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## SUMMARY AND PRIORITIES FOR ACTION

*“The situation for many children in Africa is an affront to Africa and Africans, their morality and conscience, and above all to the sense of worth and self-respect of all African governments. The alarming and deteriorating situation of children in many countries is of compelling urgency and deserves overriding priority on the public and political agenda.”*

**~ The African Child Policy Forum, 2008**

### 6.1 Progress and challenges

Africa has often been characterised as a continent of false starts and painfully slow progress. This is largely true in far too many countries. But Africa has in recent years also seen considerable, and sometimes impressive, progress in various domains – something all too often forgotten among the stories of doom and gloom. A number of countries have witnessed improvements in governance and economic growth.

African governments have ratified most of the relevant international and regional human rights instruments and made encouraging progress in domesticating them. A number of countries have harmonised or are in the process of harmonising their national laws with the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, and other major international instruments concerned with the protection of children and their rights. There are an undocumented but surprisingly large number of exciting good practices in a large number of countries aimed at, for example, Africanising the law on children; reconciling universal values embedded in international instruments with African customs, attitudes and practices; and implementing the socio-economic rights of children even in wider contexts of poverty and scarce resources.

There have also been impressive and encouraging results in past years in reducing the prevalence of diseases. Immunisation coverage has improved considerably in a number of countries. Polio is on the verge of eradication, and campaigns to roll back malaria have shown considerable progress. Government commitment in many countries has enabled free access to ART drugs for the treatment of HIV. A four-fold increase in vitamin A supplementation has been achieved in recent years on the continent, and many countries have managed significantly to reduce infant mortality as a result.

Overall, there has been progress in ensuring access to education for children of primary school age. Some countries have achieved near universal primary enrolment, while others have made progress in reaching marginalised and vulnerable children through innovative alternative basic education programmes.

Despite these impressive achievements, the state of child wellbeing in Africa, on balance, remains disturbing, for the following reasons:

- The economies of most African countries remain characterised by highly skewed income distribution and absolute poverty, thus condemning families and children to abject poverty and limiting the capacity of governments to act.
- Armed conflicts and conflagrations are less frequent, but they are no less intense than in the past. They continue to afflict several countries – for example, Sudan.
- Under-five mortality remains high. About 60 per cent of under-five mortality in some parts of Africa is still attributed to malnutrition, despite a modest decline in the number of malnourished children in recent years.
- Millions of children have no access to basic services. A considerable number of children and mothers have no access to essential health and education services. As a result, each year millions are stillborn, or die on their first day, or in their first month of life.
- Many countries are faced with a huge and growing number of orphaned children. For example, orphans will equal or exceed 20 per cent of the child population in Botswana, Lesotho, Swaziland, Zambia and Zimbabwe by 2010. It is estimated that there are 4.2 million orphans in DRC, 4.8 million in Ethiopia, and a staggering 8.6 million in Nigeria.
- Some estimates suggest that one third of two- to nine-year-old children in some countries live with some form of disability. Despite these enormous numbers, children with disabilities – seldom mentioned in policy discussions – remain hidden and invisible.
- Violence against children is a pervasive problem. Millions of children are subjected to harmful traditional practices, including female genital cutting and early marriage. Thousands are victims of war, sometimes as targets and at other times as instruments of war. Many more are subjected to daily and incessant violence, including rape and harassment, at home, at school and in their communities.
- Despite the universal recognition of education as a human right and as the key to personal growth and societal development, nearly a third of children of primary school age in sub-Saharan Africa do not go to school.

In short, despite some progress over the last few decades, life for millions of Africa's children remains short, poor, insecure and violent. The situation of these children is an affront to Africa and Africans; to their morality and conscience; and, above all, to the sense of worth and self-respect of all African governments. The alarming and deteriorating situation of children in many countries is of compelling urgency and deserves overriding priority on the public and political agenda.

Despite some progress, life for millions of Africa's children remains short, poor, insecure and violent

## 6.2 The importance of a two-pronged approach to public policy

A major starting point for action is a genuine political commitment to the progressive realisation of the rights and wellbeing of children – a commitment that goes well beyond the ritual statements about love for children. This necessitates political will on the part of governments to committing political, legal and financial capital to realising children's rights and ensuring their protection. In general, this is reflected by:

- The establishment of a solid legal and policy foundation based on the principle of the best interests of the child
- Ensuring budgetary commitment to meet the basic needs of all children
- Demonstration of respect for the voices and views of children, and encouragement of their participation in decisions that affect their wellbeing.

So, then, how well are African countries faring in this respect? What are the ingredients of success? And, finally, what can governments that are not doing so well do to bring about better lives for their children?

The Child-friendliness Index of African governments showed that the governments that emerged on top – **Mauritius, Namibia, Tunisia, Libya, Morocco, Kenya, South Africa, Malawi, Algeria and Cape Verde** – did so for one important reason: they followed a two-pronged approach. Firstly, they put in place appropriate legal provisions to protect children from abuse and protection. Secondly, they spent a relatively high share of their resources on providing for the basic needs of their children. Children in many of these countries were better provided for, particularly in terms of access to health and education services. For example, immunisation against measles in Mauritius, Tunisia, Libya and Morocco was almost universal, and enrolment of children (both boys and girls alike) was very high at all levels of education. Survival rates, as measured by infant mortality rate and children's nutritional status, were relatively high in these countries; and they also demonstrated significant commitment to reducing gender disparity, particularly in education.

Child-friendly governments followed a two-pronged approach: effective laws and child-centred budgets

On the other hand, in the ten countries whose governments scored as least child-friendly – **Guinea-Bissau, Eritrea, Central African Republic, Gambia, São Tomé and Príncipe, Liberia, Chad, Swaziland, Guinea and Comoros** – both the nature of the actions taken and the outcomes in terms of children's wellbeing were sharply different.

Let's look more closely at the policy mix in Guinea-Bissau, Eritrea and Central African Republic, the three countries whose governments scored worst on the Child-friendliness Index. The assessment showed that Guinea-Bissau and Central African Republic in particular made least effort in the legal and policy spheres to ensure adequate protection for their children: their national laws did not provide adequate legal protection, particularly from harmful traditional practices. For example, the government of Central African Republic ratified only three of the eight relevant international and regional legal instruments, has no policy for free primary education, and does not prohibit corporal punishment. In Guinea-Bissau, the minimum legal age for marriage is 14 for girls and 16 for boys. The lack of legal provisions to protect children from harmful traditional practices, the very low and discriminatory minimum age for marriage, and the absence of child-sensitive juvenile justice systems are some of the shortfalls that contributed to these governments' low performance scores, particularly in relation to child protection. Going

beyond the legal sphere, it should also be pointed out that these two countries scored poorly in providing for children's basic needs. For example, government expenditure on health as a percentage of total government expenditure was only 3.5 per cent in Guinea-Bissau compared with a median average of nine per cent for the region, and expenditure on education as a percentage of GDP was 1.4 per cent in Central African Republic compared with the median average of 4.3 per cent for the region.

Eritrea, the country that scored the second lowest in the Child-friendliness Index, performed relatively better in the legal and policy spheres, and achieved significant reduction in infant mortality compared to Guinea-Bissau and Central African Republic. However, along with Central African Republic, it scored the lowest in terms of budgetary commitment and child-related outcomes. Eritrea has the lowest percentage of its population with access to adequate sanitation; as of 2004, only nine per cent of its population had access to such facilities. In addition, very high levels of malnutrition, relatively low rates of participation in education (particularly among girls), and extremely high levels of military spending (which in 2004-2005 stood at 19.3 per cent of GDP, by far the highest in the continent) were some of the factors contributing to Eritrea's poor performance in the overall measure of child-friendliness.

A significant point that emerges in this study is the reaffirmation of the critical importance of political will. The findings in this report show that national effort and commitment to the cause of children is not necessarily related to a country's national income or level of development. The Child-friendliness Index indicates that the governments of Malawi, Kenya, Rwanda and Burkina Faso are among the top twelve countries that have made the greatest effort to lay foundations for the protection of their children and to provide for their basic needs and wellbeing, despite their relatively low GDPs. On the other hand, relatively wealthy countries with high GDP – Equatorial Guinea and Angola, for example – are not investing enough resources in ensuring child wellbeing, and so have not scored well, coming out 38th and 35th respectively in the Child-friendliness Index rankings. The availability of resources alone is therefore not necessarily the determining factor in how well governments provide for their children's basic needs and wellbeing. Indeed, the index strongly confirms the fact that governments with relatively low GDP can still have high performance scores for their efforts in realising child rights and wellbeing.

National effort  
is not necessarily related to  
economic status

### Budgetary policy and children

Political  
commitments MUST be backed  
up with budgetary responses

It is clear from the above analysis that appropriate budgeting is key for the realisation of child rights and wellbeing. The problem of the huge gap between international pledges and undertakings and national action on the ground is the failure of governments to back their political commitments with commensurate budgetary resources.

One important area of special concern in this regard is health, inclusive of nutrition, water and sanitation. If there is one area of action for the highest priority in terms of children's wellbeing in Africa, it is health – preventing the needless deaths of close to five million children every year, and reaching out to the 28 per cent of sub-Saharan African children who are underweight and undernourished, through access to improved nutrition, water and sanitation.

Limited state commitment, including budgetary commitment, is an important factor in the failure of Africa's health systems. Two-thirds of the survival challenges facing Africa's children could be prevented with small increases in healthcare investment. Increasing the

coverage of essential interventions to 90 per cent could save the lives of up to 800,000 newborns in Africa every year.

The health of children is very much linked to their nutrition, and, as noted above, poor nutrition and hunger are particularly serious problems in the region. Yet in spite of the fact that malnutrition can be dealt with for less than US\$ 20 per child per year, expenditure on nutrition is not given political attention, in part because investment in nutrition is not as tangible and has less immediate political relevance than capital projects such as schools and health centres. Its benefits in terms of saved and improved lives, however, are no less significant. Growth in productivity and GDP does not automatically translate into improved nutrition given the nature of growth and the inequalities in income in many African countries. Direct action is needed, although how this is to be done is a complex question deserving further investigation. Even so, governments should consider various types of interventions, including the introduction of school feeding programmes and innovative social security schemes catering for the poorest families.

The upshot of this discussion is that perhaps the most important measure of judging whether or not a government is serious about its children and its international commitments is to look at the proportion of the budget that goes to public health. As can be seen in Annex 3, Table A3.7, national expenditures on health vary considerably between governments. Median expenditure for health was nine per cent of the total government expenditure; the Government of Malawi was by far the most committed, having allocated the highest proportion (about 29 per cent) of its total expenditure to health-related programmes. Second was the Government of Liberia, which directed an impressive 20 per cent of its total expenditure to similar programmes. At the other end of the scale, the Government of Burundi committed the least spending to health, at a paltry 2.3 per cent of its overall budget.

The empirical lesson that emerges from this analysis is that governments committed to combating infant mortality, saving their children from avoidable deaths and combating HIV/AIDS – including through the provision of ART – must aim to raise their budget allocation to health to as high as 20 per cent of the total government expenditure.

Budgetary expenditure on health should be raised to as high as 20% of total government expenditure

Governments with very low proportions of health expenditure should aim, as a first step, to allocate at least nine per cent of their total expenditure to the sector, which is the median value for the region. The minimum proposed is even less than what African governments pledged in Abuja in 2001 – to increase their healthcare spending to at least 15 per cent of their annual budgets. These targets are not unattainable. They are achieved by many, and significantly bypassed by some: the proportion of the budgetary expenditure that went to health was over 9 per cent in several countries – 9.1 per cent in Mozambique, 9.4 per cent in Ethiopia, 9.5 per cent in Chad, 9.8 per cent in both Mauritius and Senegal, 9.8 per cent in Benin and 10 per cent in Uganda. These are respectable figures, regionally, but there are even more impressive cases at the higher end of the spectrum. The prize for the top investors on children's health is taken paradoxically – and reassuringly – by four low-income countries: Burkina Faso at 15.3 per cent, Rwanda at 16.5 per cent, Liberia at 20.1 per cent and Malawi at 28.8 per cent.

The other important area of concern for governments is education. As with health, the data on expenditure on education varies markedly by country. It ranges from 0.6 per cent of GDP spent by the Government of Equatorial Guinea, to 13.4 per cent spent by the Government of Lesotho. Median expenditure on education for 2003-2006 was 4.3 per cent of GDP. Those with the lowest expenditure ratio – less than two per cent – included Central African Republic, Chad, Congo (Brazzaville), Equatorial Guinea and Guinea; top investors

on the education of their children included Lesotho at 13 per cent of GDP, Botswana at 9.7 per cent, Djibouti at 8.4 per cent, Tunisia at 7.3 per cent, and Namibia at 6.9 per cent. The policy conclusion therefore is that countries committed to education should aim at raising the proportion of GDP that goes to education to as high as 13 per cent. Governments with lowest proportion of expenditure on education should raise it to at least 4.3 per cent of their GDP – the regional median.

Proportion  
of GDP that goes to  
education should be as high as  
13 per cent of GDP

Budgetary instruments are not the only governmental means of enhancing school enrolment. There has been progress towards achieving education for all in countries that have taken direct action – for example, by abolishing school fees. When Kenya removed user fees on primary schooling in 2003, about 1.3 million children enrolled for the first time. In Tanzania, net enrolment ratio for girls increased from 58 per cent in 1999/2000 to 85 per cent in 2004, and in Zambia from 65 per cent to 80 per cent. Countries like Seychelles, Uganda, Algeria and Tunisia have achieved a figure of nearly 100 per cent net enrolment ratio. Malawi has achieved a 98 per cent net enrolment ratio for girls and 93 per cent for boys in 2004. This is not to say that these countries do not have other problems: some countries with high net enrolment ratios also have some of the highest dropout rates. Three out of four primary students in Uganda and Chad drop out, bringing the percentage of students who remain until the last grade of primary school to 25 and 26 per cent, respectively. In Benin, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritania, Mozambique and Rwanda, at least every second child starting primary school drops out before completion. Gender disparity in access to education is also evident in most countries. In many cases, governments focus on primary rather than secondary education. As a result, a large proportion of youths, particularly girls, are unable to pursue secondary education. Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) is below 20 per cent in 11 of the 49 countries for which data was available, and below 50 per cent in 39 countries. Burkina Faso, Burundi, Chad, Madagascar, Mozambique, Niger, Rwanda and Tanzania stand out as having the lowest GERs for secondary education. Quality of education is also lamentably low in most African countries, exacerbating the problem of dropping out, because of the high opportunity cost of schooling and limited future employability of skills.

In conclusion, although there are numerous challenges, this report has shown that they are not insurmountable. Action is possible and success achievable. A number of African countries have shown the significant progress that can be made with the application of pro-poor and pro-children budgetary policies.

Governments must ask themselves: Are we doing enough to serve the needs of our children and young people – who constitute some 50 per cent of the population? Are we allocating enough of our budget for the benefit of children, even if it may not necessarily be commensurate with their numbers and relative proportion? These are fundamental questions in public policy, the answers to which mirror the extent to which governments are committed to children.

Efficient utilisation of  
resources and proper targeting  
are equally relevant

It should also be observed that efficiency in the utilisation of resources matters in effecting positive changes on children. For example, there are countries that are ranked high for budgetary commitment, but which have scored low on child-related outcomes; on the other hand, there are countries ranked low as far as budgetary commitments are concerned, but ranked high on child-related outcomes. All this confirms that allocating more resources to, say, education or health will not automatically yield positive child outcomes: such allocation must be accompanied by efficiency in the utilisation of resources and proper targeting of needy children and families.

## The legal protection of children

Legal and policy instruments provide the critical link between rights and duties, and are key in ensuring children's wellbeing. There has been considerable progress in Africa in the adoption of legal instruments for the protection of children. Many countries have harmonised, or are in the process of harmonising, their national laws with international law and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child. For example, countries such as Mauritius, Nigeria, Tunisia, Mauritania, Equatorial Guinea and Djibouti have established appropriate minimum ages across their legal systems that are consistent with the internationally recommended ages, and have legal systems that consider boys and girls equally, without discrimination. Other nations, however, such as Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Egypt, São Tomé and Príncipe and Seychelles, have yet to address the issue of discriminatory minimum ages between boys and girls in respect of marriage.

Another illustrative and important issue is the minimum age for criminal responsibility. About two-thirds of African countries have set a minimum age that is equal to or higher than the internationally recommended minimum age of 12 years. However, eight African countries have minimum ages for criminal liability of between eight and ten years. Worse still, Egypt, Gambia, Lesotho, Malawi, Namibia, Seychelles, South Africa, Sudan, Swaziland, and Zimbabwe have set the age of criminal responsibility at seven years.

In more than one-fourth of African countries, harmful traditional practices are not legally prohibited, thus creating a favourable climate for their wide prevalence and practice. In more than half of the African countries, corporal punishment is not prohibited in schools and in penal systems. National laws in a third of the countries surveyed do not provide protection against child trafficking. Clearly this is not a legal environment that is conducive to child wellbeing.

In almost all of Africa, there is thus still a long way to go in terms of enacting appropriate legislation and establishing the institutional framework and capacity for effective enforcement and implementation of measures that will ensure child wellbeing. Two specific measures should be taken concerning the legal protection of children.

Firstly, countries should aim at a comprehensive and systematic review of their national laws; they should identify gaps and improvements that need to be made, both to ensure that they are in harmony with international standards and to facilitate and expedite effective legal protection; and they should fill those gaps and make those changes.

Countries  
should harmonise and  
enforce national legislation

Secondly, they should look to strengthening government implementation, monitoring and enforcement bodies. The existence of such bodies is necessary for the effective formulation and implementation of policies and laws, but it is one of the areas where most African governments are badly lacking.

A large number of countries in Africa, no fewer than 20, have established national human rights commissions and institutions. In addition, over 10 African constitutions provide for ombudspersons or public protectors, and an impressive 45 countries provide for an independent judiciary in their constitutions (Sloth-Nielsen 2007b). These institutions do fulfil one of the indicators of good practice. Despite this, it is common knowledge that the degree of their success is limited. Such bodies are usually weak politically and poorly resourced. They must be strengthened politically, technically and financially: they are essential for effective policy formulation and for ensuring that the rights of children are kept at the heart of the public agenda, and addressed both in law and in practice.

### **Box 6.1 Ten things the law should say and do**

In reviewing national laws in the context of international law, here are ten things the law should say and do as a minimum:

1. Adopt a standard definition of a child as any person below the age of eighteen
2. Ensure that universal access to primary healthcare is enshrined in national law and is progressively realised
3. Ensure that universal, free and compulsory primary education is enshrined in law, and that progressive access and completion of secondary education is provided for
4. Repeal all provisions that discriminate children, particularly on the grounds of parentage, sex, disability, religion, ethnicity and others
5. Raise the minimum age of criminal responsibility to at least 12
6. Prohibit corporal punishment in homes, schools or any other institutions
7. Prohibit harmful traditional practices such as female genital cutting and early marriage
8. Develop legislative provisions for the protection of orphaned and vulnerable children
9. Ensure that the child justice administration serves the best interests of the child
10. Articulate the methods of enforcement and implementation of the law

### **6.3 Priorities for action**

As the experience of child-friendly governments has shown, the major instruments for effective action for improved child wellbeing are a policy of child budgeting that gives a first call to children, and the adoption and implementation of effective laws and policies. More specifically, poorly performing countries should undertake the following actions on a priority basis.

**Firstly**, the best way of combating child death is to improve and expand access to primary health care, nutrition and improved water and sanitation, and therefore to increase the budget allocated to public health. It is proposed that countries increase the budgets they allocate to health progressively to as high as 20 per cent, which some countries – Liberia and Malawi, for example – have already achieved. Some governments might need urgently and substantially to reduce their military spending in order to free up the resources necessary to accomplish this level of healthcare investment.

**Secondly**, education: the rapid expansion of education is evidently necessary, not only for children themselves, but as a condition for Africa's economic success and prosperity and its effective participation in the global economy. The emerging policy conclusion from this report is that countries committed to education should aim at raising the proportion of GDP that goes to education to as high as 13 per cent, as has already been achieved by some child-friendly governments. A range of actions is also needed to improve the quality of education across the region.

**Thirdly**, the growing orphan population (caused largely by the HIV/AIDS pandemic) is a cause for serious concern. For children, the best form of protection is to have their

parents around for as long as possible. Given the limited impact of preventive measures and their inapplicability to parents who are already infected, governments should expend the maximum effort to make ART widely available, at the same time designing measures that can improve the legal and social protection for those that are already, or likely to be, orphaned from any cause.

**Fourthly**, there should be zero tolerance for violence, especially against children, and there should be concrete action against such violence. The place to start is the adoption of legal provisions that: (i) prohibit corporal punishment at home and at school; (ii) prohibit early marriage; and (iii) prohibit and criminalise female genital cutting. In addition, governments should implement a public education programme that promotes respect for the rights and dignity of all children, boys and girls alike.

**Fifthly**, laws. Laws are the bricks and mortar of all efforts aimed at the realisation of child rights. Countries should strengthen their legal capacity to fight child abuse, violence and exploitation, and to ensure respect for the rights and wellbeing of children. This calls for harmonisation of national legislations with the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child. Special attention should be given to addressing the common shortcomings of most national laws, especially through the adoption of a standard definition of a child, reviewing of the ages of sexual consent and marriage, elimination of discriminatory treatment of boys and girls, raising of the minimum age of criminal responsibility, prohibition of corporal punishment, and reform of child justice administration in favour of children's best interests.

**Sixthly**, given the hidden and extensive nature of the needs of children with disabilities, governments should address their needs, through legal and inclusive socio-economic policies and programmes. Governments should try to document the issue of providing for children with disabilities and make it visible, then implement policies and programmes that facilitate the full participation of children with disabilities in society, schools and – when they become adults – in the world of work.

**Finally**, advocacy and political pressure. The African Union (AU) is emerging as a major actor in the continent's transformation. The effort it has been putting into resolving conflicts and bringing about economic and political transformation throughout the continent is paying off, as peace slowly returns to many African countries, authoritarian structures give way to more pluralistic regimes, and buoyant economic growth becomes the norm in many countries of the continent. With various organs and programmes like NEPAD, the Pan-African Parliament, the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, the African Court of Human Rights and other institutions at its disposal, the AU is well poised to be an agent of empowerment of citizens and political and economic transformation. It enjoys the political legitimacy required to ensure that states respect and protect children's rights, and that they fulfil their needs as stipulated in the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, the UNCRC, the ACRWC, and other African rights instruments. With the moral and political standing at its command, the AU has a duty to use its leverage to make states accountable to their citizens.

Complementary to all of these measures, Africa needs a vibrant civil society that can engage constructively with states and hold them accountable for their behaviour and actions. For example, The Africa-wide Movement for Children, which was launched on May 11th 2008 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia (See Appendix 4), would be an initiative able to put pressure on states to live up to their obligations vis-à-vis children. Such initiatives can also support and reinforce the efforts of the AU and its various organs to apply pressure on states to ensure that they live up to their obligations, especially in regard to children.

### **Box 6.2 Six major issues and action points**

The major problems facing most African countries are:

- Too many children dying from avoidable diseases
- A large number of children, especially girls denied of education
- The existence of a huge and growing orphan population, and the emerging problem of child-headed households
- The unacknowledged but ubiquitous phenomenon of violence against children
- A hidden but very large population of children with disabilities
- Inadequate protection for children, arising in part from the incompatibility between national laws and international legal standards.

Steps that need to be taken by countries:

- Combating child death by expanding access to public health and related services, by increasing the budget allocated to public health to as high as 20 per cent of the total government expenditure
- Raising the proportion of GDP that goes to education to as high as 13 per cent, as has already been done by some child-friendly governments on the continent
- Addressing the problem of orphanhood by making the maximum effort to make ART widely available
- Instituting a policy of zero tolerance for violence against children by adopting legal provisions that prohibit corporal punishment, and criminalising early marriage and female genital cutting
- Protecting vulnerable children, especially those with disabilities, both through legal and inclusive socio-economic policies and programmes
- Harmonising national laws with international law, and strengthening enforcement.

## POSTSCRIPT

# THE GLOBAL FOOD CRISIS AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR CHILD WELLBEING IN AFRICA

### A 'SILENT TSUNAMI' IN THE MAKING

A little more than three decades ago, wrenching images of emaciated children in Ethiopia taught the world a painful lesson about the tragedy of starvation. Worsened by the current global food crisis, hunger continues to haunt much of Africa, robbing villages of children and plunging human beings into extreme despair.

During the first three months of 2008, international nominal prices of all major food commodities reached their highest levels in nearly 50 years, and prices in real terms were the highest in nearly 30 years. The price of vegetable oils increased on average by more than 97 per cent during the first month of 2008, followed by the price of grains, which rose 87 per cent; dairy products, which rose 58 per cent; and rice, which rose 46 per cent (FAO 2008a). This resulted in a crisis situation, what the World Food Programme calls a "silent tsunami", which at the time of writing is threatening to plunge more than 100 million people on every continent into hunger (WFP 2008).

The crisis has affected nearly every country in the world. It has had an ominous snowball effect - one that eventually brought down a prime minister in Haiti, made more children in Mauritania go to bed hungry, and forced the Egyptian army to bake bread for the general population.

Sub-Saharan Africa is one of those regions most vulnerable to the adverse effects of the current food crisis. The region contains 20 of the 36 countries seen as most vulnerable to the adverse impacts of soaring world food prices (Reuters 2008).

### WHAT ARE THE CAUSAL FACTORS?

Both supply and demand factors are to blame for recent surges in the price of food. A critical trigger factor has been the decline in the production of cereals due to more intense and increasingly frequent weather disasters and other phenomena. Climate change is causing a loss of agricultural land, irreversible in some cases, as a result of droughts, floods, storms and erosion (Falksohn et al. 2008). Experts predict that climate change could eventually cause as much as a 30 per cent reduction in Africa's agricultural productivity (Oxfam America 2008).

In 2005 and 2006, production of cereals declined annually by four and seven per cent respectively in major exporting countries. The gradual reduction in the level of cereal stocks since the mid-1990s is another supply side factor that has had a significant impact on markets recently (FAO 2008a). By the close of 2008, world cereal stocks are expected to decline a further five per cent from their already reduced level at the start of the season, reaching their lowest levels in 25 years.

The increases in fuel prices have also raised the costs of producing and transporting agricultural commodities. For example, US dollar prices of some fertilisers increased by more than 160 per cent in the first two months of 2008 compared to the same period

in 2007. Along with fertiliser costs, higher energy prices contributed to about 15 per cent of recent increases in food production prices (PREM, ARD and DEC 2008). Freight rates doubled within a one-year period beginning in February 2006, affecting the cost of transporting food to importing countries (FAO 2008a). As of May 2008, the price of fuel had hit a record high of USD 135 a barrel, with the impact of such prices felt acutely by consumers and businesses alike (BBC News 2008).

The rise in fuel prices has also unleashed another important factor: the diversion of crops to production of biofuels. The switch to biofuels – which are derived from plants that require agricultural land for their production – has boosted food prices yet further, reduced the supply of the crops available for food, and encouraged the conversion of large amounts of agricultural land from production of food to production of biofuel (Hennigan 2008). Some sources estimate that 65 per cent of the recent rise in food prices has been due to the biofuels industry and factors related to its rapid increase in demand for inputs (Mitchell 2008 cited in FAO 2008a).

Commodities, which have predominantly been used as food and/or feed, are now being grown as raw material (feedstock) for producing biofuels (FAO 2008a). The result is that many people around the globe who are anxious about filling their gas tanks are competing with others elsewhere in the world who are struggling to fill their stomachs (World Bank 2008). It is said that 232 kg of corn, sufficient to feed a child for a year, is needed to make 50 litres of bioethanol (Finfacts 2008a). According to IFPRI, there are some 2.4 million more malnourished pre-schoolers in developing countries in 2008 due to the impact of the biofuels industry. Current research suggests that 390,000 additional children under the age of five will die because of this increase in malnutrition due to biofuels. If current biofuel development trends continue, child deaths will rise to 475,000 by 2010 (Senauer 2008).

Further complicating the situation, the demand for biofuels in a world of rising oil prices is also luring poor African countries into making imprudent choices in the name of attracting foreign investment. For instance, in Tanzania, thousands of farmers growing rice and maize are being evicted from fertile areas of land with good access to water, in order to establish biofuel sugar cane and jatropha plantations on newly privatised land. Millions of hectares in Ethiopia have been identified as suitable for biofuel production, and many foreign companies have already been allocated land from farmland, forests and wilderness areas (Hennig 2008). In other countries, such as Kenya, farmland that used to grow food for domestic consumption now grows luxuries for the north, such as cut flowers (Angus 2008).

The other reason cited for the current food price hike is the changing structure of food demand, especially in prospering Asian economies. Diversifying diet patterns are moving away from starchy foods and towards more meat and dairy products, intensifying demand for feed grains and strengthening the linkages among different food commodities (FAO 2008a). For instance, China has accounted for up to 40 per cent of the increase in global consumption of soybeans and meat over the past decade (Hennigan 2008). It is worth noting that seven kilos of grain are necessary to produce a kilo of meat (Kurata 2008).

There is also a view that attributes the current crisis to more profound structural factors than just a circumstantial scarcity of food. Proponents of this view say that hunger and malnourishment are the results of an international economic order that maintains and deepens poverty, inequality and injustice (Ventura 2008). They argue that there is enough food in the world for all its inhabitants. According to this argument, the problem is one of inequitable distribution of the globally available food. If food was distributed equitably around the world, enough would be available for everyone to consume an average of 2,760 calories a day (World Ecology Report 2005 cited in UNEDESA 2005). As of 2006, there were

800 million people in the world who were hungry, but they were outnumbered by a billion people who were overweight (Wilson 2008). The world's 200 wealthiest people have as much money as about 40 per cent of the global population, and yet 850 million people go to bed hungry every night (Falksohn et al. 2008).

The other argument forwarded along these lines centres around the refusal of developed countries to eliminate their agricultural subsidies, while imposing their rules of international trade on the rest of the world. A very small number of trans-national corporations hold the power to set prices, monopolise technologies, impose unfair certification processes on trade, and manipulate distribution channels, sources of financing, trade and supplies for the production of food worldwide. They also control transportation, scientific research, gene banks and the production of fertilisers and pesticides (Ventura 2008). A combination of unfair trade agreements, concentrated ownership of major food production, and dominance of international trade through control and influence in institutions such as the World Bank, IMF and the WTO, has meant that poor countries have seen their ability to determine their own food security policies severely undermined (Shah 2008).

Finally, as an additional compounding factor, some of the policy measures taken to reduce the impact of higher prices on vulnerable consumers, such as export bans and increased export taxes, have themselves exacerbated the short-term volatility of international prices (FAO 2008a).

### **HOW ARE CHILDREN AFFECTED?**

At the macro level, the rise in food prices has contributed to a deepening of poverty in a number of countries in Africa. Deepening poverty nearly always has a disproportionate impact on children. In six of eight countries considered in a study that analysed the impacts of higher prices of key staple foods on poverty, it was found that price increases for food between 2005 and 2007 increased poverty by three percentage points on average (PREM, ARD and DEC 2008). The World Bank estimates that doubling of food prices over the last three years could potentially push 100 million people in low-income countries deeper into poverty (World Bank 2008). As food is no longer the cheap commodity that it used to be, food imports are likely to cost four times as much by the end of 2008 as they did in 2000 (FAO 2008b).

The African continent is a net importer of cereals (FAO 2008a). One study showed that a 10 per cent increase in the prices of imported goods raises poverty by 1.8 percentage points (Ivanic and Martin 2008). Of the 19 countries that have large budget deficits and predicted growth of bills for cereal imports of greater than one per cent, 11 have greater than 20 per cent undernourishment rates. This means that more than one out of every five persons fails to consume the minimum calorie requirement necessary to maintain good health under light activity. Of the seven most vulnerable countries, four have undernourishment rates of 29 per cent or higher (FAO 2008a).

A new rank of poor people is being created by the food crisis. For instance, increasing the price of maize by ten per cent would raise poverty in Zambia and Malawi, where both urban and rural households are net buyers, by 0.8 and 0.5 per cent respectively in rural areas, 0.2 and 0.3 per cent in urban areas, and 0.5 per cent nationwide for both countries (Ivanic and Martin 2008). The least developed countries, with high levels of poverty and food insecurity and large population groups, have households that spend 70-80 per cent of their income on food (FAO 2008a). In the short run, those food buyers, in the cities and in the rural areas (including the poorest rural households, which are predominantly net food buyers), will be the most adversely affected. The poorest

expenditure quintiles are worst affected in both urban and rural areas across the board (FAO 2008a).

The high dependence on imports of petroleum products (100 per cent in most countries) – and, in many cases, on imports of major grains (rice, wheat and maize) for domestic consumption – is exacerbating the predicaments of these countries and deepening poverty. For instance, on a full-year basis, rises in oil prices will increase Ethiopia's imported oil bill by about a billion dollars (three per cent of GDP) (Abate 2008), severely limiting the country's investments in welfare.

Countries such as Eritrea, Niger, Comoros, Botswana and Liberia are especially vulnerable due to very high levels of all these risk factors. Eritrea, with grain imports of 88 per cent and 100 per cent importation of petroleum products, has a population that is 75 per cent undernourished, while Comoros, which also imports 100 per cent of its petroleum products and 80 per cent of its grain, has a population that is 60 per cent undernourished (FAO 2008a).

At the household level, there are consequences related to the difficult choices that households, especially the poorest ones, have to make because of their rapidly declining purchasing power (FAO 2008a). In compensating for rising food prices, vulnerable households may move towards using less food, or towards substituting cheaper, but less nutritious, food for current diets (PREM, ARD and DEC 2008). Poor households find themselves having to compromise on healthcare, education, and other non-food household expenditures (FAO 2008a), or to sell key productive assets in order to cope with their newly dire economic circumstances. Under such circumstances, therefore, poor households become poorer (Rashid 2008), suffering a significant loss in household wellbeing. While those on US\$ 1 a day are cutting back on meat, vegetables and one or two meals, so they can afford one bowl of food, those on US\$ 50 cents a day are dragged into utter disaster (The Economist 2008).

Even the middle class is not immune to the impacts of the crisis. The middle classes in poor countries are giving up health care and cutting out meat so they can eat three meals a day. The middling poor, those on US\$ 2 a day, are pulling children from school and cutting back on vegetables so that they can still afford rice.

The effect of the crisis on the most vulnerable – including people dependant on humanitarian assistance, orphans, those affected by HIV/AIDS, and pregnant and nursing mothers – is devastating. Children are not only temporarily deprived of the nutrients they need to grow and thrive, but can also carry permanent scars on their physical and intellectual potential into their youth and adulthood. There is also a serious risk of children dying of easily treatable illnesses, or dropping out of school so they can be sent to work (Deen 2008) because of deepening household poverty.

HIV infection, compounded by inadequate dietary intake, worsens the effects of malnutrition. Malnutrition in turn shortens the asymptomatic period of HIV infection, hastens the onset of AIDS and ultimately death, and may also increase the risk of HIV transmission from mothers to babies.

On a wider societal scale, there is also the potential for the food crisis to generate massive movements of people, creating humanitarian emergencies and disasters. According to UNFPA, unbearable costs for food may force poor women to resort to transactional sex in order to meet their basic needs, and may cause potential increases in violence against female-headed households and among poor women (Deen 2008).

Children are also naturally affected by the consequences of economic problems and related social unrest, including the food riots that have taken place on most continents,

primarily in urban areas where people have borne the brunt of soaring food and fuel prices (Hattingh 2008). Unrest in Burkina Faso, Mauritania, Mozambique, Senegal, the Ivory Coast and Cameroon has claimed about 100 lives (Falksohn et al. 2008) and caused substantial material damage.

On the positive side, high prices may stimulate a supply side response wherein market signals are transmitted to food producers who have capacity to increase production and – where existing transport and market infrastructure allow it – to supply the market. This may represent an important opportunity for promoting agricultural and rural development in many low-income countries, provided that an enabling policy environment and supportive measures are established quickly (FAO 2008a).

## **WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE?**

African countries are now facing daunting challenges that require urgent and prudent policy measures. So far, sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean have shown the lowest levels of policy activity, with roughly 20 per cent and 30 per cent of the countries in these respective regions reporting no activity in any of the policy categories (FAO 2008a).

Policy measures available in the short term include the provision of safety nets and social protection to the most vulnerable consumers in both rural and urban areas, as well as the enhancement of short-term supply responses by smallholder farmers. This may involve protecting the most vulnerable through direct food distribution, targeted food subsidies and cash transfers, and nutritional programmes including school feeding.

Improved trade policies, such as reductions in tariffs and taxes that can provide some relief to consumers, can also yield important gains, as can the elimination of agriculture trade barriers and export bans (Rashid 2008).

Projects related to biofuel production may also need to be re-examined in light of their effects on food security. South Africa, for instance, has already restricted the use of grains for ethanol production because of food security concerns (FAO 2008a).

Governments can act to lower the overall costs of domestic distribution. The importance of strengthening inland transport links in mitigating price spikes was recently underscored in Congo (Brazzaville) (PREM, ARD and DEC 2008).

In the longer run, it will be important to address the fundamentals that increase investment in agriculture, both public and private, and improve the functioning of markets. Cancelling the debts of developing countries can help them invest the money in their agriculture, with the aim of achieving food security in the longer term. If the current estimated US\$ 345 billion debt of developing countries is relieved, these countries could have more than sufficient funds to overhaul their agricultural systems. This total figure is more than ten times the US\$ 30 billion a year needed to re-launch agriculture in the developing world and avert future risk of conflicts over food (Finfacts 2008b).

These and other related measures are critically needed. A weary, apathetic response would only invite needless failure, the consequences of which could be staggering: reversals in hard-earned gains in nutrition, health and education; social instability and insecurity; deepening poverty and hunger; and human death in large numbers (FAO 2008a).

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