



Remarks by Mr. John M. Powell
Deputy Executive Director
World Food Programme

Population Growth and Rapid Urbanization:
Food Insecurity on the Rise in Urban Settings
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All of us sitting here would like to at least hope that 2009 will be a year in which significant progress will be made in achieving the Millennium Development Goals. This will not be easy. In just one year we have seen food and fuel prices fluctuate radically, markets tighten and collapse, and the effects of climate change take a more direct and more dramatic toll than ever, while humanitarian crises such as Afghanistan, Darfur, the Democratic Republic of Congo, the occupied Palestinian Territory, and Somalia demand urgent and constant attention.

WFP's Governing Body recently adopted a new Strategic Plan that broadens our approach to food assistance. It is predicated on the continuance of high and volatile food prices and climate change as two of the defining issues of our time, with a profound impact on efforts to achieve the MDGs. It makes us an even more versatile partner with our sister agencies – UNDP, UNICEF and UNFPA.

Today we want to focus on one of many relatively new challenges: the rapid growth of urban areas and the “new face” of poverty, hunger and food insecurity confronting people living in those areas. Thoraya Obaid and her colleagues at UNFPA have done a lot of work on these urban population pressures.

Urban areas world-wide are growing by almost 1.3 million people a week – equivalent to a city the size of Munich, or Orlando, Florida. Most of the world's urban population growth occurs in low-income countries; poverty is increasing more rapidly in urban areas than in rural areas. Urban poverty will become increasingly a major challenge for development and for attaining the internationally agreed development goals, including the MDGs.

Yet cities have the potential to provide opportunities for improved nutrition and food security: ideally, they provide easier access to basic services, and to employment and education opportunities. For that potential to become reality, the world needs to prepare for the effects of massive migration to cities. People in urban areas will need access to housing and basic services -- especially health and education -- and adequate access to nutritious food. This requires solid policy at national and sub-national levels, as well as investment in state and municipal capacities to manage the challenges of

urbanization. Kemal Dervis will have more to say on this crucial aspect of strengthening capacity.

Increasing urbanization puts more pressure on land and on agricultural production in rural areas. High food prices have already affected the urban poor, with reports from diverse countries (Kenya, Mali and Vietnam) indicating that large numbers of the urban poor are reducing the quantity and quality of the food they consume, leading to deteriorating nutrition situations. The prolonged global economic crisis will further reduce the purchasing power of the poor, increasing poverty, food insecurity and malnutrition in urban areas.

The background paper provided to you represents the collective view of our agencies. There may be, however, some broader dimensions for your consideration:

First - the food crisis is not over. Rather, it has been overtaken by the financial crisis, diverting our attention from food and hunger issues. The impression that the crisis is subsiding is also conveyed by the fall in food and energy prices at the international level. This, too, is misleading. Food prices are going through an extended period of volatility. The expectation is that they will continue to remain high and volatile for the next few years. There is nothing automatic nor proportionate about lower food prices in global markets being transmitted to local prices. Given these difficulties, the challenge of responding to urbanization has just gotten harder.

Second, there are a billion hungry people in the world - up by 115 million people over the past year or so. These people, many in urban areas, are hungry now, and our response arises from their compelling needs. Food and nutrition problems cannot be postponed. Without adequate food and nutrition at the right time children will be indelibly marked. In thinking about increased urbanization, we all need to be able to respond rapidly to urgent situations in urban settings.

Third, we must avoid building scary scenarios where the hungry are portrayed as dangerous. It is true that hunger and poverty can have destabilizing effects. But our main objective is to help those in need whether it is called humanitarian assistance, development assistance or recovery. It is important to ensure that in responding to urban poverty, hunger and malnutrition, we do not forget those silent tens of millions in faraway places who don't have a voice.

Fourth, in these hard times, we believe that providing food and nutritional assistance can be an important engine of growth, much needed in the global economy. Apart from the moral and humanitarian arguments, there is a strong economic argument to be made for the dramatic and positive impact on productivity and growth of a better nourished and educated population. It is these very arguments that are the least developed. A recent study carried out by ECLAC and WFP has shown that the economic cost of hunger in the Central American region amounts to about 6 per cent of GDP. Surely, this is a number that would attract the attention of any Minister of Finance!!

Fifth, over the last 25 years, the number of climate related disasters has quadrupled. The number of people affected annually by these disasters is over 250 million. Climate related disasters compromise health, nutrition and education. They perpetuate

hunger and poverty, and indeed, jeopardize futures. For example, in Ethiopia and Kenya, two of the world's most drought prone countries, children aged 5 years or less are respectively 36 and 50 per cent more likely to be malnourished if they were born in a drought year. And in Niger, children aged two or less and born in a drought year are 72 per cent more likely to be stunted. Part of the coping strategy of these people is to move to urban areas, yet some of these areas may be vulnerable to climate-related events.

In concluding, let me stress that Government responses and initiatives must be supported by coordinated action among United Nations agencies: we cannot work in isolation. We need to mobilize a wide coalition of actors, engaging governments and city administrators and reaching out to non-governmental and civil society organizations involved in addressing urban poverty; stakeholder participation is crucial to our efforts.

All of this, of course, is aligned with the thrust of the Comprehensive Framework for Action of the SG's High level Task Force on High Food Prices. This afternoon Ann Veneman will be leading a conversation with you on some of these issues.

The bottom line is that all of us need a sharper focus on urbanization and the specific problems faced by the urban hungry and poor. We must recognize the reasons for increasing trends to urbanization, challenges faced by the unregistered nature of urban slums, the high mobility of the populations and their inability to access social services. We must all work together to develop ways to increase capacities related to urban development, in order to support governments at all levels to build appropriate responses that will ensure food and nutrition security for the urban poor.

We look forward to your comments. Thank you.