

PRESS RELEASE



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Addressing hunger precondition for sustained human development in sub-Saharan Africa, UNDP Report says

Food security must be at centre of continent's development agenda



Nairobi, Kenya, 15 May 2012—Sub-Saharan Africa cannot sustain its present economic resurgence unless it eliminates the hunger that affects nearly a quarter of its people, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) argues in the newly released Africa Human Development Report 2012: *Towards a Food Secure Future*.

“Impressive GDP growth rates in Africa have not translated into the elimination of hunger and malnutrition. Inclusive growth and people-centred approaches to food security are needed,” said UNDP Administrator Helen Clark at the launch today, attended by Kenya’s President Mwai Kibaki.

Arguing that action focused on agriculture alone will not end food insecurity either, the Report calls for new approaches covering multiple sectors; from rural infrastructure to health services, to new forms of social protection and empowering local communities. Ensuring that the poor and vulnerable have greater voice through strengthened local government and civil society groups is also needed to ensure food security for all.

The quickening pace of change and new economic vitality on the continent make this an opportune time for action, the Report says.

Hunger among plenty

“It is a harsh paradox that in a world of food surpluses, hunger and malnutrition remain pervasive on a continent with ample agricultural endowments,” says Tegegnework Gettu, Director of UNDP’s Africa Bureau.

In yet another paradox, sub-Saharan Africa's high rates of economic growth in recent years – some of the fastest in the world – and improvements in life expectancy and schooling have not led to commensurate improvements in food security.

With more than one in four of its 856 million people undernourished, Sub-Saharan Africa remains the world's most food-insecure region. At the moment, more than 15 million people are at risk in the Sahel alone – across the semi-arid belt from Senegal to Chad; and an equal number in the Horn of Africa remain vulnerable after last year's food crisis in Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Somalia.

Hunger and extended periods of malnutrition not only devastate families and communities in the short term, but leave a legacy with future generations which impairs livelihoods and undermines human development.

Food security, as defined by the 1996 world leaders' Food Summit, means that people can consistently access sufficient and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs for an active and healthy life at a price they can afford.

Freedom from hunger enables people to live productive lives and realize their full potential. In turn, higher levels of human development can further improve the availability of food, creating a virtuous cycle for all.

Policies to build food security

“Building a food-secure future for all Africans will only be achieved if efforts span the entire development agenda,” Helen Clark said.

While acknowledging that there are no quick fixes, the report argues that food security can be achieved through immediate action in four critical areas:

Increasing agricultural productivity: With a population projected to exceed two billion sometime after 2050, Sub-Saharan Africa will need to produce substantially more food, while mitigating the stresses which agricultural production places on the environment.

Ending decades of bias against agriculture and women, countries must put into place policies which provide farmers with the inputs, infrastructure, and incentives which will enable them to lift productivity.

Encouraging the innovative and entrepreneurial spirit of Africa's growing youth population to further stimulate rural economies is particularly important.

With two-thirds of working Africans making a living off the land, policies promoting agricultural productivity would stimulate economic growth, pulling people out of poverty through job and income creation, and increasing their capacity to save and invest in the future. This will also enable a more sustainable use of land and water resources.

Such action can make a difference. Ghana became the first Sub-Saharan African country to achieve the Millennium Development Goal One on halving hunger by 2015, partly by focusing on policies which encouraged cocoa farmers to boost output. Malawi transformed a food deficit into a 1.3 million tonne surplus within two years, thanks to a massive seed and fertilizer subsidy programme.

More effective nutrition: Countries must develop coordinated interventions which boost nutrition while expanding access to health services, education, sanitation, and clean water. The report cites research showing that mothers' education is a more powerful factor in explaining lower rates of malnutrition in children than is household income.

In Senegal, coordinated and targeted actions across several ministries, supported by an increased national nutrition budget, helped to lower incidences of malnutrition in children -- from 34 to 20 percent between 1990 and 2005. In Tanzania, through similar efforts, children whose mothers received food supplements in the first three months of their pregnancies completed longer schooling periods.

Building resilience: Getting food from field to table in Sub-Saharan Africa is fraught with risk. Countries should take measures to lower people's and communities' vulnerability to natural disasters and civil conflict, seasonal or volatile changes in food prices, and climate change.

The Report recommends social protection programmes such as crop insurance, employment guarantee schemes, and cash transfers – all of which can shield people from these risks and boost incomes.

Kenya, for instance, has developed a drought insurance scheme which delivers payments to smallholder farmers based on rainfall levels monitored by weather stations. Another example is Mozambique's input trade fairs, which replenish seed stocks among families affected by drought.

Empowerment and social justice: Achieving food security in sub-Saharan Africa will remain out of reach so long as the rural poor, and especially women, who play a major role in food production, do not have more control over their own lives, the Report says.

Ensuring access to land, markets and information is an important step to empowerment. Bridging the gender divide is particularly vital: when women get access to the same inputs as men, yields can rise by more than 20 percent.

Access to technology can play an important role in channeling power to small land-owners by reducing transaction costs and increasing their bargaining power. The Ethiopia Commodity Exchange, for instance, uses text messaging to disseminate price information to farmers, receiving 20,000 calls daily to a hotline which answers their questions.

Access must be coupled with more participation in civic debate. This in turn, must be linked with greater accountability by governments and other organizations.

For too long the face of Africa has been one of dehumanizing hunger. The time for change is long overdue, the Report argues.

“Africa has the knowledge, the technology, and the means to end hunger and food insecurity,” says Tegegnetwork Gettu.

The challenge is large, the time frame is tight, and the investment required is significant, but the potential gains for human development in the region are immense, the Report says.

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