The Challenge of Eradicating Child Undernutrition:
Statement to the Regional Ministerial Conference on the
Eradication of Child Undernutrition—Santiago Chile—
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Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are gathered here at a critical moment. The world finds itself in the opening
stages of a global food crisis that threatens the wellbeing of tens of millions of the
most vulnerable people on the planet. The truth is that the global institutions of
the post-World War II era have never faced a humanitarian food crisis of
comparable magnitude, complexity, and geographical reach. In less than two
years we have seen global food prices increase on average by 83 per cent. The
indications are that not only could prices still rise, but that they may well stay high
for several years to come.

The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean has already
estimated that at current price levels, the region can expect to see ten million
people plunged into extreme poverty or indigence. At the same time we can
expect to see a comparable rise in illness and disease as the region’s poor find
their bodies weakened by hunger and less able to resist, and if we are not
careful we risk seeing an increase in hunger-related deaths, especially among
children. In addition, another ten million people will find themselves on the knife
edge of the poverty, barely able to cope and threatened with hunger and
undernutrition by any subsequent rise in prices. In short, not only does the food
crisis threaten a catastrophe on millions of new victims, but it threatens to wipe
out the important gains obtained through development efforts.
For example, we know that undernutrition can cause irreversible mental and physical damage in children between birth and age three. We also know that this, in turn, will have a profound impact on a child’s productive life and will limit his or her contributions to society. Last year, the World Food Programme and the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean released a study of six Central American countries and the Dominican Republic which showed that the average cost of child undernutrition amounted to the equivalent of more than 6 per cent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Today’s food crisis threatens to increase that figure significantly.

At the same time, we have all witnessed the social unrest sparked by higher food prices. Haiti recently joined a list of countries of the world where violent protests have erupted as a result of the food price increase. It requires no great insight to realize that many similar disturbances could ensue in the future, which in turn could have grave economic and political consequences for the countries involved as well as risk the needless loss of life.

Our challenge today is to find the best means of assisting the hungry poor and to ensure that the necessary resources are devoted to this task. By this I mean that business as usual will not suffice. Not only will the international community have to play a critical role in providing financial resources to cooperation organizations like WFP, UNICEF, FAO and the Pan American Health Organization, but the nations of the region will have to take unprecedented and forceful action. If a needless tragedy is to be avoided, new policy and budget priorities will have to be adopted. Governments will face difficult decisions as they assign lesser importance to some politically popular projects and give top priority to the hunger and nutritional crisis that is gradually gripping this region. Unless governments convincingly respond to food prices in the initial phases of the crisis, they may well find themselves unable to respond to events as later stages unfold.

As you may have read, WFP has requested that donor governments contribute on urgently an additional $756 million to help us for our current programme of
work. In other words, the additional US$ 756 million would enable us to bridge the gap between the original estimated costs of our operations to feed 70 million people to the actual cost today. This amount excludes any additional people who will need assistance either because the high food prices leave them unable to meet a bare caloric minimum or for any new emergencies. The result is that we are currently assessing the additional needs and discussing with our partners plans for a more comprehensive response. As you also may know, the president of the World Bank, Bob Zoellick, has called for a new Marshall Plan and a coordinated response from the Bretton Woods institutions and key UN agencies. It is indeed on such a grand scale that we must respond if we are to be successful.

Besides the increase in commodity prices, Latin America and the Caribbean face increasing emergencies caused by natural disasters. The latest hurricane season lasted longer than those of previous years and was particularly harsh, with two exceptional category 5 storms starting the season and a host of other storms repeatedly hitting the region. This situation has severely damaged crops and agricultural activity, it increases food insecurity and vulnerability of more and more people - especially women and children - and is threatening development gains in the region. A Colorado State University forecast for the 2008 hurricane season predicts 8 hurricanes, four of them category 5 storms, hitting the region.

In the World Food Programme as well as other UN agencies, our greatest concern is the impact the food price crisis is having on the deterioration of the nutritional status of children and pregnant and lactating women. As Latin American and Caribbean governments undertake immediate actions to tackle the effects of the current crisis, this situation provides an opportunity to strengthen social safety nets, mother-child health and nutrition interventions and school feeding programmes that prioritize the nutritional well-being of vulnerable groups and renew the region’s commitment and determination to eradicate child undernutrition. According to FAO, OCDE, USDA and the World Bank, food
prices will remain high in 2008 and 2009 - and they are likely to remain well above the 2004 levels through 2015 for most food crops. We must ensure that in the face of this crisis the advances already made in reducing child undernutrition in the region are safeguarded and vulnerable groups receive extra protection against these shocks.

The International Food Policy Research Institute called for the implementation of a “comprehensive social protection and food and nutrition initiatives to meet the short- and medium-term needs of the poor” and other long-term agricultural and trade policies to face up to the challenge. Meanwhile the World Bank has stated that high priority should be given to avoiding negative nutrition impacts because the recent rise in food prices will produce in the poorest families a sudden cut in real incomes. This in turn could hit complementary feeding and reduce effective access to health care and medicines, thus further worsening nutritional outcomes.

All of us here have a very important role to play if we are to succeed. I ask each and every one of you to persuade your government to adopt an activist approach. We will need your support, particularly in the diplomatic arena. You must engage in forceful efforts to persuade donor countries to become engaged to the fullest and at the earliest possible time. It must be clear that this will not be a one-shot deal. There will need to be sustained financial support as long as prices remain exceedingly high. At the same time, governments will have to adopt an activist approach at the national level.

This is a region rich in experiences in addressing child undernutrition. Many of your countries already have in place robust policies and programmes that include reaching vulnerable populations with well-targeted and effective social safety nets. The current world scenario especially highlights their importance and relevance.
Over the next two days we will be challenged to develop an inventory of experiences and best practices derived from child undernutrition programmes undertaken to date; to establish a network of institutions and players responsible for programmes on child undernutrition in the region; to identify areas for South-South and triangular cooperation in support of national programmes to eradicate child undernutrition; and to adopt a mechanism to facilitate the sharing of knowledge, experience, and best practices.

The World Food Programme stands ready to work with you. The Regional Initiative “Towards the Eradication of Child Undernutrition in Latin America and the Caribbean” has received political endorsement at the highest level, promoted technical exchanges at regional and national levels, and brought policy and programme makers together in events such as this one.

We have also developed methodologies and tools to support governments in eradicating child undernutrition, such as the Cost of Hunger Studies and the Hunger and Undernutrition Atlas, provided technical support to combat vitamin and mineral deficiencies, and designed with governments and other stakeholders a knowledge management platform and networking tool to promote South-South and triangular collaboration in support of food-based and nutrition programmes.

Among other things, we can help design improved emergency response mechanisms. We can also use this crisis to fast-track implementation of the regional initiative “Towards the Eradication of Child Undernutrition”. It is my hope that this conference will result in the development of an action plan for quick implementation at this moment when time is truly of the essence, as hunger waits for no one.

Thank you.