Statement by

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United Nations
Addressing food security – critical to MDG achievement

Since 1990, the baseline date against which we measure progress towards the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), over six hundred million people have been lifted out of poverty and the global population as a whole is healthier, wealthier, and better educated than ever before. These are significant achievements.

Yet the aggregate and average figures also disguise the fact that ending poverty is a vast and unfinished agenda and inequality is increasing in many countries. The multiple crises which have hit the world in recent years have exacerbated these challenges, and have shown the state of our planet’s economic and social systems, and eco-systems to be under considerable stress.

This year’s Global Monitoring Report (GMR), “Improving the Odds of Achieving the MDGs”, explores country performance and shows uneven MDG progress. The report’s focus on food prices, nutrition, and the MDGs is welcome, given recent and on-going food crises in some parts of the developing world.

Improving food security is central to poverty reduction and MDG achievement. Not only is it a primary development objective in its own right, but also food security is critical for advancing on all the MDGs.

Last year, the Horn of Africa experienced its worst food security crisis in more than twenty years, and Somalia suffered in the 21st century’s first famine.

In the Sahel, just two years after the last severe food security and nutrition crisis, a combination of drought, poverty, high grain prices, environmental degradation, political unrest in some countries, and chronic underdevelopment, has led to a serious food and nutrition crisis this year. Latest estimates suggest that more than fifteen million people in Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, and Senegal are directly affected, with the crisis yet to peak.

Effective and comprehensive strategies to address chronic food insecurity must combine humanitarian relief with development measures, including support for agricultural development, restoring degraded lands, establishing land tenure rights, improving rural infrastructure, and ending armed conflict and insecurity.
Throughout, the continued attention of the international community is essential, including through meeting the commitments laid out in the L'Aquila Food Security Initiative of 2009. Reform of the global financial system must also be seen as part of this agenda. Stronger regulation of financial derivatives markets could help reduce the adverse impact of financial speculation.

The UN’s MDG Acceleration Framework (MAF) is being deployed in support of building longer term food security in the Sahel. It is a diagnostic tool which helps countries to identify priority actions needed to accelerate progress on the MDGs. It helps break down silos between sectors in favour of pragmatic, cross-sectoral, problem-solving approaches.

**Building resilience through social protection**

Effective social protection systems are critical in strengthening the resilience of local communities, including in times of severe droughts and food insecurity. It is highly appropriate that the Development Committee is giving specific attention to them during these spring meetings.

During the recent food, financial, and economic crises, the value of social protection systems has been clear. They had a measurable impact on helping the poor cope with the impact of the global economic crisis, for example by enabling families to keep their children in school, thereby avoiding long term welfare losses.

Basic social protection programs are affordable, with estimates of costs ranging between one and two per cent of GDP. Yet, only some twenty per cent of the world’s working age population – mostly in middle- and upper-income countries – have effective access to comprehensive social protection systems for themselves and their families.

The UN has long promoted the merits of social protection measures for building resilience and advancing MDG achievement. The Social Protection Floor Initiative is a UN system-wide effort to promote strategies for providing access to essential social services and income security for all.

The UN sees social protection not only as a set of policies and instruments to protect people in situations of vulnerability, but also as empowering. Effective social protection goes wider than traditional concepts of social safety nets, the aim of which is usually only to protect households from falling below a critical threshold of well-being in times of shock.

Across the UN, agencies work jointly to promote social protection instruments which protect and expand people’s choices and opportunities. This includes cash transfers; in-kind transfers such as those provided through school feeding; access to health services; and public works programmes which generate employment and skills development.

Increasingly, South-South co-operation is supporting new approaches to social protection through sharing experiences, innovation, and lessons learned. The UN development system is facilitating such exchanges across the developing world.

**Innovations in leveraging the private sector for development**

Advancing sustainable development and MDG achievement requires broad partnerships in which the private sector has a critical role to play. It is timely therefore for the Development Committee to reflect this year on innovative ways of leveraging private sector activity for greater development benefits.
Inclusive business models are about getting win-win outcomes for development. A growing body of evidence suggests that businesses which engage the poor on the demand side as clients and customers, as well as on the supply side as producers, employees, and business owners, get good returns.

Traditional development partners and emerging economies are increasingly focusing on how to engage the private sector in catalyzing and driving development.

An area of great potential lies in modes of delivering cash transfers to the poor. It is estimated that more than 170 million people are receiving cash transfers from their governments. Yet, only one quarter of them receive the money in a bank account. Innovative private sector solutions are now being used to make such transfers electronic, resulting in increased financial services for the poor and other benefits. For instance, through the Pacific Financial Inclusion Programme – a joint programme of some UN agencies, AusAid and the EU - 22,000 social welfare recipients have been provided with savings linked bank accounts, the majority of whom did not have access to the banking system before. This has enabled them to save the up to fifteen per cent of their income which was previously spent on travelling to bank and social welfare locations.

In the transition to greener and more inclusive economic models, innovative approaches which aim to minimize the environmental footprint of economic activity and are increasingly called for. Here, the private sector must play a central role.

In March last year, UNDP and the Government of Turkey agreed on establishing the Istanbul International Center for Private Sector in Development. It aims to be a platform for South-South Co-operation and exchange on best practice by the private sector in development.

Looking ahead: Rio+20 and the post-2015 framework

The world’s population has reached the seven billion mark, and is expected to grow by another two billion people by 2050. By 2030 it is estimated that the world will need at least fifty per cent more food, 45 per cent more energy, and thirty per cent more water.

Current patterns of consumption and production risk breaching planetary boundaries, thereby limiting the potential to improve people’s lives – both now, and in the future. Although climate change, deforestation, air and water pollution, and natural disasters impact on many societies, it is always the most vulnerable and poor who are disproportionately affected.

Unless issues of sustainability and equity are addressed simultaneously, the impressive human development gains of recent decades will not be sustained. Avoiding progress slowing to a crawl and even reversing is one of the great challenges of the 21st century.

The UN Conference on Sustainable Development in Rio (Rio+20) this June offers an important opportunity for the international community to revisit the premise of current development models, see what works, why, and where the world could do better. More than 120 heads of state and government have confirmed their intention to participate in the conference – indicating that it is likely to be one of the largest such gatherings of world leaders in recent times.

The outcome from Rio must recognize that economic, social, and environmental objectives are not competing goals to be traded off against each other, but rather are interconnected objectives which are most effectively pursued together in a holistic manner.
The UN development system is actively engaged in supporting the preparations for Rio+20 at the global, regional, and country level. The UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs and UNDP are working together to support the Rio+20 preparations in many countries, and helping to prepare the ground for the work after Rio.

There is a vibrant discussion in the build-up to Rio on establishing Sustainable Development Goals, and on the role they would play in the post-2015 development framework. The MDGs have provided a strong rallying call for development with their time-bound, specific, and easily communicable targets. The post-2015 agenda needs to build on their successes.

The process for defining the post-2015 framework should be open and inclusive. It needs to draw on the perspectives of governments, the private sector, civil society, and citizens around world. The UN is putting in place a broad outreach process to achieve that.

The UN looks forward to working with all actors in this process, with the ultimate aim of putting the world on a more sustainable and inclusive development path to the future we all want.