iron deficiency anaemia
- About 500,000 children go blind annually from vitamin A deficiency, and half of these will die within a year of losing their sight. Iron and iodine deficiencies in the first three years of life lead to permanent loss in intellectual capacity.

The report concludes:

'The links between the undernourished status of women and the poor nutritional status of children are clear. When the importance of women in agricultural production is added to the picture, it is obvious that a strong focus on meeting women's productive and nutritional needs must be a key component of any strategies to overcome hunger.'

Having listed a number of more recent initiatives internationally, the report argues that food security and agriculture are now firmly back on the international agenda and that there is renewed commitment to social protection in many African and Asian countries but similar initiatives do not appear to be underway in the area of nutrition.

3 Critical Areas

The Task force argues that there are there are 3 critical areas which need priority to achieve the greatest and most lasting impact:

1. Increasing agricultural productivity in Africa – with a particular focus on women who account for up to 80% of food production in most developing countries
2. Targeting maternal and infant under-nutrition
3. Changes in governance and leadership priorities are needed at both national and international levels to hold both national governments and donors to their commitments, and address the needs of the hungry.

What should Ireland do?

The report concludes with a series of proposals outlining what Ireland can do to deliver on its responsibilities in relation to world hunger.

At a national level:

- Declare eradication of hunger a cornerstone of its development aid programme and a key component of its foreign policy;
- Take a strong leadership and advocacy role internationally to ensure that the MDG hunger target is reached and, if possible, exceeded
- Work towards an indicative target of 20% of its overseas aid to actions to alleviate and eradicate hunger – this target to be achieved on a phased basis by 2012 in the context of Ireland's commitment to reach the 0.7% GNI target by that date;
- Appoint a Special Envoy for Hunger to ensure that these recommendations are implemented. The Special Envoy would engage across Government and with relevant
- Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) in Ireland, and could represent Ireland in important international fora.

At an international level:

- Support reform of the international system to tackle world hunger, promoting coherence across the UN agencies and the entire international system
- Promote strong international mechanisms to ensure that governments – both in developing and developed countries – honour their commitments and prioritise the reduction of hunger and malnutrition in their national development strategies and assistance programmes.
- Support the possible establishment of a Global Fund designed to deal with smallholder agriculture and long term nutrition
- Support new initiatives by the International Financial Institutions (IFIs) to direct more funds towards agriculture, food assistance and nutrition

Irish Aid (the development agency of the Irish Government) should:

- Support efforts to promote intensification of smallholder agriculture through programmes designed to maximise access by women and the poor to land and other critical inputs and services
- Encourage developing country partners to establish a supportive environment for the promotion of sustainable and equitable input and output markets

- Support agricultural interventions which encourage appropriate diversification amongst small-scale farmers
- Support the international agricultural research system in a research programme that contributes to the elimination of hunger and the development of resilient food systems. In that context, Ireland should support initiatives to ensure that small-scale farmers can benefit from the research being undertaken by national, regional and international research bodies, and also support the strengthening of African agricultural research and extension/advisory services
- Support strengthening of farmer organisations, particularly those which actively target poorer farmers and women as members – a critical governance issue
- Support improved rural infrastructure, both at national and local levels. Poor rural roads, in particular, block access to markets and are one of the major constraints faced by small-scale farmers in trying to move from a subsistence basis to a more sustainable scale of production

As a donor in support of improving nutrition status, Irish Aid should;

- Support coherent and multi-sectoral nutrition strategies which:
 - establish an appropriate institutional structure;
 - provide strong political and organisational leadership to ensure the necessary
- cross-sectoral actions take place; and
 - increase the numbers of nutritional personnel at all levels – notably community
- nutrition workers.
- Support programmes which encourage exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months
- Support programmes which ensure improved maternal nutrition, including micronutrient fortification and supplementation
- Continue to support the promotion of preventive measures against HIV/AIDS and other diseases, while also promoting the positive benefits of nutrition to mitigate their impact
- Support programmes which provide targeted school feeding (a breakfast/lunch meal) – such programmes have proven to be critical for providing nourishment for children at school, allowing them to learn better, as well as increasing attendance and enrolment rates, with a particular focus on encouraging female children to stay in school
- Support opportunities to link agriculture and nutrition in policies and programmes at all levels

- Support the implementation of social protection programmes where they are most needed and promote the inclusion of specific mechanisms within such programmes which enhance nutrition
- Continue to encourage and support the development and scaling-up of Community
- Management of Severe Acute Malnutrition as an effective means of addressing acute malnutrition.

Conclusion

The report concludes by noting:

'While Government provides the lead, the proposed actions cannot be undertaken by a single agency in Ireland.

The critical nature of the global hunger problem requires a response from all in Irish society. These include relevant branches of Government, NGOs, missionary organisations, higher education and research institutions, the private sector, and the citizens of Ireland who have so often responded with compassion to food crises in the developing world.

The Hunger Task Force calls for creative and sustained efforts by all of these partners in Irish society, so that Ireland can show genuine leadership in making the global commitment to eradicate world hunger a reality. This is a shared task – dictated by present humanitarian imperatives, but also informed by our failures in the past to end the scourge of famine which has blighted the history of so many nations.'