“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times,” so wrote Charles Dickens in *A Tale of Two Cities*. The same could almost be said for this year.

So far, 2005 has been a year of extreme contrasts for the poor and hungry. Generosity shone brightly as millions of individuals, businesses and governments dug deep into their pockets to respond in record time to the devastating tsunami. Amidst the desperation and destruction, the world showed that compassion reigned. No lives were lost to starvation or disease after the tsunami, despite overwhelming odds.

Leadership also stood out as the heads of the world’s most important economies – the G8 – moved to double aid, liberalise trade and forgive debt for the world’s poorest continent, Africa. Politicians, pop stars and the public celebrated this landmark from one end of the globe to the other. Truly, it seemed that it might be possible to finally ‘make poverty history’.

But almost as if to remind us of the razor thin line between poverty and prosperity, images of children starving once again flashed across our television screens last month. Hundreds of thousands of children in Niger
were acutely malnourished, their families unable to afford the rapidly escalating prices of staple foods caused by drought and waves of locusts.

Ironically, while the world was showing how generous it could be, and the aid community demonstrating how efficiently it could respond to disaster in Asia, the warning signs of a food crisis were ignored in Africa. The youngest and the weakest would pay the price.

So the report card on the Millennium Development Goals, which should be released in September in New York, should be mixed. Progress has been made in some areas. Political commitment has been forthcoming. Additional funds have been mobilised. But for the very poorest, hungriest, weakest people, none of the fanfare has much meaning.

Goal One: eradicate extreme poverty and hunger.
Global poverty rates are falling, led by Asia. Since the 1980s, global poverty has dropped by 20 percent. But millions of people have sunk deeper into poverty in sub-Saharan Africa, where the poor are getting poorer.

In some places, progress has been made against hunger, but the absolute number of poor and hungry people in the developing world is actually on the rise again after decades of progress. In the mid-1990s 792 million people were hungry, this year the Food and Agriculture Organization reported that 852 million are undernourished. Millions more people are chronically hungry in sub-Saharan Africa than they were in 1990 – in fact, one in three.
Fighting this hunger and poverty is at the core of WFP’s work. Last year we reached 113 million people in 80 countries. We were responsible for delivering half of all the food aid worldwide. We spent nearly $3 billion on operations – two thirds of which went to the world’s least developed countries.

But one in four of the world’s children under age 5 is still malnourished. We managed to reduce acute malnutrition – like that experienced by the painfully skinny children you see in Niger – in 21 of 29 operations surveyed. But the truth is, most of deaths from malnutrition occur off camera, and we simply don’t get the funds we need to deal with chronic hunger that isn’t considered an ‘emergency’. I use that term grudgingly, since to me, the needless death of any child is an emergency.

The significance of child malnutrition cannot be overlooked. In fact, if I had to wager which factor is likely to stand in the way of our reaching all of the other Millennium Development Goals, my money would be on hunger among children and mothers.

Why? Let me walk you through some of the other goals, and point out some little-known facts.

The second MDG deals with getting every child into elementary school. There are more than 100 million children who still don’t get to go to school. For many of them, the reason is simple. Either they go to school, or they eat. Their families can’t afford both.

Last year WFP offered school meals to 17 million children in 72 countries. Not only did we enable them to go to school, and get the
nutrition they needed to concentrate on their studies. We also used our network to give them medicine to protect them from intestinal worms, vaccines, nutrition information and HIV/AIDS awareness. Where WFP was feeding school children, enrolment rates went up an average of 9 percent. And in the same schools, 92 percent of children kept going to class right up until the end of the school year. They didn’t drop out.

The third MDG talks about empowering women, evening up the balance between men and women worldwide. Putting food in the hands of women guarantees that it gets to those who need it most. Last year more than half of all the people who ate WFP’s food were women or girls. In nine out of 10 relief operations, women were encouraged to go and collect rations … ensuring that they ended up in the kitchen, not the market place. Two thirds of all the people who participated in our food-for-training projects were women, giving them basic literacy and skills to enable them to earn a better living.

I was hardly what you could call a radical feminist before I took this job on, but having seen the burdens that women carry, and the sacrifices they make, I might become one before I finish.

The fourth and fifth MDGs aim to reduce child and maternal mortality. Well, given that more than half of all the deaths of children under five are associated with malnutrition, and that poorly nourished women are more likely to die during pregnancy or childbirth, it would seem evident that getting nutrition right would make a big dent in that goal.

There is no excuse for any child going hungry. Whichever way you look at it – religious, moral, social, political or economic – it is simply wrong
for children to lose their futures to hunger. We reached more than 50 million children last year. It’s not enough.

The good news is that child hunger can be conquered, and all children can be given an opportunity to go to school. Like any apparently insurmountable problem, it needs to be broken down into manageable parts. Roughly 180 million hungry children are already receiving international assistance, or they live in China, India or Brazil, where the governments have the resources required – and have made concrete commitments – to address child hunger. We estimate that there are approximately 107 million children and pregnant women at risk of delivering malnourished babies, who still require help.

The cost of helping them is not prohibitive. Studies conducted by the World Food Programme have shown that for roughly US $5 billion a year, we can feed the children not currently being reached by their governments or international assistance. This would include a comprehensive package of health and nutrition for pregnant women and children aged under five, plus school feeding for those aged 5 to 15.

While US $5 billion may seem like a big sum, it’s made up of some very manageable parts. For just US $25 per child per year, we can not only give children a meal in school – with all of the vitamins and minerals they need for healthy growth. We can also make sure that they get regular health checks and de-worming treatment. For US $60 we can give young children – aged under five – special supplementary food, complete with extra micronutrients, vaccinations, de-worming and basic health checks. For the same price, pregnant women and nursing mothers who are at risk of giving birth to babies weighing less than 2.5 kg can receive extra food.
These rations would be fortified with iodine, vitamin A and iron – those micronutrients most often missing from poor women’s diets, which can cause maternal illness and birth defects. Nutrition education is also included in the package for women, to ensure that they know what foods they and their children need to lead healthy, productive lives.

We expect that the developing countries where the programme will run will provide the food needed to meet their own children and women’s needs – at a global value of a bit less than US $2 billion. The remaining US $3 billion will need to come from international sources.

The sixth goal deals with AIDS and other diseases. AIDS has become the leading cause of premature death in sub-Saharan Africa and the fourth largest killer worldwide. Malaria and tuberculosis together account for nearly as many deaths. But all of them together don’t come near the number of people who die from hunger and malnutrition – nearly 10 million each year. What’s worse is that malnourished people are more likely to die of AIDS or TB or malaria, since their immune systems are weakened. And poor sick people are easy prey for hunger, since most of them rely on their labour to earn a living, and if you’re too sick to work, you don’t get paid.

I am also the UN Secretary-General’s Special Envoy on Southern Africa, and I have seen for myself the devastation that occurs when hunger and HIV mix. It hits every level of society. Parents die leaving villages full of old people and young children. Countries lose more judges, police, teachers, doctors and nurses than they can train. Fields lie fallow because the farmers have died before they could teach their children to till the land. And orphans flock to the cities, where they become street children
at even greater risk of contracting the disease that took their parents away.

One fact puts all of this into perspective. The average life expectancy in Zimbabwe used to be 68. Today it is 32.

Food can really help. It can ensure that people get the most out of anti-retroviral treatment, keeping them alive longer. It can help keep orphans and other children affected by AIDS in school. And that’s important, because an education might be the only truly effective way of slowing this pandemic.

Peter Piot, the head of UNAIDS asked a group of women with AIDS in Malawi what it is they most needed, and their answer surprised him. It was not care, not medicine, not freedom from stigma, but food. Because people with HIV often become too sick to work, and that means they can’t feed themselves or their families.

The last Millennium Development Goal calls for a global partnership for development. It seeks to tackle debt in developing countries. We seem to be on the way. But debt relief is little help to a starving child today. Niger was among the countries whose external debts were forgiven by the G8 at Gleneagles in July. At the same time, mothers in Niger were lining up outside therapeutic feeding centers carrying babies so thin you could literally see their hearts beating through their ribs.

What I would like to see is a ‘food first’ policy. It’s a bit like Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. Until humans have the very basic elements they need for survival: air, food, water and shelter, nothing else matters to them.
Without food, no one can really enjoy growing prosperity and opportunities around them; the only opportunity a hungry person cares about is one that will fill his belly. Without food, development initiatives will never truly reach all of the poor.

Don’t get me wrong, debt relief is a good and necessary thing. But it can’t be seen as the panacea for today’s pain. So too with trade liberalization. We applaud attempts at the WTO to dismantle subsidies on agriculture. They do tremendous damage to farmers in poor countries. But just like debt relief, they won’t help the poor and hungry any time this decade. In fact, they might just make things harder in the short term, as producers in developing countries struggle to compete with cheap imports from more efficient producers elsewhere.

One thing stands out for the World Food Programme in ongoing trade discussions and that is a proposal to ‘discipline’ the use of food aid by restricting donations of food, rather than cash. The World Food Programme already goes to considerable lengths to ensure that its food aid does not distort markets. Our operations are based on careful assessment of food availability and markets. We target our food to people who essentially have no buying power. And we monitor its effects both on people and the economy to ensure we’re doing the right thing.

With the number of hungry people rising, not falling, and levels of food aid half of what they were five years ago, now is not the time to place even more limits on donations for the hungry.

On a positive note, global partnerships for development are emerging every day. WFP, UNICEF and the World Bank are talking about a
partnership to address child hunger from all angles. Close to 2,000 non-
governmental organizations are working with us in very practical
partnerships to deliver food. And donations from private individuals and
businesses doubled from 2003 to 2004. Our partnerships with private
firms like TNT, Citibank, the Boston Consulting Group and others are
multiplying and bearing fruit. During the tsunami we learnt just how
valuable their help could be in getting food there fast. Now TNT is also
helping us get food and other essential items to Niger.

In June, President Obasanjo of Nigeria, and Chairman of the African
Union came to our Executive Board meeting. He said two things which
have made an indelible impression on our staff:

First, he recounted a Nigerian proverb, which says, “when you take
hunger out of poverty, poverty is halved.” I hope I’ve convinced you of
that.

He also said, “a hungry man is an angry man.” In an era when we are all
justly preoccupied with security, surely one of the best remedies is to
ensure that no mother’s child must suffer from hunger, and that our
generosity cannot tell the difference between race, religion or politics.