

How to Feed the World

Below, eight leaders in the fight against hunger offer up food crisis action plans, and long term ideas for how to end famine and bolster farming.

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Gordon Brown

Prime Minister, United Kingdom

Every day, 25,000 people die from hunger-related causes. And when food accounts for more than half a poor family's spending, price rises can be truly devastating for millions living on the edge.

To find solutions to the short- and long-term problems these families face, I recently hosted a meeting of leading experts, scientists, food producers and retailers in Downing Street.

Already the U.K. has pledged £30 million of immediate support to countries hit hardest by food-price inflation, as well as an additional £25 million to boost incomes.

But what the world really needs is fully coordinated and committed action from the international community—a worldwide response to this unfolding catastrophe. Last month, Secretary General Ban Ki-moon announced a task force to address this at the highest levels of the United Nations, and the World Bank has also pledged support. These are important steps. And I have written to the chair of the G8, Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda of Japan, asking him to work with the World Bank, the IMF and the U.N. to produce a plan.

We need an agricultural revolution to boost production in the poorest countries. And new research and support for high-yield and climate-resilient crops, as well as a review of bio-fuels to help us understand their impact on food prices and the environment.

We need to secure rapid IMF and World Bank help for countries suffering from the cost of food imports.

And by the time of the G8 in July, we must have a deal on trade that opens up rich-country markets and cuts subsidies, to help increase food production in poor countries.

We are close to a deal, but it will take real leadership from the G8, the U.N., the EU, the World Bank and the IMF in the coming weeks to secure it.

Robert Zoellick

President, the World Bank Group

For more than 2 billion people today, high food prices are a matter of daily struggle, sacrifice and survival. We estimate that the current food crisis could push 100 million people deeper into poverty. That could mean seven lost years in our efforts to overcome poverty worldwide. Beyond the numbers, it means stolen lives and stunted futures.

Donors must act now to support the World Food Program's call for about \$755 million to meet emergency needs. Without this money, some will starve; there will be more food riots and political instability. For these people, the international system will have failed.

But there is a larger challenge here: overcoming hunger and malnutrition, the underlying cause of death of 3.5 million children each year.

Ministers from more than 150 countries have now endorsed a New Deal for Global Food Policy. We must turn these words into action. A New Deal will require action over the short, medium and long term: support for safety nets such as school feeding, food for work and conditional cash-transfer programs; increased agricultural production; a better understanding of the impact of

biofuels, and action on the trade front to reduce distorting subsidies, hoarding, export bans and trade barriers.

For our part, the World Bank Group is doubling lending for agriculture in Africa to \$800 million this year, creating a rapid-financing facility to provide support to poor and especially fragile countries and looking at how we can use insurance to help farmers manage risks such as drought. With partners, we are working to create a "green revolution" for sub-Saharan Africa, helping countries to boost productivity and smallholder farmers to break the cycle of poverty.

These are all critical issues for international action. But first and foremost, donors must act now to raise some \$755 million. The world can afford this. The poor and hungry cannot.

Jeffrey Sachs

Director, Earth Institute, Columbia University

At the core of the challenge is producing more food to meet the growing world demand, and ensuring that the poor and vulnerable have access to that food.

First, the world should urgently establish a special fund to help the world's poorest farmers, especially in Africa, to gain access to fertilizer, seeds and small-scale irrigation. In many impoverished and hungry places, food output could be doubled or tripled in a couple of growing seasons. All "green revolutions," such as in India in the 1960s, got started with special help for impoverished farmers.

Second, the United States should stop subsidizing the diversion of our corn to ethanol. Similarly, Europe should stop subsidizing the displacement of food crops by oil seeds such as canola for use as biodiesel.

Third, governments around the world should help their farmers to make their crops more resilient to climate shocks, including through the adoption of new techniques for "supplemental" irrigation in rain-fed regions. Financial insurance against crop failures should also be promoted.

Fourth, global research budgets for food production, especially for the tropical and dry-land regions, should be bolstered. There are great hopes for developing drought-resistant crop varieties.

Fifth, the food-exporting countries should avoid or reverse the ban on food exports, which gravely exacerbates the crises in food-importing countries.

Sixth, UNICEF and the World Food Program should be supported so that they can bolster basic nutrition for the extreme poor, refugees, displaced persons, the elderly and the ill, through emergency food aid, school feeding programs and nutritional supplementation.

Joachim Von Braun

Director General, International Food Policy Research Institute, Washington, D.C.

A family in Bangladesh that has \$5 a day typically spends \$3 on food. The recent increase in basic food stuffs—some of which have risen 50 percent—takes \$1.50 of their purchasing power away. The consequence is under-nutrition.

Eight hundred million people in the world were in food deficit before the crisis. Now it is many more. Their reaction is frustration. People in more than 30 countries have protested in the streets.

A triple-action program is needed now. In the short run, developing-country governments should expand food or income transfers and early-childhood nutrition programs for the poorest people—both urban and rural. Countries that do not have such programs in place need to start work-programs for the poor. Donors should expand food-related development aid.

The world needs a grain reserve to calm markets. Trade policy reforms are overdue to create a level playing field for developing-country farmers. Export bans should be stopped. They are hurting other countries, dependent on food imports. Grain-based biofuels distort world food markets. Food-competing biofuels production should be stopped.

Investment in agriculture must increase to address the problem of low supply. Developed-country governments should increase their investment in research that is relevant to productivity on small-scale farms. Developing countries should increase their investments in rural infrastructure and access to seeds and fertilizer for farmers. The amount of money needed for investment is large, because these investments were neglected for long.

This is a global crisis. It needs a coordinated global response by the G8 countries together with the big countries, especially China, India, and Brazil and the United Nations.

Muhammad Yunus

Managing Director, Grameen Bank

All the indications show that the current crisis will not be temporary. Unless firm global actions are taken immediately, the crisis will deepen and expand in other directions.

The rise of oil prices to unprecedented levels, climatic changes intensifying droughts, floods and cyclones, the increasing popularity of biofuels and the depletion of global food reserves have all combined to cause the current food shortage and inflation. A decline in global poverty in large countries like China, India, Indonesia and Bangladesh, which make up nearly half the world population, has led to higher consumption of food grain among newly better-off people, also raising prices. This has hit the poor, and particularly poor children, very hard.

An immediate global action plan should be put into place to secure food supply and financing for needy countries. The idea of creating a global food bank can also be explored seriously. The U.N. secretary-general should lead this effort. U.N. agencies like WFP, FAO, IFAD and UNICEF, multilateral development banks, regional development banks, research groups like the CGIAR and private-sector food-grain companies should be brought in to help prepare and implement the plan. Common goals should be defined so that all can move speedily in the right direction.

Longer-term funding and political direction must be given to encouraging "green revolution"-type technological breakthroughs in agriculture. It is also time that rich countries take the lead in ending trade-distorting agricultural subsidies.

The rise in oil prices has significantly contributed to the rise of food prices. It will continue to do so. We need a solution to this crisis that connects it to oil prices. The oil bill for each country is becoming higher and higher, and with this increase in price, there is less and less money available for food imports.

Given that higher oil prices are a big part of the problem, I propose that each oil-exporting country create a poverty and agriculture fund, contributing a fixed amount (say, \$10) per barrel of oil exported. This will be a small fraction of the windfall gain made from the higher price of oil. This fund would be managed by the founding nation, and would be devoted to overcoming poverty, boosting agricultural research, supporting social entrepreneurship and improving other areas such as health care, employment, women's empowerment, safe drinking water, information technology, soil quality, and education.

Josette Sheeran

Executive Director, United Nations World Food Program

Hunger and malnutrition are on the advance, fueled by aggressively soaring food prices. Many consumers feel the pinch, but for those living on less than a dollar a day it means catastrophe. From Burundi to Haiti to Afghanistan, the poorest of the poor are eating mud cakes and flour that is blue with mold, or skipping meals, sometimes for days. Even before this crisis, there were more hungry and malnourished people than ever—850 million. But now an estimated 100 million more are joining their ranks.

The WFP is the world's frontline hunger force, helping protect up to 90 million people a year from the devastation of hunger. It is as efficient as it is effective—we are proud of our standard-setting 7 percent cap on overhead. But just when the world needs us most, our operations have been hampered: contributions buy 40 percent less food today than they did just 10 months ago. In March, I issued an emergency appeal to world leaders to cover those losses—now set at \$755 million—so we maintain rations for the millions of hungry we reach. We must also raise our base operations budget of \$3.5 billion.

The world is moving boldly to help countries break the cycle of hunger at its root. Many countries, such as Malawi, Senegal and Ghana, have made huge gains against hunger and malnutrition. We are grateful for the generous pledges that are rolling in, but we still have a way to go.

There are also urgent calls to help millions of poor farmers who are planting much less this year because they cannot afford the record-high cost of fertilizer and fuel. When the tsunami of 2004 devastated many millions, the world gave \$12 billion in aid rapidly. I have called this crisis a silent tsunami that knows no borders.

No one wants to be dependent: we must help the hungry help themselves. The WFP has revolutionized food aid to build local capacity through ways such as making 80 percent of our food purchases from farmers in the developing world. We can help get food to those who need it, as we have recently in Myanmar—using the WFP's network of planes, ships, helicopters and, where necessary, donkeys, camels and elephants. But we must also take this as a wake up call to act now to defeat the plague of hunger once and for all.

Jacques Diouf

Director-general, United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization

The FAO has called a summit of world leaders, to be held in Rome from June 3 to 5, to find solutions to this crisis. Most urgently, we need to get seeds and fertilizers to the most vulnerable countries so that they can improve this year's harvest. This will require \$1.7 billion for those countries.

Looking ahead, we need to reverse the distorted trade, aid and investment policies that have slowed agricultural growth in much of the developing world over the past two decades. The time is right because high prices finally make it attractive to invest in farming.

We need to see this emergency not just as a threat to people's lives and livelihoods but as an opportunity for us to make a new start on agriculture and help more than a billion poor farmers make a decent living for themselves and their families.

It means making major investments in agricultural infrastructure in developing countries—irrigation above all, because water control is crucial. More roads, communications and transport and storage facilities will also be required, because farmers will never benefit from higher prices if they cannot bring their produce to market.

A sustained effort to promote agricultural research is required, too.

We cannot afford to pass up the chance we now have to help bring about an agricultural renaissance, improve the lives of hundreds of millions of farmers and plan for the future. To do so would make a new and potentially more disastrous crisis inevitable in the years ahead.

Michael Pollan

Author, "In Defense of Food: An Eater's Manifesto," and "The Omnivore's Dilemma;" Knight Professor of Journalism at UC, Berkeley

The worldwide crisis over food prices is the direct result of the decision, made by the Bush administration in 2006, to begin feeding large quantities of American corn to American automobiles, in the form of ethanol. This fateful decision led to a run-up in corn prices, which in turn led farmers to plant more corn and less soy and wheat—leading to the surge in the price for all grains. But make no mistake: we've created a situation where American SUVs are competing with African eaters for grain. We can see who is winning.

The quickest way to relieve pressure on world food prices would be to cut U.S. subsidies for ethanol and drop import tariffs on Brazilian ethanol. But there are longer-term steps we need to take as well if we are to ensure food for everyone. The other reason grain prices have spiked is that oil prices have spiked, and industrial agriculture has become heavily reliant on fossil fuel—for fertilizer, for pesticide, for processing and transportation. Today it takes 10 calories of fossil-fuel energy to produce one calorie of food energy. We need to reduce the dependence of modern agriculture on oil, an eminently feasible goal—after all, agriculture is the original solar "technology," and sustainable farmers have shown us how we might put our food system back on a foundation of sunlight. For example, when you take cattle off their typical feedlot diet of grain and allow them to eat grass, those hamburgers put less pressure on the prices of both oil and grain.

That brings me to the third, and perhaps least tractable, factor behind the run-up in world grain prices: the growing appetite for meat in places like China and India. Most of the world's grain goes to feed animals, not people, and meat is a very inefficient use for that grain—it takes 10 pounds of grain to make one pound of beef. There would be plenty of grain for everyone if we actually ate it as food and didn't use it to make meat. Reducing world meat consumption—or feeding our food animals differently—would leave more grain for the world's hungry.

It comes down to this: the world's agricultural lands make up a precious and finite resource; we should be using it to grow food for people, not for cars or cattle.

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