



Remarks by Mr. John M. Powell,  
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ECOSOC Humanitarian Segment  
“Role of Food and Nutritional Assistance in Responding  
to the Food Security Crisis”  
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Excellencies,

Today, I would like to speak with you about:

Hunger – and why it is a humanitarian crisis for those trapped in its grasp;

Climate change and high food prices – how these two defining issues of our time affect hunger;

New opportunities for confronting hunger in a world without food surpluses;

Increasing needs for food and nutritional assistance; and

Stronger partnerships for meeting the new challenges.

The starting point for this conversation is hunger. There are about 850 million people who do not have enough to eat, day in and day out. Hunger denies them the opportunity for good health and nutrition from childhood, thereby robbing them of the chance to take advantage of development opportunities, even when they exist. A hungry child is not able to concentrate in school even if you can get her or him to class. A malnourished mother will give birth to an underweight baby who, without the proper micronutrient and vitamin support, is predestined for a shorter, less healthy and less productive life. According to the World Bank, rising food prices may push another 100 million of our fellow human beings into hunger and poverty.

Sometimes we can be blinded by numbers; and it is important to remember that behind each of these “numbers” is a person with a name, a family and

hopes and aspirations for a better life for her/himself and their families. They are real people not statistics.

For all of them, hunger is an omnipresent reality.

Most of the hungry do not live – and die – in situations that are commonly defined as humanitarian crises. Overwhelmingly, they live in a situation that we define as development. If you are hungry and desperate and there is a flood, drought or civil conflict, then the international community is there; if you are just hungry and desperate, we may not be. The sad reality is that people are no less hungry because of these definitions. Most of us, I suspect, have yet to meet a desperate mother, struggling to feed her family, ask of us whether we are classifying her situation as “humanitarian or development”. Hunger and its pernicious effects do not follow our orderly definitions.

It is National Governments that have the responsibility for protecting the poor and vulnerable in their society; and it is our job to support National Governments in their efforts. Sometimes this will be in the form of direct programmatic assistance, sometimes it may be capacity building in particular technical areas (for instance vulnerability assessment and mapping) and always in advocacy in support of their efforts. These people must not be “forgotten” as we focus on the humanitarian dimensions of this panel discussion.

I have begun my remarks in this way because we in the humanitarian sector are dealing with the perhaps 10-15% of the world’s hungry – those who face hunger (or indeed famine) because they are trapped in a crisis associated with natural disasters, civil conflict and/or economic disruption.

### **Climate Change and High Food Prices**

Between 1980 and 2006, the number of reported climate-related disasters has quadrupled – most of them floods, cyclones and storms. Over the same period, the number of those affected by these disasters has increased from 170 million to over 250 million a year. As recent events in Myanmar and China have shown, and what seems to be unfolding in the Horn of Africa portends, this trend shows no sign of abating. As John Holmes commented only recently, what we have seen to date may merely be a harbinger of the future.

Environmental changes affect development options, with poor people being the most vulnerable to their effects. In the period 1992-2001, for example, floods were the most frequent disaster killing nearly 100,000 people and

affecting another 1.2 billion. More than 90% of the people exposed to natural disasters live in the developing world.

Environmental degradation and hunger seem inexorably linked. A desperately poor family trying to survive on marginal, semi-arid land is much more concerned with providing food for the family today rather than worrying about the environmental implications for the future. Climate-related disasters compromise health, nutrition and education. They perpetuate hunger and poverty, and, indeed, jeopardize futures. Examples: in Ethiopia and Kenya, two of the world's most drought prone countries, children aged 5 years or less are respectively 36 and 50% more likely to be malnourished if they were born in a drought year. And in Niger, children aged two or less, born in a drought year are 72% more likely to be stunted.

The global fuel and food crisis, combined with natural and man-made disasters, has had a "layering effect", which has resulted in unprecedented needs and, as importantly, requires new tools to address the challenge of hunger. The new face of hunger affects both rural and urban populations. Simply expressed, high food prices mean that food may be available in the shops or markets but poor people do not have the income to buy what they need.

Our assessments show that the most vulnerable populations are running out of coping strategies. For those living on less than \$2 a day, they cut out health care and education and kill or sell their livestock. For those living on less than \$1 a day, they cut out protein and vegetables from their diet. For those living on less than 50 cents a day, they cut out whole meals and sometimes go days with nothing to eat.

## **New Opportunities**

We begin a conversation about hunger with a focus on the hungry individual or family. The core issue is the food and nutritional assistance needs for populations that are overwhelmingly women and children. The manner in which this assistance is provided becomes a secondary or contextual consideration. Hence, you will hear me speak about food and nutritional assistance and not food aid. The difference is not semantic but substantive. Food assistance may come in the form of commodities or micro-nutrient or vitamin fortified processed food but equally it may come in the form of cash, coupons or food stamps when there is food on the shelves or in the markets but people simply do not have the purchasing power to buy it. WFP can do all of these things.

At its Annual Session in June, our WFP Executive Board approved a new Strategic Plan which includes a more robust and nuanced set of tools to address hunger while recognizing that, in many situations, the provision of food in the form of commodities may be the appropriate response, such as in Darfur today.

WFP now receives a greater proportion of its resources in cash rather than in kind. This opens new possibilities for a more flexible response. Already WFP uses 80% of the cash it receives to purchase food in developing countries – more than \$612 million in 69 developing countries in 2007. More than \$250 million of that was purchased in Africa. Local and regional purchases generally mean food more in line with local tastes and dietary habits and lower transport costs while boosting the local agricultural economy and promoting local and regional trade.

But we can do even better. We are launching a pilot program titled Purchase-For-Progress, which is designed to connect small farmers to markets. Simply stated, WFP is working in partnership with the concerned national governments, the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa, the Gates and Howard Buffet Foundations and others to change its purchasing practices with the aim of reaching out to small farmers by providing them with an assured level of demand for a period of years, providing that the food can be delivered in time, in quantity and meet quality standards. We can reduce the level of uncertainty that small farmers face. By combining our purchasing power with the technical and managerial contributions of other partners, WFP hopes to play a part in longer term solutions to sustainable increases in agricultural production, particularly in the context of the present food crisis.

Export bans and other measures on purchase and trade of food make it difficult to do what is needed when it is needed most.

The basis of humanitarianism is changing and humanitarian assistance must change with it. In a globalized world, our response has to try and leverage our humanitarian assistance to promote economic development. This is still a work in progress, but we have made a start.

### **Increasing Needs**

In early 2008, WFP had a program of work that was estimated to cost \$3.1 billion. By February 2008, fuel and food price increases had raised the cost by \$755 million. This was the basis for the Executive Director's extraordinary appeal to Heads of State and Government; and the response

has been wonderful. Long standing partners of WFP have contributed year after year billions of dollars in support of urgent humanitarian needs. Without this unfaltering support, WFP could not have done what it has. In the first months of this year, there have been additional humanitarian needs. In Afghanistan and Myanmar to name but two. The combined estimated cost of these operations was around \$420 million. Thus the program of work rose to more than \$4.3 billion. The situation in the Horn of Africa, Zimbabwe and DPRK suggests that the requirements of 2008 will approach \$6 billion. There is nothing to suggest that 2009 will any less onerous. The main take-away message here is that the numbers of those who need humanitarian assistance has risen dramatically – and at a time when a dollar or Euro simply buys less food and fuel.

A sharply increasing caseload and higher prices have doubled our bill.

### **New Partnerships**

Partnerships with National Governments, UN system organizations and the Bretton Woods Institutions are central to WFP's work. Many are well known, such as those with UNICEF, UNHCR, FAO, IFAD, WHO and the World Bank. We greatly appreciate the work of John Holmes and the OCHA Team. Perhaps less well known are partnerships with other agencies, such as the International Maritime Organization (IMO). Recently, for example, the Executive Director of WFP and the Director-General of the IMO have collaborated to advocate with Governments concerning the urgency of providing military escorts to WFP chartered vessels delivering humanitarian assistance to Somalia. We also have an extensive web of partnerships with Non-Government Organizations, almost 3,000 of them. And, of course, we have private sector partners who support our work in a variety of important ways.

Let me now turn to funding. The needs are enormous. In 2008, just for WFP they have doubled, from around \$3 billion to almost \$6 billion. As the Secretary-General said only recently “without full funding of these emergency requirements, we risk again the spectre of widespread hunger, malnutrition and social unrest on an unprecedented scale”. For all of us involved in humanitarian action, the overriding imperative is to save lives.

How are we to get there? The WFP response to this question would be to reach out to new partners. In the past several years the number of donors to WFP operations and programs has increased dramatically. In 2007, they numbered 88. The broad statement of policy might be colloquially expressed as “every member state is a donor; and some donors are also

recipients”. The practical results are a greater sense of burden-sharing, a stronger sense of national ownership and commitment, and a greater assurance of sustainability. In an important albeit almost intangible way, it changes the ambience of the conversation because there are no longer distinctions between donor and recipient.

We again add WFP’s voice to the call for an equally rapid response for FAO and the other partners to the urgent needs for seeds, fertilizer and other essential inputs to ensure that planting seasons are not lost for small farmers – and indeed, so that they can become part of the agricultural supply response for longer term solutions.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, hunger is a humanitarian and development problem. Today, we only reach 10-15% of the hungry. To those we cannot yet assist, we must give hope. In that sense the CFA, the Comprehensive Framework of Action, produced under the direction of the Secretary-General’s Task Force on Food, is an affirmation of our shared concern for the unbearable plight of the hungry.

There are new opportunities for confronting hunger in a post-food surplus disposal world. The food surpluses of the past facilitated a humanitarian response. In a rapidly changing globalized world, we now have the opportunity to deploy a more nuanced and robust set of economic and operational tools to attack hunger at its root. Needs are increasing, driven by climate change and high food prices. We must now open our minds to new partnerships involving Governments at local and regional levels; regional institutions such as AU; and civil society and the private sector.

Only by so doing can we respond to the crisis caused by high food prices; and build the framework for lasting food security for all.