



# Solutions for the New Era of Global Hunger

## The State of Global Hunger

It is easy to get the impression that outbreaks of acute hunger (often called “famines”) are isolated calamities that simply result from crop failures, natural disasters or conflicts. In reality, there is a deeper problem underlying these events. What appear to be isolated disasters are really symptoms of a systemic crisis.

In 1999, a time when food prices were near historic lows, an estimated 798 million people were considered undernourished across the developing world. Even before the current emergency, 1 billion people lived on less than \$1 a day, and 162 million barely survived on less than \$0.50 a day.

For this population, lack of access to sufficient food is a persistent, long-term problem that results from enduring social conditions. Women and children comprise the majority of the world’s chronically hungry people. They tend to be concentrated in rural areas where development processes have failed, and growing numbers of people have become trapped in poverty.

In the year 2000, 189 nations, including the United States, pledged to cut the proportion of people suffering from hunger in half by 2015, as part of the Millennium Development Goals. Today, despite those pledges, there are more than 850 million people worldwide who are still undernourished, and hunger and malnutrition are the #1 risk to global health, killing more than AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis combined.

## Rising Food Prices

So, the picture was already grim, even at the end of more than a decade of extraordinarily low food prices. From 1974 to 2005, world food prices fell by 75 percent in real terms. Since 2005, this trend has been completely reversed. Prices rose gradually at first—9 percent in 2006 and 23 percent in 2007—but in the last few months, they have surged. By March of this year, global food prices were 75 percent higher than they had been in 2005.

The reaction to spiking prices has been quick. There have been food riots—some of them deadly—in Bangladesh, Indonesia, Egypt, Haiti, Lebanon and many African countries. Haiti’s prime minister was ousted as the result of food riots, and political pundits have expressed concern that rising prices may trigger a period of urban unrest and political instability in several other countries. Several governments are so shaken by



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these developments that they have instituted desperate measures, including price controls and export restrictions.

Rising food prices erode the purchasing power of poor people, many of whom already spend most of their income on food, and could trigger a global surge in hunger. Rising prices have also made it more expensive to deliver international food aid to the hungry. Even before the current global crisis, the international aid system failed to address underlying causes of chronic hunger. Likewise, the United States has no coherent, comprehensive strategy to combat food insecurity. Now, the world faces a more alarming possibility—that rising commodity prices and climate change will trigger crises on a scale that the international humanitarian system will be unable to cope with.

## U.S. Programs to Address Hunger

For 50 years, the American people have generously responded to the needs of hungry people around the world. Throughout this period, the U.S. government’s principal strategy for addressing hunger has been to ship American food overseas, either to be distributed to people in need, or to be sold in open markets to generate cash to pay for humanitarian programs.

It is now apparent that these efforts, albeit generous, have failed to prevent hunger in some parts of the world from becoming worse. Emergency food aid in times of crisis is, of course, important, but food aid alone does not adequately address root causes of chronic hunger. CARE believes that the United States can and should play a more effective role in ending hunger. The current rise in hunger around the world makes a transformation imperative. Three fundamental changes are needed.

## Expand and Improve Emergency Programs

Additional funding for emergency programs is desperately needed.

Everything possible must also be done to reduce costs and improve the effectiveness of food aid practices so that organizations like CARE can achieve the greatest possible impact with the resources we have. One way to do this is to increase flexibility in the government's international food assistance so that humanitarian organizations are able to buy food locally instead of waiting for food to be shipped overseas.

Under the right circumstances, it makes far more sense to purchase food locally for an emergency in a developing country. This reduces delays and saves lives while also stimulating local agricultural development. Under other circumstances, the best response to acute hunger may simply be to distribute cash or vouchers to people in need so they can purchase food themselves in local markets.

## Develop Long-term Strategy to Address Chronic Hunger

Chronic hunger is often the result of multiple, deeply rooted causes. In the long term, achieving a lasting reduction in the incidence of chronic hunger will require improvements in agricultural productivity, processing and marketing; greater access to information, capital, basic education, health services and technical training for the poor; social protection programs; strengthening weak governments; and changes in the status of women and girls. This ambitious list obviously goes well beyond the mandates set forth in any particular program. Indeed, it is beyond the means of any single organization or government. But this crucial, broader objective is not impossible, and it is fully consistent with the values of the American people to help others help themselves.

Addressing underlying causes of hunger will require setting common goals and promoting coordinated action among national governments, international institutions and agencies, implementing partners and communities.

## Fund "Safety Net" Programs for Acutely Vulnerable People

As the scale of chronic food insecurity has increased, and as international commodity prices and shipping costs have risen, it has become apparent that traditional humanitarian responses to hunger will not be able to keep up with the scale of current problems. Shipping food from the United States to developing countries overseas is expensive, slow and unpredictable. These shipments also often reach only a fraction of the population in need. By the time that food aid arrives, recipients are often in such dire condition that the cost of saving lives and rebuilding livelihoods is high.

There is an emerging consensus among development practitioners that the chronic food security problem now calls for a different approach. Many experts believe that, because the problem has become much more predictable, it is possible to design more proactive systems that will help governments of developing countries provide effective safety nets at a manageable cost. These kinds of programs would reach many more people than traditional food aid programs.

While the focus of emergency food aid programs has often been to rebuild livelihoods, the goal of "safety net" or social protection programs is prevention. Early cash transfers to households are intended to protect livelihoods, rather than rebuild them. The principal targets of these programs are families that face food insecurity, but have not yet had to resort to selling productive assets. Because aid would be delivered early, before conditions become dire, the amount of assistance that each household receives is normally comparatively small.



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These programs can also make important contributions to long-term development. Reliable cash transfers are intended to reduce risk, and thereby encourage poor people to make productive investments in innovations that can deliver higher, but more volatile average returns on their investment.

## Conclusion

It's past time to think differently about hunger. There are better, proven ways to keep people from going hungry day after day. The global food crisis may have finally forced the issue. We now have a unique opportunity to focus our government's policy like never before. Given the needed fundamental changes that are outlined above, CARE believes that it is time to recast the U.S. approach to hunger. This will require a dramatic shift in policy—one de-emphasizing food aid as the main response to food insecurity and focusing on the structural changes called for in both U.S. food and development policies. ■