Eradication of child malnutrition in Latin America and the Caribbean: An urgent call to action

Eradicating child undernutrition in Central America and the Caribbean is possible

Latin American as a region today faces an historic inflexion conducive to the eradication of child undernutrition. The saliency of the right to food, together with economic and institutional conditions that stress economic growth and stability, international political agreements, and the advance of democracy make it unacceptable for hunger to continue to be treated as a natural phenomenon.

Latin America today has enough basic infrastructure, political will, and social capital to launch a serious offensive against child undernutrition and extreme poverty. There is a shared understanding that completely eradicating hunger and child undernutrition in the region is not only a credible target, but also that it can be done within a reasonable timeframe.

By making use of its own governmental efforts and with the support of the international community, Latin America and the Caribbean can become the first region to eradicate child undernutrition: It can be done, and it must be done urgently.

Hunger and child undernutrition: hampering development

According to all studies on the subject, Latin American and Caribbean region (LAC) is the most unequal region in the world. Sustained progress towards political democratization and economic liberalization has fostered societal openness in the region and created impressive prosperity for certain population segments in the 33 Latin American countries.

Despite such progress, 209 million people live in poverty and, of these, 81 million live in extreme poverty. Eighty-six percent (86%) of the poor live in medium-income countries where official development aid is on the decrease. This brings about the double exclusion of the poor: exclusion from the possibilities of development within their own countries and exclusion from the possibilities offered by international development aid.

Progress in reducing hunger is similarly unequal. The nutritional profile of Latin America’s population still shows great disparities, a reflection of the huge inequalities in income distribution. Achievements have not been proportionally reflected amongst and within countries. Four of the Latin American countries are not on track to achieve Target 2 of Millennium Development Goal 1 (MDG1) of halving the number of hungry people by the year 2015. Those same countries have the lowest per capita social spending figures in the region for the period 1990-2001.

Although the region produces enough food to fulfil over 30% of the needs of its total population (550 million), there are many areas where access to food remains extremely frail and is further jeopardized by an increase in the frequency and intensity of natural disasters and issues relating to food security in connection with the production of bio-fuels. Besides threatening the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the persistence of such high levels of inequality also threatens equitable and sustained development and frustrates progress made in respect of social cohesion.

Hunger and undernutrition affect almost 53 million people (10 percent) in Latin America and the Caribbean. Almost 9 million (16 percent) children under 5 years old suffer from chronic undernutrition.

(1) PMA Capacity Building Projects. Project 10411.0 “Fostering capacity in support of social protection programmes based on food assistance” and Project 10421.0 “Fostering capacity within the framework of programmes in Central America and Belize that incorporate micronutrients.”
Problems surrounding chronic child undernutrition are largely concentrated among poor populations, mostly those of indigenous traits, who live in the most isolated rural areas or in the urban periphery, and who have mostly inherited such unfavourable socio-economic conditions. Among such populations, the prevalence of undernutrition surpasses 70 percent.

Vitamin and mineral deficiencies (VMDs) are also severe nutritional problems found in the region, particularly iron, zinc, iodine, and vitamin A deficiencies. The gravest problem, anaemia, extends throughout the entire region and shows prevalences of almost 50% among children under five. In some countries of Central America and the Andean sub-region there are prevalences of over 80 percent.

Hunger and undernutrition thwart efforts to achieve all MDGs, not just because of their impact on poverty but because they also impact health, education, and mortality, among other aspects. There are clear causal relationships that have been abundantly substantiated through empirical research that indicate the interrelationship between hunger and undernutrition, on the one hand, and poverty, on the other. They also show how hunger and undernutrition lessen school attendance and learning, access to markets and other resources, mother and child health, the immune system, and the education and employment of women and girls. The sustained pressure of hunger also promotes the unsustainable use of natural resources and risky survival strategies related to infectious-contagious diseases.  

**The devastating effects of child undernutrition**

It is well known that undernutrition in children under three years old impacts their entire life cycle. Scientists are in agreement that the fundamental physical, cognitive, and psychological characteristics that will be consolidated in successive development stages are modelled and structured at this early stage. At no other stage of human development are there levels of brain development similar to those found during early childhood.

Children exposed to undernutrition in their early years are prone to a higher risk of death during infancy and of morbility and undernutrition throughout their entire life cycle, so that their potential for physical and intellectual development is limited and their ability to learn and work as adults is restricted. The lack of development opportunities is accentuated by the fact that child undernutrition affects cognitive and physical capabilities, which results in lower school performance and even desertion. This restricts the opportunity for professional and economic growth, thereby contributing to the perpetuation of the poverty cycle.

Likewise, vitamin and mineral deficiencies, sometimes called “silent hunger”, affect the health and development potential of humans and are the main factors contributing to child mortality and morbility. The general awareness of, and political and economic commitment to, reducing micronutrient deficiencies remain low when contrasted against the allocation of resources for other development priorities.

**The “cost of hunger”**

In this region it has been possible to note that governments often fail to recognize and understand the full scope of the social and economic costs associated with hunger and child undernutrition and that this generates a significant lack of investment in social programmes based on food assistance. Approximately one percent (1%) of social expenditure is destined to food programmes and even less is

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1 Hunger and Social Cohesion in Latin America. How to reverse the relationship between inequality and malnutrition. (ECLAC-FAO-WFP 2007)
invested in promoting, producing, and distributing enriched foods for small children. It is essential to make sustained investments in the fight against hunger and child undernutrition in order to ensure that social protection programmes have the appropriate impact.

For our societies, hunger is costlier than its eradication. According to the study “The Cost of Hunger: social and economic impact of child undernutrition in Central America and the Dominican Republic” (ECLAC-WFP, 2007), the sequence of child undernutrition during the past decades would have generated a cost of almost 6.7 billion dollars in 2004 as a result of greater expenditure for health, inefficient educational processes, and productivity losses. These economic losses are the equivalent of over 6 percent of the GDP of those countries during that year, ranging between 1.7 and 11.4 percent. It is easy to glean from such data that a region free from child undernutrition would benefit all social sectors and all governments.

**Challenges in the eradication of child undernutrition**

There are various restrictions on national commitments in the field of child undernutrition. The coexistence of multiple players and organisations in the field of nutrition frequently results in the dispersion of efforts being made to reduce undernutrition among too many different institutions and programmes, or else, that these efforts simply do not materialise. Undernutrition is often unnoticeable for those who feel it worst: they are unaware of its future implications.

There is also a lack of nutritional monitoring systems and of effective tools that may enable governments to identify the geographical areas with high prevalence of undernutrition and to comprehend the factors determining the food/nutrition problems present in those regions. This often results in largely ineffective and inefficient interventions targeting hunger and undernutrition.

Many challenges arise when attempting to verify that goals have been met and that programmes are having the desired impact. Quite often, as a result of limitations due to insufficient technical and financial resources and to varied methodological approaches, monitoring and evaluation systems in the region lack the ability to generate the data necessary to adequately evaluate the efficiency, effectiveness, and sustainability of those interventions. Even if such systems and evaluations were capable of producing an analysis of the results associated with those programmes on the basis of evidence, the lessons learned through such exercises would not be systematically incorporated into the process of formulating new or improved programmes.

In the meantime, the efforts of experts and policymakers in the region are constrained because of the scarce opportunities available for them to learn from others, and this often keeps countries with serious problems unaware of the existence of successful experiences elsewhere. Scarce use is being made in the region of the benefits and advantages derived from South-South cooperation. There is a need to promote and expedite programme designs based on facts and on the operations of successful programmes, since the exchange of experiences among experts can help translate explicit and tacit knowledge into better practices in support of policy and programme formulation.

**Political support: Creating partnerships**

In Latin America and the Caribbean, WFP supports governments in establishing and effectively managing their own social programmes to reduce hunger and undernutrition, and it also advocates the allocation of more resources to be translated into efficient programmes. WFP looks beyond the project approach and seeks to influence public policy by helping governments and communities analyse the causes of undernutrition and inequalities. WFP is committed to making policy and decision makers, private sectors and civil society that: the eradication of poverty will never be possible without the eradication of hunger; that any other investment made by governments will not generate the
desired results is countries do not tackle child undernutrition; and that today, investing in children is the only path to a better future.

WFP has adopted a two-pronged approach to tackle the state of child undernutrition in this region: (i) advocacy at the highest echelons to raise awareness and influence political decision makers, and (ii) provision of technical support so that Latin American and Caribbean countries can bolster their social programmes on the basis on food assistance and by taking advantage of the mechanisms offered through South-South cooperation.

Over the past two years and via various technical consultations, fora, and ministerial summits (See chart), WFP, the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), specialised international co-operation agencies, and countries in the region have worked to design the Regional Initiative “Towards the Eradication of Chronic Child Undernutrition in Central America and the Dominican Republic.” At the Annual Meeting of IDB Governors held in March 2007, the government representatives of countries espousing this initiative committed to placing child nutrition at the highest level of their poverty reduction strategies. Afterwards, at the XXXVII General Assembly of the Organisation of American States (OAS), held in June 2007, the 35 member states passed a resolution in support of efforts to eradicate child undernutrition in Latin America and the Caribbean and requested that an action plan to strengthen the mechanisms for horizontal cooperation among countries be prepared in order to carry out those efforts.

Positioning child undernutrition is a challenge and an opportunity, both for the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean, and for the international community. Through declarations and resolutions produced at these high level meetings, the viability of facing the challenge has been proven. WFP remains committed to support countries, in order to move from political commitments to action.

### Political support for the eradication of child undernutrition in Central America and the Caribbean

- **IV Meeting of Men and Women Ministers of Health and Social Protection of South America**, Chile, April 2005
- **IV Summit of Heads of State and Government of the Association of Caribbean States**, Panamá, Julio 2005
- **Annual Assembly of the Health Sector Network for Central America and the Dominican Republic (RESSCAD XXI)**, Belize, September 2005
- **Extraordinary Meeting of the Central American Integration System (SICA)**, March 2006
- **Panama Declaration at the XXVIII Regular Meeting of SICA Heads of State and Government**, Panama, July 2006
- **Annual Assembly of the Health Sector Network for Central America and the Dominican republic (RESSCAD XXII)**, Guatemala, September 2006
- **Technical Meeting of Health Ministries of the Andean Group, “Towards the eradication of child undernutrition by the year 2015”**, Lima, Peru, November 2006
- **Ministerial Meeting of Health Ministers of the Andean Area REMSAA XXVII**, Bolivia, March 2007
- **Annual Meeting of the IDB Governors**, Guatemala, March 2007
Working together to eradicate child undernutrition in Latin America and the Caribbean

WFP offers a package of activities for capacity building to assist national governments in their efforts to reduce poverty and eradicate child undernutrition. This package has been developed through technical consultations with governments in the region, in order to define the areas and priorities that would most impact the fight against child undernutrition and in which they wish to receive WFP support and technical assistance. Two complementary regional projects for capacity building provide the framework for activities unfolding in inter-related phases, as follows:

- Phase 1: Advocacy and getting commitments. Development of methodologies and tools
- Phase 2: Developing capacity through technical assistance and the application of the methodologies and tools developed

Under Phase 1, WFP has concentrated on positioning the eradication of child undernutrition at the highest level within the political agenda by advocating for greater and sustained investments to expedite the process. To this effect, alliances with regional political organizations have been created and strong links with technical institutions have been established, and an inter-agency framework with the United Nations has been launched, all of which has fostered synergies amongst countries in the region at the programme and policy levels, as part of carrying out capacity building activities.

WFP has developed a package that includes methodologies, research studies, technical assistance, and mechanisms for knowledge management and exchange that seeks to facilitate the development of national strategies and plans and promote South-South cooperation. The package provides significant public advocacy tools and instruments aimed at improving management and enhancing the results of national programmes to fight hunger and child undernutrition.

Results to date: Major steps toward the eradication of child undernutrition in Latin America and the Caribbean

Gaining the political support of governments and the subsequent positioning of the issue of child undernutrition at the highest level of the public agenda has been a key element of the strategy being applied to eradicate this scourge from the region.

Phase 1 - Advocacy to strengthen the regional commitment to combat hunger and child undernutrition and development of methodologies and tools:

1) With the goal of gaining the political commitment of governments and the incorporation of the issue of child undernutrition into the financial and legal framework of countries, WFP promoted a joint
Project with the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) to determine the social and economic impact of child undernutrition in a given country. Once the methodology had been developed and was validated by a group of renowned experts, 7 country studies were developed in Central America and the Dominican Republic, in addition to a regional study. On 3 June 2007, the study’s results, “The Cost of Hunger: Economic and Social Impact of Child Undernutrition in Central America and the Dominican Republic” were presented by United Nations Secretary General Ban-Ki Moon, who commented that the conclusions constitute “no less than a call to action” for governments to act against child undernutrition in the region.

2) The development of analytical methodologies and tools on food and nutrition security within the framework of the initiative “Towards the eradication of child undernutrition in Central America and the Dominican Republic” is an essential component in support of governments for the improved targeting and design of their social programmes based on food assistance. They also help to improve risk reduction and emergency response activities within the region.

WFP’s skill in analysing and mapping vulnerability to food insecurity (VAM) is renowned worldwide as a key tool for understanding the origins of food insecurity and undernutrition, as well as for targeting relief assistance, rehabilitation, and development efforts. Throughout Phase I, VAM methodologies have focused on taking advantage of the best practices in the region (Bolivia, Guatemala, Peru, El Salvador, and Nicaragua). The ability to align such good practices with general methodologies will enable WFP to provide governments with an analytical toolkit. Given that undernutrition is the focus of WFP’s general strategy for the region, the nutritional dimension has been added to WFP analyses via the development of a specific product, the Atlas of Hunger and Undernutrition.

This atlas is a methodology that allows for the location of groups with high prevalence of child undernutrition at higher levels of administrative segregation, so that resources may be more effectively used through improved, effective targeting. A pilot has been presented to the government of the Dominican Republic and the process is underway to create atlases for Panama and Ecuador.

2) With the goal of having a dynamic virtual setup that can facilitate the exchange of information, knowledge, and best practices among governments, professional experts, beneficiaries, executors, and managers, WFP is supporting the establishment of an Internet portal on knowledge management of social programmes based on food assistance and on the reduction of hunger and undernutrition, as a way of underpinning a culture of South-South cooperation that allows for a sharing of information and knowledge through which countries can be of mutual help.

3) To gain the commitment of governments to effectively handle vitamin and mineral deficiencies, WFP is sponsoring effective associations and the strengthening of National Micronutrient Committees, and has already undertaken technical consultations with the governments, United Nations, and other partners to extend the commitment of handling vitamin and mineral deficiencies and to start up or bolster programmes providing complementary fortified foods.

Phase 2 – Enhancing capacity by providing technical assistance

1) In response to the need to support governments in designing plans, programmes, and strategies to combat child undernutrition, WFP is implementing sub-regional strategies, as follows:

a) Central America Sub-Region:
   Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama, and the Dominican Republic.
• An alliance with the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) was formed to develop a joint technical cooperation project to consolidate the regional initiative “Towards the Eradication of Chronic Chile Undernutrition in Central America and the Dominican Republic.” Common criteria were developed through this Technical Cooperation and technical assistance was provided for the formulation of national plans to eradicate chronic undernutrition in each country.

• With the strong support of governments themselves, this initiative has been joined by range of partners that include United Nations specialised agencies, NGOs, and other governments within the region, such as Chile and Mexico, within the framework of South-South cooperation. Eight plans have already been prepared and these are aimed at accelerating the rate of advance towards the eradication of chronic child undernutrition through a revision, interconnection, and strengthening of existing national programmes. The progress made in each of the 8 national plans was presented in Panama, in January, at a regional meeting with the participation of specialists on the issues of nutrition and representatives of cooperation agencies, donors, and international financial institutions.

• National plans have already begun to bear fruit in developing immediate action at country level as, for example:

  o Belize adopted a national plan for the Eradication of Chronic Chile Undernutrition and a key activity within the National Action Plan for the Eradication of Poverty 2007-2011.
  o In December 2006, the government of Costa Rica published its Health and Nutrition Policy 2006-2010, which explicitly incorporates “the development and implementation” of the plan “Towards the Eradication of Child Undernutrition”. The Directorate General of the Secretariat for the National Food and Nutrition Policy – SEPAN has been charged with coordinating this plan.
  o In Guatemala, the Plan enriched the text of the PRDC (Programme for Reducing Chronic Undernutrition, in Spanish), which has been endorsed by WFP from the start.
  o The Nutrition Plan of Honduras serves as a framework for the national plan; the latter, in turn, helps to ground plan execution by means of specific interventions in child nutrition. Three project proposals for the regional and departmental ambitions are simultaneously being prepared in order to make the plan operational in predefined geographical areas over the next three years.
  o In Nicaragua, the Ministry of Health (MINSA) assumed leadership of this initiative and considers the national plan as a public health strategy to reduce chronic child undernutrition and as a means of broadening health services for target groups.
  o The Government of Panama launched two national plans aimed at eradicating child undernutrition among its most vulnerable population by 2015 and help the country achieve the MDGs. The "National Plan to Fight Child Undernutrition 2008-2015" and the "National Plan for the Prevention and Control of Micronutrient Deficiencies 2008-2015" were presented at the Presidency of the Republic.

b) Andean Sub-Region:
Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Paraguay, Peru, and Venezuela

• A similar process has been catalysing in the Andean region through the Regional Technical Consultation “Towards the Eradication of Child Undernutrition in the Andean region by the year 2015”, held by WFP in Lima, in November 2006, with the support of the governments of Peru and Chile. At this meeting, representatives of the Andean countries and their neighbouring countries, members of financial institutions and of NGOs, international
agencies, academia, and regional experts analysed the problem of child undernutrition in the Andean region and made a commitment to hasten the pace of work to eradicate it.

- Soon thereafter, at the XXVIII Meeting of Men and Women Ministers of Health of the Andean Region (REMSAA) held in Santa Cruz de la Sierra, Bolivia in March 2007, the countries instructed the Executive Secretariat of the Andean Health Organisation (ORAS CONHU) to coordinate meetings at the highest level on the issue of eradicating child undernutrition and on the creation of a Technical Committee on Nutrition within each country. This Secretariat convenes the representatives of Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, and Venezuela with the aim of establishing a regional technical committee for the eradication of child undernutrition in coordination with United Nations agencies and cooperation agencies.

- The First Meeting of the Andean Sub-regional Committee for the Eradication of Child Undernutrition was held in June 2007 with representatives from Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, and Venezuela. As a result, an Inter-agency (WFP, WHO, UNICEF, FAO, and UNFPA) Working Group was formed to provide technical assistance to the Committee in the drafting, implementation, and evaluation of the Andean Plan for the Eradication of Child Undernutrition. Work on the drafting of the Andean Sub-regional Plan along 8 strategic lines has also begun. WFP will closely follow this process and will work together with governments, other United Nations agencies, and other strategic partners.

With political support from governments, WFP continues to secure these processes by identifying potential sources of funding from international cooperation and from within the framework of South-South cooperation, and by working with countries to identify all technical assistance and advice they may require in support of their efforts to eradicate child undernutrition.

2) **Building capacity for the design, targeting and monitoring of interventions**

- WFP will provide technical assistance to the governments based on an integrated analysis of existing gaps in the targeting and design of existing programme interventions. In the first phase, the Vulnerability Analysis Methods and the Hunger and Undernutrition Atlas will be shared and transferred to governmental counterparts through technical assistance, training, and education, so that these tools may be applied as part of national plans and programmes. WFP technical assistance and collaboration will be geared towards ensuring that the interventions based on food assistance i) reach priority areas of vulnerability in the countries (optimizing resources), and ii) reach the proper vulnerable groups, thereby optimizing programme effectiveness.

The broad analytical solutions offered through the VAM package permit an analysis of data for decision making processes through the programme cycle (design, targeting, and monitoring and impact evaluation) and they also provide the tools needed to transition from a context of emergency/relief (through the Food Security Needs Evaluation – EFNA, in Spanish) to one of rehabilitation and development (baselines, food and nutritional monitoring and evaluation systems).

3) **Manage the support provided by international cooperation and the United nations System** to underpin the implementation of national plans to eradicate child undernutrition

- In an effort to assist countries with the implementation of their national plans in the fight against child undernutrition, as a strategy for resource mobilisation, and under the United Nations Reform vision of “working in unison”, the team of LAC regional Directors requested that each country prepare a joint project to support implementation of this initiative within the framework of the work undertaken by the agencies within the region. Priority was assigned to the development of
a joint United Nations project to assist the respective governments in their fight to eradicate child undernutrition within their own country and bearing in mind the impact that this will have in the achievement of a series of targets under the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The process is underway in 8 countries.

4) Study “Cost of Hunger”

- At the request of countries in the Andean region, a capacity building process with the government teams in Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Paraguay, Peru, and Venezuela has been launched by means of training exercises on the methodology, so that they can each carry out the study within their own countries. Other countries in the region, such as Mexico and Brazil, have shown an interest in developing the study.

5) Support for initiatives to prevent and reduce VMDs

- WFP is bolstering the capacity of countries in the region to reduce hunger and undernutrition by implementing programmes that incorporate micronutrients and are primarily aimed at children under 3 years old and pregnant and lactating women. Countries are being provided technical assistance for developing their national programmes and policies and for the configuration of alliances and sub-regional networks that raise the level of such interventions in the search for ways to sustainably prevent, control, and reduce micronutrient deficiencies.

- Technical assistance being provided encompasses advocacy to gain greater commitment on the part of governments in the fight against such deficiencies; communications, information, and social marketing; monitoring and evaluation; the undertaking of research and other studies; and the design/production of low cost, culturally appropriate complementary fortified foods. Work begun in Central America under the auspices of a specific WFP cooperation project has been extended to encompass other countries in the region.

- WFP signed a technical cooperation agreement with the Micronutrient Initiative (MI) to provide its support to governments in controlling nutritional anaemia, iron and zinc deficiencies, and iodine deficiencies in priority countries within the region. To date, progress achieved on both initiatives has enabled WFP to position itself as the leading technical cooperation agency in the field of micronutrients. As part of this leadership role, WFP has been designated as coordinating agency for the regional group that will develop the “Ten-Year Strategy for Reducing Vitamin and Mineral Deficiencies”.

- WFP will continue to sustain the implementation of work plans in each country by following an integrated approach for the various interventions; through the sharing of experiences in relation to the use of effective strategies and practices for combating such deficiencies among countries; and by generating mechanisms to mobilize additional technical and financial resources.

6) Knowledge management to strengthen South-South collaboration on the fight against child undernutrition in Latin America and the Caribbean

- Governments have appointed focal points, and a regional and national teams have been formed in all countries where WFP is represented. Operational strategies to be implemented in each of the five theme areas of the portal have been defined, and a technological platform has been selected, on which the content programming and database for the thematic areas of Mother-Child Nutrition and Food for Education have been loaded. The format for the cover, secondary, and country pages on the portal have also been defined.
• Information regarding programmes and projects in the two priority areas (mother-Child Nutrition and Food for Education) has been gathered and that information is currently been loaded onto the portal so that it may be offered to users. The information includes an inventory of programmes and projects currently in progress in the region, of institutions and experts, and of positive experiences, lessons learned, and good practices. Work has begun on the consolidation of national thematic networks with the participation of governments, other United Nations agencies, national NGOs, and local associations.

• The process of developing ownership of this initiative on the part of governments has likewise started. Efforts are being done to create a more pertinent and appropriate organisation that may effectively manage this initiative and work on the task of identifying strategic partners with which to broaden coverage to all countries in the region continues.

**Eradicating child undernutrition: everyone’s responsibility**

The formulation of national strategies, plans, and programmes, complemented by a regional initiative in their support, represents a key step forward in the effort to break the cycle of child undernutrition in the region. Thanks to the trust afforded WFP, the Programme is well suited to further the process of consolidating the necessary political backing and of lending the technical assistance needed at the national, local, and community levels, under a South-South cooperation approach, to improve and implement national plans and programmes focusing on this same topic.

The concerted effort of all international cooperation players, together with those of national governments, is required if Latin America and the Caribbean is to become the first region in the world to eradicate child undernutrition. There is urgency in undertaking such joint action, lest we risk losing much of the significant gains made in the region thus far.