TIME FOR ACTION

A PARLIAMENT MAGAZINE SPECIAL SUPPLEMENT ON COMBATTING MALNUTRITION
COMBATTING MALNUTRITION: A PARLIAMENT MAGAZINE SPECIAL SUPPLEMENT

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INTRODUCTION

Time for action

We must act now, to stem the tide of malnutrition across the world, argues PA International’s chairman Mark Eyskens

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In my role as European commissioner for international cooperation, humanitarian aid and crisis response, I often visit the humanitarian projects we fund around the world. These visits have brought me face-to-face with the dramatic effects of undernutrition. The impact of chronic food shortage is particularly tragic on the most vulnerable: young children. Seeing some of them – often babies under two years old – in nutrition feeding centres, in refugee camps and in disaster areas – is heart-breaking. It is also unacceptable that, in this day and age, so many children still die or suffer permanent damage to their development due to malnutrition. The commission agrees with the World Health Organisation that undernutrition is the most important single threat to the world’s public health.

This is why we – politicians, humanitarians and activists, governments, aid agencies and the international community – need to work with even more determination to ensure these children have the chance of a healthy future and that the problems of undernutrition and food insecurity are solved in a sustainable way. This challenge is huge. Today, as we struggle to contain the hunger crisis in the Horn of Africa, another potential crisis is brewing – this time in the Sahel region of Africa. The combination of bad harvest after poor rainfall, rising food prices and the sharp fall in remittances due to the return of migrant workers has plunged into volatility an impoverished region, where already 300,000 children die of malnutrition every year according to Unicef. The risk of a food crisis in 2012 means this number may increase, evolving into a massive humanitarian disaster.

Europe is moving fast to avoid this scenario. Building on the lessons learnt during the 2010 crisis in the Sahel but also on the response to this year’s crisis in the Horn of Africa, the European commission has just increased our humanitarian assistance to the Sahel region, adding €10m to the €45m we are already giving in that part of the world.

“Policies to link crisis relief aid to development assistance are as important to tackle malnutrition as they are in coping with other disasters”
In this way, we are protecting half a million lives, threatened by the food crisis. This is just one example of the European commission’s determination to fight undernutrition – a determination which is at the heart of our humanitarian promise to help save lives and help make them worth living.

In nutrition, saving lives equals treating severely malnourished children in therapeutic feeding centres. It also translates into concrete requirements for our operations such as providing appropriate food with sufficient and balanced nutrients, promoting breastfeeding, measuring the impact of food assistance through the growth of children and acting early in advance to safeguard nutrition before the spread of seasonal epidemics such as malaria.

Together with targeting our nutrition policies so that they are most effective, the European commission is making sure that our assistance is adequate to the needs we face. We have increased our funding for both emergency nutrition and long-term development policies for food security. Direct nutrition interventions represent 10 per cent of the humanitarian aid budget of the European commission. For instance in 2010, €125m was allocated to address undernutrition in humanitarian emergencies. This amount was complemented by €300m of cross-sector interventions which contribute indirectly to reducing under-nutrition. In addition, in 2010 alone the commission allocated €417m for more sustainable solutions to improve the long-term nutrition of the populations who are most vulnerable to food shortages.

The current food crisis in the Horn of Africa and the looming one in the Sahel are also a wake-up call for the importance of prevention and resilience-building for the most vulnerable. Policies to link crisis relief aid to development assistance are as important to tackle malnutrition as they are in coping with other disasters. So part of our challenge is to build a common understanding on how to effectively link humanitarian activity with development support and to attack undernutrition with the strength of all instruments we have at our disposal.

In order to achieve this I work closely with Andris Piebalgs, my fellow commissioner responsible for development. I also seize all opportunities to lobby for nutrition to be higher on the development agenda. For instance, in September last year I supported the launch of the scaling-up nutrition (Sun) initiative in New York. Sun is a movement that brings together more than 100 organisations and governments that are committed to uniting their efforts to fight hunger and undernutrition.

I firmly believe that by working together with determination and the right policy mix, we can make our nutrition support more efficient and accelerate progress towards reducing hunger and undernutrition. This will help tremendously to achieve six of the eight millennium development goals. But even more importantly, our success will be measured by saving millions of children’s lives.
Taking responsibility

Governments and businesses must work together to secure a sustainable future for nutrition, writes Stephan Tanda

There are one billion people on the verge of starvation, 129 million severely underweight people, 195 million chronically malnourished children, and some 3.5 million under five-year-olds dying every year of diseases related to malnutrition. The world must not tolerate this. The world must not tolerate that one third of the world’s population suffers from malnutrition. The fight against the burden of diseases has to begin at the very start of life. Malnutrition, also called micronutrient deficiency, has devastating effects on human health and development, especially in children under the age of two. Whatever is missed during the first 1000 days of life cannot be repaired later on.

Business cannot ignore this catastrophe. The creativity, reach and implementation experience of the private sector can greatly contribute to ending malnutrition and hunger. DSM, a global science-based company active in health, nutrition and materials, partners with a number of well-known organisations such as the UN world food programme (WFP), US Aid, Unicef, GAIN and many more – some at country or regional level, some at global level. As a major producer of vitamins, enzymes, nutritional lipids and other essential nutrients, DSM has developed many solutions, including the MixMe micronutrient powders sachets or NutriRice fortified rice that have proven very effective to help alleviate malnutrition. The world food programme and DSM have been partners for almost five years, working together on a programme entitled ‘improving nutrition, improving lives’, which aims to include micronutrients in at least 80 per cent of WFP’s food basket. DSM’s support comes in the form of technical expertise, field training, as well as micronutrient and financial donations. To date, approximately nine million people receive better nutrition due to solutions that have been developed by the DSM-WFP partnership.

Partnerships between governments, regulators, NGOs, local farmers and food processors are crucial to implement practical, and particularly sustainable, solutions. Only by working together across sectors we can improve the lives of those who need it most. DSM believes in public private partnerships, making available not only funding, but also the scientific and technical innovation and expertise of industry, to support policymakers and civil society groups. For this cooperation, nutrition is particularly relevant. Improving nutrition is both impactful and cost-effective.

Without effective approaches to improve the nutritional status of many of the world’s people, it is impossible to achieve the millennium development goals (MDGs), particularly those directly related to nutrition, as micronutrients are one of the essential links between food and health. DSM is a strong supporter of the roadmap for scaling-up nutrition (Sun) that highlights evidence-based investments in nutrition that will yield significant short- and long-term returns. Europe is well positioned to reduce malnutrition. With its current leading position in the agri-food industry, its strong nutrition knowledge and industry, its science-based approach, and supported by a tradition of cooperation with governments, academia and industry, Europe can facilitate and positively influence more inclusive development and growth in developing countries. No single institution can tackle malnutrition on its own. So far, nutrition has been everyone’s problem but no-one’s responsibility. All of us must live up to our responsibility. Not as scientists, political leaders, NGO experts, business people – but as citizens who can create sustainable change if we work together.

“So far, nutrition has been everyone’s problem but no-one’s responsibility” Stephan Tanda is a member of the managing board at Royal DSM
t is impossible to overstate the dimensions of the global child malnutrition crisis. One billion people go to bed hungry each night; more than 170 million children under five are chronically malnourished or stunted and malnutrition is the leading cause of death among children, killing 3.5 million children each year.

Imagine a medium-sized passenger plane full of children crashes after take-off, killing all on board. Twenty minutes later the same thing happens, and again twenty minutes later, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. If you had an airplane full of children crash every 20 minutes on your television-screens, how long would it be before somebody did something about it?

In November, I attended PA International’s Brussels conference on combatting global malnutrition. Discussions went well beyond the pure human tragedy, recognising that it also affects the economic growth and potential of nations too. Malnourished children tend to start school later, are more likely to drop out and to earn less as adults. That lost human potential translates into a huge loss to GDP. Malnourished children grow up to be less healthy adults whose needs strain limited national budgets.

As the frontline UN agency fighting hunger, the world food programme (WFP) is tackling child malnutrition at its root. We now know how vital it is to ensure children are well nourished in the critical 1000 days window, which spans from conception to two years of age. We also know how to treat and prevent malnutrition, which goes beyond simply filling empty bellies, by providing the right food at the right time.

No one can solve malnutrition alone and this is why WFP is scaling up our nutrition strategy with a range of partners, governments, other UN agencies civil, society and important private sector companies, like DSM.

The world has the knowledge to make huge strides in eradicating malnutrition. Business leaders can assist us in innovative strategies to help countries on the front lines of hunger and malnutrition.

WFP’s nutrition revolution has been made possible also thanks to donors such as the European Union which have prioritised support for nutrition. I would like to thank the EU, for the great attention it has placed on mother and child nutrition. Member states and the European commission are strong supporters of WFP and EU leadership has catalysed momentum on nutrition through the scaling up nutrition (SUN) movement. As a result we see child nutrition becoming a national priority in over 20 countries. We look forward to ongoing and critical support and investment of the EU on nutrition.

Each of us has a duty, a moral obligation to future generations to the seventh billion child that was born somewhere in the world just a few days ago, so she can be nourished and grow to her full potential.

Amir Abdulla is the UN world food programme’s chief operating officer and deputy executive director for external relations.

Policymakers cannot turn a blind eye to malnutrition, which kills the equivalent of an airplane full of children every 20 minutes, argues Amir Abdulla
The global and ‘silent’ crisis of childhood and maternal malnutrition in developing countries across Africa, Asia and Latin America is among the most important issues in international development. The scourge of malnutrition is often considered to be a societal and health problem only facing these developing countries. However, there is increasing acceptance in Europe and in countries such as Japan and South Korea that malnutrition is now a serious health issue facing their own populations. In particular, there is dawning acceptance and understanding of the cost of the burden of disease caused by malnutrition and especially micronutrient deficiencies in the elderly population.

Results of epidemiological research that I have undertaken on the issue of the links between malnutrition, disease and mortality address not only under nutrition but also over nutrition. On the basis of my epidemiological study of Korean men and women in different age categories, the conclusion can be drawn that although obesity is a health risk, the risk itself is not as high for elderly people as for middle-aged people. Therefore, for many in the elderly population it is issues of poor nutrition, for example in care-homes in developed countries, as a result for example of poor quality meals and/or a lack of micronutrients in them, due to a lack of knowledge of what is necessary in terms of proper nutrition for elderly people.

For example, research has demonstrated the links between risks of fracture and osteoporosis with intake of calcium, and micronutrients such as Vitamin D. However, the scientific and epidemiological studies that are needed to provide a sound evidence base for malnutrition in elderly people are relatively scarce, and especially for the very oldest people because of the difficulty in undertaking such research. In addition, the association between nutrition and health status may be different in different cultures. The studies should be done covering various populations with different cultures, different dietary habits, and different food availability and environments.

We strongly need more nutritional epidemiologic studies in elderly populations throughout the world in order to fully and better understand the links between malnutrition, micronutrient deficiencies and disease prevalence. These scientific studies will increasingly be needed in both developed and developing countries. This is urgently needed because the elderly population is now increasing dramatically all over the world, in particular in developed economies such as Europe and Japan. With this rapidly ageing population, and the diseases and health problems that come with it, will come increasing health costs to deal with these issues.

Therefore, more research is needed to ensure that there is enough evidence to make sure that prevention of these problems becomes the key focus of health policy and care for ageing populations.

Satoshi Sasaki is a professor at the university of Tokyo’s school of public health in the department of social and preventive epidemiology.

“More research is needed to develop the right kinds of nutritional strategies for the elderly population, argues Satoshi Sasaki”
By 2050, the world population will be more than nine billion, reaching 10 billion by the end of the century. This growth exerts greater pressure on the supply of food, water and other resources. Food prices hit record highs, which increases the burden on the public and leads to social and political instability. Extreme droughts have caused serious food shortages in the horn of Africa, where some 13 million people desperately need food for survival. In south Somalia, more than 60,000 children suffer from malnutrition, causing irreversible damage. Malnutrition is also a serious problem in Asean countries, where millions of children suffer from malnutrition-related illnesses.

As new forces in international relations, international organisations also play a critical role in the MDGs and contribute to global governance. We see international organisations working to eliminate poverty, hunger, epidemics, illiteracy, environmental degradation and discrimination against women.

Scientists from China, Russia, the USA and India, among others, initiated Iesco in 2006 in China, with support from UN agencies and according to the MDGs. Our objectives are to maintain ecological safety, handle ecological crises and climate change, respond to natural disasters, and achieve the coordinated development of economy, society, and ecology through the cooperation with political parties, congresses, government agencies and international organisations. Natural disasters such as extreme weather, flooding and drought are increasingly common and are directly threatening global food production stability. However, many governments do not function well during natural disasters. The UN’s global early warning system warned of the possibility of famine in Africa as early as in August 2010, which was confirmed in November. The failure of the international community to heed the warning has caused a delayed response to this crisis.

Together with the Chinese water resources institute and PA International, Iesco assisted the launch of the research project on combating drought in south China in Yunnan in 2010. International organisations, industries and governments contributed to the project and the results will be an innovative project between the Omani, Chinese and Dutch governments to develop artificial underground aquifers through the use of so-called ‘bio-sealing’ technology. This will lay the basis for the creation of sustainable local projects to produce essential and high protein/vitamins food (bamboo shoots based), stimulate economic activity and development.

If successful in China, this model is easily replicable in other regions facing persistent and chronic drought and the consequential malnutrition.

The solution of the global food crisis and food safety lies in international coordination and cooperation of this kind. Facing the silent crisis of global malnutrition, the international community has and will continue to provide humanitarian aid and support.

Jiang Mingjun is director general of China’s international eco-safety cooperative organisation.
The relationship between the EU and Indonesia has been long and mutually beneficial. Each is taking steps towards a relationship focusing on equality, fairness, sustainability and productivity. My country continues to experience annual growth of between six and seven per cent and we are among the 20 largest economies. We also provide leadership within ASEAN and are involved in discussions on an EU free trade agreement.

At the same time, it is clear that our world’s differing socio-political systems increasingly converge with regards to the conditions that we wish to attach to our environment and to our manufacturing, agriculture and indeed food. The global discussion on standardisation continues, but new and painful light has been cast on the remaining differences. The millennium development goals (MDGs) in particular focus these differences and we in Asia, with our emerging economies and still low per capita incomes, seem unable to fulfil much of the MDG promise to ourselves.

The most painful of these regards malnutrition. I fully agree with Unicef that the world and particularly the EU and ASEAN need to focus on the almost 200 million children whose lives will be negatively affected because of a lack of essential nutrients in their first 1000 days of life. Current programmes to assist our children unfortunately reach very limited numbers on a sustained basis. Dwindling development assistance and rapidly rising costs make it hard to develop sustained approaches to combat malnutrition among children, unless all of us enter a new era of international and national coordination and cooperation. This is where public private partnerships (PPP) and corporate social responsibility (CSR) provide the right framework for action.

While Indonesia may be among the few countries with a special law on CSR, our law does not provide a specific definition of what it actually is. The EU and ASEAN should make an effort to agree on at least the definitions of both PPP and CSR in order to create effective approaches and programmes. I wish to thank Mark Eyskens for the efforts of the PA International foundation in assisting in the development of this international dialogue on new definitions and models.

The Indonesian government is ready to help develop a framework that allows our companies to facilitate the manufacturing, marketing and selling of such highly effective nutritional products with a percentage of the sales price being provided to a public fund that subsequently distributes the same nutritious products for free to children and others in need. The EU and ASEAN may wish to further develop this particular model based on facilitation by governments from the north and the south and by industrial cooperation and partnering between companies from around the world. This would be a new way and possibly a much more effective and lasting way to combat malnutrition in Indonesia.

Using the latest technologies, techniques and cooperative approaches, specific deficiencies among children can be addressed cheaply. This is why I look forward to the upcoming European commission communication on nutrition. The policies, instruments and budgets to be made available by the EU will help guide other regions to the required results. Together we can produce new ways to combat the world’s ‘silent crisis’. This is the moment to coordinate and cooperate. We in both ASEAN and Indonesia are looking at the EU for a new and sustained partnership for nutrition.

Mohamed Hidayat is Indonesia’s minister for industry
Fight the famine now

Climate change, the economic downturn and high food prices mean that many more people are at risk of hunger, warns Alex Rees

In May 1919, a young woman named Eglantyne Jebb was arrested for distributing ‘fight the famine’ leaflets, in which she highlighted the plight of Austrian children suffering from undernutrition. She was fined £5 and, after the trial, the public prosecutor donated a symbolic £5 towards her cause – and the Save the Children fund was launched. Save the Children is carrying on Eglantyne’s fight for justice for the 178 million children who are affected by the chronic form of malnutrition known as stunting, and the 55 million children suffering from the acute undernutrition we currently see in the crisis in east Africa.

We are in the midst of a very exciting revival of the political focus on tackling undernutrition. The evidence base has improved dramatically and there is consensus about what works. Beyond the moral imperative to tackle the issue, the economic case for investing in nutrition is gaining weight in the corridors of power across the world. It is estimated that without undernutrition, the GDP of a developing country could increase by 41 per cent in 10 years. An unprecedented unity of purpose and clear sense of direction created by the ‘scaling up nutrition’ movement is rallying governments, UN agencies, international organisations, academics, civil society and the private sector behind a shared objective.

The moment is now. A triple threat of climate change, economic downturn and high food prices conspire to reverse the lacklustre progress that has been made in reducing undernutrition over the past few decades. Save the Children analysis shows that this year’s food price spike may put an additional 400,000 children at risk.

For these reasons, we must keep our foot firmly on the gas. In 2012, Save the Children will be launching a major global campaign focusing on hunger and undernutrition. It is important to increase the coverage of high impact nutrition interventions such as breastfeeding, improved hygiene practices and iron fortification of staple food if we are to improve child nutrition. There is also a need to ensure that the underlying causes of undernutrition are tackled through nutrition sensitive development. This means ensuring that wider policies and programmes to alleviate poverty and drive economic development are modified to have the maximum possible impact on reducing undernutrition, particularly for women and children.

So what can the commission do? First, fulfilling the European council’s request to produce a communication on nutrition would provide a much needed and long overdue overarching policy dedicated to ensuring adequate maternal and child nutrition in both emergency and development contexts. In addition, such a communication would provide coherence and ensure that nutrition is an EU priority, and not solely that of a handful of member states.

The latest policy communication, ‘agenda for change’ has a very welcome emphasis on health and education. However, without an equally strong emphasis on nutrition and the knock-on effects it has on health and education, EU investments are in danger of not realising their full potential to contribute to the achievement of the MDGs. In 2010, 7.2 million children did not reach their fifth birthday. One third of these deaths can be attributed to undernutrition. As the world food programme’s chief operating officer Amir Abdulla reminded us, if we turned on the evening news and learnt that a plane full of young children was crashing every 20 minutes, surely it wouldn’t take very long before world leaders stood up and did something.

Alex Rees is head of Save the Children’s hunger reduction policy
European council president Herman Van Rompuy has urged the international community, including the EU, to take “more decisive” action to tackle global malnutrition. Speaking at a high level conference on combating malnutrition earlier this month in Brussels, Van Rompuy said the EU was the world’s biggest aid donor, contributing some 56 per cent of all global aid commitments. However, he stressed that all parties should still strive for “further aid effectiveness.”

The conference, organised by the private, not-for-profit foundation PA International, was also told that malnutrition was the leading cause of mortality among children. Van Rompuy pointed out that, recently, the world’s population had reached the seven billion mark, adding, “Somewhere in the world, maybe in India, maybe in the Philippines, a woman gave birth to a child. This is good news: Is there a more beautiful sign of life than the birth of a child? But it is also a cause for concern. Will this little boy or girl live on a planet with a safe and healthy environment? More importantly, will the earth be able to feed this child?” He said it was not only the world’s “moral duty” to combat global malnutrition but was also in its economic, political and security interests. “We must do this more decisively than before”.

European commissioner Kristalina Georgieva said that nutrition and the millennium development goals (MDGs) were “inter-dependent.” Improved nutrition contributes to achieving the MDGs and achieving the MDGs “underpins an effective response to under nutrition”. Georgieva, commissioner for international cooperation, humanitarian aid and crisis response, also praised the role played by the private sector in humanitarian relief, saying, “I see the great value of private sector engagement in efficiency, innovation and for filling competency gaps found in the humanitarian sector.”

According to Dutch MEP Thijs Berman, a member of the European parliament’s development committee, when the food crisis was evolving in 2008, malnutrition was “not very high” on the agenda. “Of course, we are blessed with the MDGs, aiming at halving hunger by 2015 but aside from this meagre objective – the bare minimum of development – there was little action matching this official goal. This is the moment when the EU has to step in. The European parliament will stress this urgent need when, in the next year, it will come to define future policies and their financial priorities. We have to ban hunger and to ban malnutrition.”

Opening the conference, Mark Eyskens, a former Belgian prime minister, said that, according to Unicef, only half of the world’s developing countries – 62 out of 118 – were on track to achieve the MDGs. Eyskens, chairman of PA International, said this meant that one third of under-fives in the world were threatened by under-nourishment. “This is a disaster and affects not just Africa but also south east Asia.” Further comment came from Arif Havas Oegroseno, the Indonesian ambassador to the EU and Belgium, who described malnutrition as the “single gravest threat” to global public health. He also appealed to European countries to be more mindful of the amount of food which is “lost
or wasted” in the food supply chain.

Kolsteren illustrated a breathtaking 99 per cent of all research funding going to “new solutions” that can reduce mortality by 22 per cent. Just one per cent is for ensuring people receive the required nutrients and can reduce mortality by 66 per cent. Amir Mahmoud Abdulla’s horrible comparison of plane loads full of children crashing every 20 minutes, every day, every week, every month and every year brought himself and many in the conference to tears. But this emotion must finally lead to decisive action.

Abdulla, the chief operating officer at the world food programme, said that the WFP was “scaling up its efforts” to address child malnutrition, particularly during the crucial first 1000 days. He warned, “No-one can solve malnutrition alone and this is why we are scaling up our ‘right foods at the right time’ nutrition strategy in collaboration with a range of partners, including governments, UN partners, civil society and partnerships like Royal DSM to ensure people have access to safe, affordable and nutritious food.”

Stephan Tanda, a member of the management board of Royal DSM (a science based company active in health and nutrition and materials) had earlier told the debate that only by “working across sectors can we improve the lives of those who need it most.” Tanda added, “Improving nutrition is both impactful and cost effective. Without effective approaches to increase in micronutrient levels of many of the world’s population, it is impossible to achieve the MDGs, particularly those that are directly related to nutrition.” Europe is well positioned to help reduce malnutrition. It can facilitate and positively influence more inclusive development and growth.

Werner Schultink, head of nutrition at Unicef told the debate that ‘stunting’ affected around a third of children under five in the developing world. Stunted growth is primary a consequence of early childhood malnutrition including foetal development time in the womb. Stunting can cause serious health issues, affect reproductive performance and restrict brain development. It can also lead to premature death later in life due to the underdevelopment of vital organs during childhood. He warned that “undernutrition is not synonymous with food security” as some of the highest rates occur in countries such as India and Indonesia, where food is secure. Hygiene, health food and financial security are also underlying causes of under-nutrition. “It’s also about poverty: Under-nutrition leads to a cycle of chronic poverty, where the poor are locked into poverty.”

“Undernutrition is not synonymous with food security”
Werner Schultink
The international community was also urged to do more to get private companies on board in solving the malnutrition challenge. Marc van Ameringen, the executive director of the global alliance for improved nutrition (Gain), said, “We need a multi-pronged approach. We need big solutions and we need markets to be working effectively.” He called for “business-led approaches where businesses are encouraged to step up and invest.” He said that it was important to encourage good practice, via regulation or penalties, for example. “Sustainability will only come if we can make markets work for the poor, and right now they’re not.”

Howard Sharman of AdvanceAid gave examples of companies such as Sohar Aluminium and Vale creating sustainable jobs through CSR. CSR Europe president viscount Etienne Davignon said a new vision was needed to change how companies operate and secure smart, sustainable, inclusive growth. One example is Danone, where a form of social enterprising has developed in Bangladesh.

Yasuhiko Toride, of the Ajinomoto Group, highlighted a successful social business model in Ghana while Oswaldo da Costa e Silva, vice-president of the DSM nutrition improvement programme highlighted his company’s project bringing nutrition “to the base of the pyramid”. “Malnutrition takes too many lives every day,” he said. “We have to act now: there is no time to wait. There is a need for intervention during catastrophes but there’s hidden hunger that happens every day.” Rising food prices are also presenting a “compelling reason” to tackle malnutrition, said Alex Rees, head of Hunger Reduction at the Save the Children NGO.

He told the conference that between 2009-2011 global food prices had rocketed by 40 per cent. “We estimate that such an increase has put at risk the lives of 400,000 children. He added, “This is not the time to take the foot off the pedal but, rather, to put both feet firmly on the gas.” Tarik Kadir of Action Contre la Faim said that there was an “under appreciation” of the burden of malnutrition on many Asian countries. Kadir pointed out that globally, 70 per cent of children at risk of under-nourishment were in Asian countries. “Undernutrition is not articulated as a problem and there is a lack of understanding of the scope and depth of the issue,” he said. Turning to the role the EU has to play, Kadir said that there was a need to increase funding on undernutrition and to make the issue a “core pillar” of EU policy. “The EU can act as a catalyst for sound corporate investment and country government budget allocations,” he added.

According to Zulfiqar Bhutta, professor of paediatrics and child health of Aga Khan university in Karachi, more funding is
“The EU can act as a catalyst for sound corporate investment and country government budget allocations”

Patrick Kolsteren, coordinator for child health at the University of Antwerp’s tropical medicine institute, fully agreed, while Florence Egal, chair of the UN standing committee on nutrition and FAO expert, blamed the Rome-based organisation for not having seriously researched the relationship between food and nutrition. She shares the sentiment of UN high representative for food security and nutrition David Nabarro that the two are not the same and nutrition requires specific attention.

This was underlined by Cees Smit of EGAN, the patients network for medical research and health. Smit, who suffers from haemophilia and the connected diseases, said, “My life expectancy ended 30 years ago; but I’m still here. Nutrition plays an important role in the prevention, treatment and management of a disease or disability. It is essential that specific disease groups with nutritional problems actively participate in the development of nutritional products.”

Closing the daylong conference, ASEAN Foundation executive director Makarim Wibisono and Max Olivier Gonnet, the assistant director for food security and economic development in the French ministry of foreign affairs highlighted the need for international cooperation.

“Despite their economic successes, ASEAN countries still experience dire nutritional conditions,” Wibisono said. “And the major irony of all of this is that the international community has all resources, services, and technologies that it truly needs to be able to wipe out malnutrition completely. In fact, malnutrition could have been prevented if millions of children receive the essential nutrients in their first 1000 days of their lives. But millions are still malnourished.”

According to Gonnet several EU member states, including France, “have recently reviewed their strategies and the level of their commitments to combat malnutrition in developing countries”. He said that Paris believed that there was currently enough “momentum to adopt a European strategy, or communication on nutrition elaborated by the European commission, to serve as a reference for closer consultation and strengthened coordination between member states and European actors, NGOs or research bodies”. “France wishes to see such a strategy defined and will support its implementation and the mobilisation of financing instruments,” he said.

“I see the great value of private sector engagement in efficiency, innovation and for filling competency gaps found in the humanitarian sector”

Kristalina Georgieva

Tarik Kadir
Undernutrition in children is caused by a combination of inadequate food intake, a lack of care, and frequent attacks of infectious disease. The most devastating consequences of undernutrition are seen when it occurs during pregnancy and in early childhood. Undernutrition is the underlying cause of at least one third of deaths among children under the age of five years. Undernutrition in children can manifest itself in several ways. The measurement of stunting, or stunted growth, in young children, is a relatively easy and objective way of assessing the level of undernutrition and it captures the level of chronic undernutrition children were exposed to in early life (pregnancy up to two to three years of life).

Stunting is a massive problem, and when it occurs in early life the consequences are often irreversible and also have an impact on the next generation. About 180 million children under the age of five from developing countries are stunted, representing 34 per cent of that age group from these countries. Stunting not only reflects nutritional status, but also the health and socio-economic situation. A stunted child is up to four times more likely to die from an infectious disease, is likely to perform less well in school (equal to up to three years lost education), and to earn less income in adult life (average reduction of 22 per cent). A stunted girl is likely to be short in adulthood, and is in turn more likely to give birth to a stunted child. Reducing stunting will create better survival chances and better conditions to learn and earn. Programmes aimed at reducing stunting will therefore reduce poverty, improve equity in a country, and influence progress towards most of the MDGs.

The underlying determinants leading to stunting include socio-cultural issues, discrimination, gender inequality, lack of education, inadequate access to services and resources, and poverty in general. However, stunting can be reduced by addressing the direct causes. These are inadequate food intake and frequent bouts of infectious disease during pregnancy, infancy and early childhood (the first 1000 days of life). In doing so, better chances are created to escape from the vicious intergenerational poverty cycle.

Effective inter-sectoral interventions include improved nutrient intake during pregnancy and ante-natal care, early and exclusive breastfeeding, adequate and timely complementary feeding and provision of micronutrients, deworming, disease prevention through immunisation and use of impregnated bednets, handwashing, improved hygiene and drinking water, immediate treatment of respiratory infections and diarrhoea and severe acute malnutrition. In addition, social safety net programmes are effective in certain conditions, such as when food insecurity exists. Experience with the successful implementation of such a package of interventions at scale does exist, and has been documented in countries including Peru, Mexico and Malawi.

Breaking the cycle

It is important to address the nutritional needs of pregnant women in tackling malnutrition, argues Werner Schultink

“Stunting is a massive problem and when it occurs in early life the consequences are often irreversible”

Werner Schultink is associate director in the programme division of Unicef in New York and chief of nutrition.
EMERGENCY RESPONSE

Quality not quantity

Nutrition and access to healthcare should be at the heart of the development agenda, writes Claus Sørensen

There is a heated debate on what it would have taken to prevent the hunger in the Horn of Africa. How early should the international community have reacted? What should have been done? How much responsibility lies with the national policies of the affected countries? We will have to learn lessons. A key lesson that we need to remember is that when you see malnutrition rates spiking or when more children are being admitted to the feeding centres of our partners, it is already too late.

Undernutrition means that children are more vulnerable to diseases; they may be impaired for the rest of their lives or even die. This is unacceptable. We know that undernutrition is preventable. Admittedly, this prevention is not easy, especially in the very difficult environment the European commission’s humanitarian partner organisations are operating – but we know what works. Clearly, humanitarian workers cannot manage to resolve the issue on their own. It requires substantial longer-term support from development workers. This is only possible once national governments establish policies that prioritise nutrition and access to healthcare as part of their development agenda. Some progress is made and international initiatives ongoing – but more efforts still need to be made.

In most of the countries we are working in, therapeutic feeding centres are integrated into health structures. This is done to maximise ownership by health authorities and training of the local health staff, i.e. the sustainability of our interventions.

However, there are two major challenges in this connection. One is related to the capacity of some national health systems and, more broadly, the limited development of social services. Often, staffing in a health structure is limited and the number of functioning structures low. Therefore, the distance a sick child must travel to reach a health post may be incredibly long and the delivery of medicine to peripheral areas unreliable. When a nutrition crisis, such as the one in the Horn of Africa, strikes – nowadays international organisations and humanitarian donors come in so as to improve the capacity of the health system. The second challenge is one of the major obstacles as far as the treatment and detection of undernourished children is concerned. Access to healthcare for children and pregnant women should in principle be free of charge.

This last example is also a good illustration of the need to address the causes of malnutrition through a multi-sectoral approach. In an emergency response, humanitarian actions do not only treat the consequences of undernutrition. When it comes to access to food, it is important to stress that it is not all about quantity. Quality is just as important, to make sure the diet provides not only the kilocalories but also the micronutrients and protein a child needs to grow. It means that the focus has to be put on the capacity of poor households to pay for an adequate diet.

We are aware of the problem of undernutrition and highly concerned with the toll it takes. Therefore, the DG ECHO is determined to maintain our commitment to fight undernutrition and to step up efforts with development partners to work jointly towards sustainable solutions.

Claus Sørensen is director general for humanitarian aid and civil protection at the European commission.
The issues of hunger, famine and food insecurity are complex and demand action. However, it is only recently that the issue of nutrition has been identified as a key aspect of tackling hunger and famine. Development policy needs to understand and target the issue of nutrition, given that all of the scientific evidence points to the importance of adequate nutrition, particularly for mothers and children under two. This relatively new focus on nutrition, specifically targeted at the early stages in a child’s life, is critical to addressing many of the longer term consequences of food insecurity especially for mothers and newborn children.

We know that the most important growth and development stage in humans is between the time of conception and two years of age. Nutrition received during this critical 1000 day period can determine whether a child lives or dies or whether it can develop to its full adult potential. More than one third of deaths of children under the age of five in the developing world are attributed to undernutrition.

Children who are malnourished are more susceptible to illness and life-threatening health conditions, including an increased risk of contracting illnesses such as diarrhoea, malaria and pneumonia. One third of all under-fives in the world, a staggering 195 million, are stunted due to malnutrition. Deficiencies in vitamin A, zinc, iodine and iron are widespread and are linked to 10 per cent of all deaths in children under five. Malnourished girls are more likely to give birth to low birth-weight offspring – perpetuating the nutrition problem into follow on generations.

At a wider level in society, impaired cognitive function as a result of undernutrition leads to lower educational performance and also lower economic productivity. In the long term, failure to tackle the nutrition challenge has implications for economic development in the developing world. Failure to tackle it will impede development in these countries.

The scaling up nutrition (Sun) initiative to address the nutrition challenge was launched in April 2010 to highlight the need for action. The Sun roadmap includes taking stock of the national nutrition situation, developing plans for scaling up nutrition and addressing the need for financing of these programmes. The social and cultural barriers to achieving improved child nutrition, including the low status of women in many societies, also need to be addressed. Sun is supported by the 1000 days advocacy initiative that focuses attention on the 1000-day window of opportunity between pregnancy and a child’s second birthday. Political commitment to address the issue of maternal and child malnutrition is necessary to build on the momentum of the 1000 days campaign and the Sun initiative. The Irish Aid programme has placed the Sun initiative at the core of its work.

The Zimmer report voted through the European parliament in September also raised the issue of undernutrition. Giving a child a good start in life by providing it with adequate nutrition can and does have a long term impact on that child’s growth and development. We owe it to those not yet born in the developing world to focus on maternal and child nutrition to give them a decent start in life. By so doing we are preventing long-term problems and death for these children and their mothers.

Alongside developing sustainable agriculture, health and education systems – the issue of nutrition must be placed centre stage in our development policy.

“The most important growth and development stage in humans is between the time of conception and two years of age”

Mairead McGuinness MEP is a member of the European parliament’s agriculture and rural development committee
Step it up

The number of people affected by malnutrition is increasing as a result of the economic downturn, warns Fiona Hall

Undernutrition, a type of malnutrition caused by inadequate food intake or the body’s inability to make use of needed nutrients, is not a new issue, but a deeply chronic problem in many developing countries, with profound and devastating impacts. It is an issue that has not received the political attention it deserves. The facts are shocking: undernutrition is estimated to be responsible for 3.5 million mother and child deaths per year – the staggering thing being that it is largely preventable.

Beyond the immediate death toll, undernutrition has other, more wide-reaching and pervasive consequences. Stunting affects an estimated 195 million children worldwide and around 55 million children suffer from acute malnutrition which, where it does not kill directly, leaves the children who survive more vulnerable to infection. Undernutrition in the first 1000 days of a child’s existence is particularly damaging. The restriction of physical and cognitive development means that individual potential – and as a consequence, countries’ potential for economic growth – is curbed. At a national level, undernutrition can reduce GDP by as much as six per cent per year.

The problem is exacerbated by the current global economic climate, which is pushing millions more into poverty. On top of this, the increase in global food prices, the devastating effect climate change has on livelihoods and the continued rise of the global population, mean that the catastrophic impacts of undernutrition are set to increase. Since undernutrition is closely linked to poverty, scaling up nutrition when development aid budgets are stretched, but the cost of not acting is much higher. There must first be the political will to tackle undernutrition, but beyond that declarations of political will need to be translated into meaningful delivery that makes an actual difference in developing countries. For this, the EU and its member state governments will need to implement strategies to address both the immediate and the underlying causes of undernutrition.

The commission’s communications last year on both food security and humanitarian assistance were a step forward, but more work is needed on policy coherence. Policy needs to be coordinated in a multi-sectoral and multi-dimensional framework for nutrition. Strategies in areas such as poverty reduction, agriculture, food security and the area of newborn and child health all need to be sensitive to the role played by nutrition. In the European parliament we have been (loudly) calling for a commission communication on the topic of nutrition and development. As has the council – in the council conclusions of June 2010, the commission was asked to come forward with a communication. In fact, never before has political will, private sector engagement, civil society, donor and multilateral organisation desire for action and leadership on this issue been so high. A holistic policy framework on nutrition could finally give nutrition the increased attention and global momentum it deserves.

“Declarations of political will need to be translated into meaningful delivery that makes an actual difference in developing countries”

becomes an essential element in achieving the millennium development goals: not only MDG1, on eradicating extreme poverty and hunger, but also the MDG4 commitment to reduce child mortality and MDG5 to improve maternal health.

Save the Children has estimated that the costs of a global package to address undernutrition for the eight countries where half the world’s malnourished children live would be €6.5bn annually. This is a not-insubstantial amount, particularly at a time

Fiona Hall MEP is a member of the European parliament’s delegation to the ACP-EU joint parliamentary assembly
The Horn of Africa is currently facing one of the worst famines during the last decades. About 13 million people are directly affected, with 650,000 children heavily undernourished, 200,000 threatened by death, and more than 30,000 children already dead.

While this particular human disaster attracted most public attention and media coverage, one billion people suffer from hunger every day all over the world – most of them in sub-Saharan Africa and south Asia. This is despite the fact that world food production covers 1.4 times the average needs of the world population. The big scandal is that most of the hungry can simply not afford enough and adequate food.

The reasons for food insecurity are manifold: high food prices and price volatility due to excessive speculation on food and agricultural commodities markets, huge land acquisitions by foreign investors in developing countries, trade distortions to the detriment of the poorest, run on fertile land caused by an increasing agrofuel production, underinvestment in agriculture in the global south and the negative effects of climate change. And these are only the most significant causes. The industrialised and powerful countries do not take enough responsibility in tackling world hunger, yet they are largely responsible for causing it.

An often forgotten but equally important aspect of food security is the nutritional component. It is not enough to achieve food security if the food delivered is neither adequate nor nutritious.

Improving the nutritional content of food is crucial to ensuring food security, argues Gabriele Zimmer MEP is the European parliament’s rapporteur on food security challenges in developing countries. In sub-Saharan Africa and south Asia one third of children under the age of five are chronically undernourished. Malnutrition is estimated to be responsible for the deaths of about 3.5 million mothers and children every year. This particularly vulnerable group needs special support as hunger is passed from mothers to their children. If a woman suffers from hunger during her pregnancy and while lactating, the ability of the baby to grow is strongly limited. Newborns suffer from underweight which increases the possibility of death in the first weeks. Furthermore, immune and development deficiencies are often observed leading to diseases and irreversible physical and cognitive damages. This is a serious human rights violation from the very beginning of a person’s life and for mothers. Not to mention the damage to society, with malnutrition decreasing learning and productive capacities.

Hunger, malnutrition and poverty are closely linked, as MDG1 highlights. Poverty implies that people cannot afford enough food or only low quality alimentation. Studies have shown that more money in poor hands directly helps in improving and diversifying their diets. Education about good nutrition is a significant complement. building up social protection systems is essential. As the European parliament’s rapporteur on food security challenges in developing countries, I welcome the commission’s proposal to strengthen the nutritional aspect. But, improving nutrition does not automatically mean supplying poor people with micronutrient tablets, produced by western pharmaceutical corporations. Rather, improving agricultural productivity, research in traditional knowledge and strengthening organic production systems as to improve quality of food in the long run will be a socially and environmentally sustainable solution. The commission should take that into account for the elaboration of the promised communication on nutrition.

“\textit{It is not enough to achieve food security if the food delivered is neither adequate nor nutritious}”
Malnutrition is an obstacle to the development of individuals and societies. Maternal and child malnutrition impedes individuals’ physical and cognitive development. For society as a whole, malnutrition is an obstacle to development. It is important to underline two points: that the current situation is worsened by the international food, financial and economic crises and the magnitude of the problem that we are facing is likely to increase due to well known demographic challenges ahead of us.

The French nutrition in developing countries strategy, drafted in 2010, puts forward a framework for cooperation to assist countries in combating mother and child malnutrition while at the same time helping make international mobilisation more effective. There are two key elements to combat malnutrition: the need for an integrated approach and the importance of closer international cooperation.

The rationale behind an integrated approach is that the root causes of malnutrition are not only nutritional. They involve a range of economic, social and cultural factors often related to poverty. Therefore, direct action is necessary, but not sufficient. A multisectoral approach is needed, including in particular health, economic and social dimensions, in addition to nutrition. Reducing maternal and child under nutrition also depends on indirect interventions on the underlying and basic causes (such as agricultural and economic development, health and social transfers, women’s rights, education, water, sanitation).

There is also a need for closer international cooperation. Through its bilateral action, France supports developing countries in detecting, preventing and addressing malnutrition in women of childbearing age and children under two years of age. It does this by: reinforcing national capacities; providing support for information systems; reinforcing programmes to detect, prevent and address mother and child malnutrition; providing support for research and development.

France contributes to more effective international mobilisation against malnutrition through the reinforcement of strategies, governance and financing at global level. Food security and nutrition were at the top of the agenda of the French presidency of G8/G20. And this is in itself a great achievement.

The declaration adopted in Cannes by world leaders confirmed the commitment of the G8 to scaling-up nutrition through a combination of direct nutrition interventions and the incorporation of nutrition in all relevant policies, including gender, agriculture, health, food security, research, poverty reduction, social protection and education. Within the G8 framework, the Deauville accountability report on the undertakings given in the area of health and food security, published in May, also emphasises the importance of nutrition. The movement that is building up around the implementation of the scaling-up nutrition (Sun) roadmap and the dynamic set in train by the ’1000 days’ initiative are also presented there as priorities for the G8. France is fully engaged to ensure the success of these initiatives.

Several EU member states, including France, recently reviewed their strategies and commitments to combat malnutrition in developing countries. We consider there is a momentum to adopt a European strategy, elaborated as a communication by the European commission, to serve as a reference for closer consultation and strengthened coordination between member states and European actors, NGOs or research bodies. France wishes to see such a strategy defined and will support its implementation and the mobilisation of financing instruments.

Max-Olivier Gonnet is assistant director for food security and economic development at the French foreign affairs ministry.
Open letter calling for an EU policy on nutrition

November 2011

Right now, across the world, 925 million people are starving. Of these 178 million are children. Over 40 per cent of children aged under five in Africa and 35 per cent in Asia suffer as a result of hunger and malnutrition. The largest number of children affected by stunting - reduced growth among 74 million children in total - live in south-central Asia.

There are three major causes:

• A world population growing to seven billion in 2011 and to nine billion in 2050; yet there is ever decreasing arable land, lower agricultural production, diminishing water supply and a fewer number of farmers.

• Manmade or natural disasters depriving human beings of essential food and nutrition.

• A ‘silent crisis’ robbing 178 million children of a life of physical and intellectual accomplishment due to major nutrient deficiencies in their first 1000 days of life.

Through its communication on food security the European commission focuses its development cooperation policy on improving agricultural production in areas where malnutrition threatens the lives of millions. This approach will deliver results over time as agricultural policies worldwide have a tendency to be slow in adapting and innovating while modernisation initiatives towards privatisation do not easily converge with local ideological and political environments. Recent academic reports identify that current food production is still sufficient to feed the world’s population today, but lack of investment in infrastructure, logistics and cold stores is leading to massive and irresponsible wasting. While it is correct that the major part of EU development aid is spent in promoting agriculture and rural development, more budgetary emphasis should be given to radically reducing systematic waste.

The current humanitarian disaster in Somalia demonstrates that the efforts by the commission’s directorate general for humanitarian aid and civil protection (ECHO) to prepare for humanitarian and food/nutrition support during natural or manmade crises deserve further support and ever stronger international coordination. Preparedness and prevention through nutritional intervention must be continued and stepped up.

All major IGOs and NGOs including Unicef, the World Food Programme, the Red Cross and Action Contre la Faim underline that, globally, underweight prevalence in children under five years old stands at 26 per cent. More than a third of under-five child deaths are attributed to undernutrition. Only half of all developing countries (62 out of 118) are on track to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (the first goal being fighting poverty including hunger). The multi-faceted nature of malnutrition requires different actors and different interventions: availability of food, access to food and provision of nutritious food at the right time. Malnutrition has a range of immediate, underlying and basic causes, and efforts to tackle it must be multi-disciplinary and engage multiple stakeholders in line with the national priorities of affected countries.

This disaster affects not only Africa and Asia but also other regions across the globe. Save the Children UK estimates that the costs of a package to address undernutrition, for the eight countries where half of the world’s malnourished children live, is just $8.8bn annually. The SUN Road Map (scaling up nutrition) projects a cost of $12bn annually to provide relief to 36 countries with the...
most serious forms of malnutrition. While these budgets may seem high, the cost of doing nothing is actually much higher: malnutrition-related disease and lack of economic performance cost the global economy approximately $80bn every year.

The total European commission development aid budget is €12bn per year. Of this approximately €410m or around 3.4 per cent is currently allocated to direct nutrition intervention.

There is a dramatic need to change this approach and to spend considerably more resources on combating malnutrition through direct nutrition intervention on a sustained basis. This requires more scientific research and development to obtain better and cheaper methods to identify deficiencies. The dwindling resources for official development aid and the requirement to optimise the use of available public and private resources require the earliest possible development of combined public private partnership and corporate social responsibility approaches. Nutritional support to children cannot be limited in time but must be a sustained and sustainable effort requiring new models, involving industries of both developing and emerging economies and their respective governments. Addressing the key issue of food security differs to the approach to securing sustained nutritional intervention to combat the silent crisis.

The undersigned organisations and institutions join the European council in calling on the European commission to mobilise the unique EU technological, technical and industrial potential and to publish a special communication on nutrition. This communication should include adequately increased budgets for direct nutritional interventions, greater financial support for nutrition-related activities, a clear policy that supports preventative and sustainable interventions and guidance on the development of models promoting public private partnership and corporate social responsibility based projects.

Supported By:

Esther de Lange MEP (European People’s Party, EPP)
Fiona Hall MEP
(Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe, ALDE)
Marc Tarabella MEP (Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists & Democrats, S&D)
Thijs Berman MEP (S&D)
Linda McAvan MEP (S&D)
The Federation of African Nutrition Societies (FANUS)
Unicef
The United Nations World Food Programme
The Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN)
Durabilis
La Sociedad Española de Dietética y Ciencias de la Alimentación (S.E.D.C.A.)
The International Union of Nutritional Sciences (IUNS)
The Patients Network for Medical Research and Health (EGAN)
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The Essential Micronutrients Foundation
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