

EDITORIAL

Joining forces against all forms of malnutrition: the role of the SCN



by Alexander Mueller, Chair of the UN Standing Committee on Nutrition

Since World Food Summits 1996 and 2002, world leaders repeatedly committed to alleviate hunger and malnutrition. Despite this, the number of hungry and malnourished people has increased dramatically and is estimated to grow to nearly one billion this year as the economic crisis takes its toll on developing countries.

The brutal outbreak of the food crisis at the beginning of 2008, followed by the financial crisis started over the summer of the same year, forced world leaders to recognize the international community failure in achieving the Millennium Development Goals and more particularly MDG1, which aims to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger.

What should be done to reverse rapidly and steadily the trend of increased hunger, malnutrition and poverty?

First, global crisis should have global responses. In July 2008, G8 leaders met at Hokkaido and endorsed the proposal for a *Global Partnership on Agriculture and Food Security*. In January 2009, in occasion of Madrid High Level Meeting "Food Security for All", the partnership was renamed *Global partnership on Agriculture, Food Security and Nutrition*. This reflects the growing awareness and consensus that unless all sectors and institutions join forces to provide the necessary support and protection to the most vulnerable households, no effective progress will be made, thus generating unacceptable social and economic costs .

Second, the world community required that the global partnership be built on existing mechanisms, rather than create further partnerships which would only create duplications and dispersal of previous initiatives' efforts. Such mechanisms will be reformed so as to adequately respond to the requirements of the global partnership.

The Standing Committee on Nutrition of the UN System (SCN), which I have presently the honour of chairing, was created in 1977 and is the oldest coordination mechanism within the UN system. Its secretariat is presently hosted by WHO in Geneva. The SCN allows UN agencies, Bilateral Partners and NGOs/CSOs to come together to exchange information, harmonise approaches and discuss nutrition related issues. Our mandate is to promote cooperation among UN agencies and partner organizations in support of community, national, regional, and international efforts to end malnutrition in all of its forms in this generation. We are therefore in a unique position to contribute to the global partnership.

At its 2007 annual session in Rome, the SCN agreed to provide technical advice to the **REACH: Ending Child Hunger and Undernutrition** Initiative which was eventually endorsed in 2008 by the heads of agencies of FAO, WHO, UNICEF and WFP and is geared to support countries in accelerating progress towards the achievement of Millennium Development Goal 1. The REACH core-team which is based in WFP Headquarters includes representatives of the different UN agencies and partner institutions. The REACH approach is being successfully piloted in Laos and Mauritania with the support of the Boston Consulting Group.

The need for joint country programming to fight malnutrition was also recognised by donors as both a priority and an opportunity for increased aid effectiveness. I would like to express our appreciation to the Spanish government who has committed funds to UN Country Teams for 24 major nutrition projects in Africa, Asia, Europe and Latin America.

And last but not least, I would like to thank the **International Alliance Against Hunger (IAAH)** for providing space for such a key topic at the time the UN Conference on the World Financial and Economic Crisis is meeting in New York. We believe the International Alliance, but above all the National Alliances have a key role to play in encouraging and informing partnerships at country level and in undertaking joint advocacy at global and national level towards the eradication of hunger and malnutrition.

The European Commission will host in late September a strategic meeting of the SCN which will focus on political commitment and coordination. We expect this will provide a milestone in the fight against malnutrition and an opportunity for finally bringing this joint work at the forefront of the international agenda.