

## **United Nations World Health Organization**

### **Topic: Combatting Malnutrition in Lesser Economically Developed Countries**

#### **I. Background**

As our part of the world is rejoicing over daily opulence of nutritional supplements and healthy nourishments, developing countries are overwhelmed with the burden of malnutrition and malnourishment. According to most recent data from Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), more than 925 million people are malnourished and approximately two-thirds of the undernourished people reside in Asia. Another estimation of 200 million children aged less than five years old struggle from severe symptoms of malnutrition; and with an increase in food shortages and famine, this number continues to skyrocket. A devastating majority of 95% of the malnourished population are in LEDCs. With an estimation of more than 925 million people struggling from such deprivation, the paramount purpose in the creation of the World Health Organization is to achieve an improvement in the access to healthy food by turning the targets of aid toward those that are truly in need.

The cultivation of food began during the Neolithic Revolution. This period of transition changed the source of food from hunter-gathering to the cultivation of crops. Mankind's relationship with food has constantly been changing, from the time of cultivation to the time of the Green Revolution during the 1940s, when increased industrialized agriculture production was established. Unfortunately, today water, soil, and air pollution have contaminated vital minerals found in soil leading to more seeds of discontent and farms of misery. The prevailing application of food genetic engineering, agribusiness, monoculture, herbicides, food preservative chemicals and pesticides contribute to the crisis of malnutrition in Lesser Economically Developed Countries (LEDC) including Haiti, Democratic Republic of Congo and

Afghanistan, which are currently still facing these problems. Genetically engineered food may seem to be improving availability of food; however, foods that are modified do not deliver more nutrition. Malnourished people suffer from a deficiency of many nutrients and focusing on providing particular engineered food does not provide a balance of nutrients. Because such products are not nutritionally enhanced, LEDCs are at risk of severe malnutrition. Although it would be ideal to prevent malnutrition in every country, it is critical to allot high priority statuses to LEDCs for access to aid.

In order to combat malnourishment, the consumers must have food containing sufficient variety, quality and quantity to meet our bodies' daily needs. The dearth of adequate nourishment such as dietary fiber, water, or protein hinders the potential development of children as well as adults, forcing them to experience the burden of chronic diseases, starvation, and even obesity. Foods that contain few nutrients do not provide as much nutrition, which leads to lowered immunity and increased vulnerability to possible obesity and hunger for consumers. In addition to capricious climate changes, intensity of flooding, droughts and climate patterns have been changing and deteriorating the harvest of crops in an ever-increasing rate. With the access to food declining dramatically particularly in Sub-Saharan African and South Asia, an increase of malnourishment has a great impact on illnesses such as infectious diseases and diarrhea. As one of the primary causes of poor development and low birth-weight babies, malnourishment influences the chronic health conditions of the mother as well as the infant. Deficiencies in crucial minerals and vitamins such as vitamin A and zinc are perilous to the human race.

World agriculture produces enough food for the population. However, the paramount conflicts that the LEDCs face include insufficient land to grow the crops and inadequate income to purchase the products necessary to grow those crops. Poorly managed economic systems are

also another main cause of malnutrition and malnourishment in Lesser Economically Developed Countries. The management and operation behind those systems in each country have authority over the income and resources. Standard economic representation is based on the exchange of goods and the products that people produce. Unfortunately, because of improper and unproductive management of such economic systems, government officials often take initiative to benefit themselves rather than aiding the people of their country. This leads to high food prices, negatively affecting many food-importing countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. With the significant rise in food bill, many households substitute nutrient rich food with cheaper processed food or a reduction of the number of meals. In addition to the decrease in micronutrient intakes, inadequate dietary intake may also cause diseases. Harmful effects on the framework of the entire system then result in the failures in economic organization of societies. With not enough income to purchase diverse and nutritious food, the people do not have the consumer power they need to take control over their own lives.

Regarding the areas with soaring demands for nutrient rich foods, production of food crops such as maize and livestock have negative consequences because safety regulations on water and farm chemicals such as pesticides and herbicides have failed to be properly implemented. With the presence of farm chemicals and unregulated water, many developing countries do not have access to safe nutritious goods. Furthermore, serious micronutrient and protein deficiencies are still widely common in LEDCs, exacerbating the crisis of malnutrition. Take the key issues in Afghanistan that are being discussed for instance. Reports from the Food and Agriculture Organization have stated that Afghanistan has the highest rates of infant and child mortality in Asia. Children in Afghanistan are suffering from the lack of safe drinking water and this has prevented them from having access to healthy water. Thus, with both the

accessibility of safe consumer products and high cost of nutritious goods at crisis, the investment in cooperating with agribusiness in order to offer consumers inexpensive and insubstantial organic products still remains a great challenge.

By placing fair-trade as the principle achievement, more concentration on nutritious plant sources with available food processing technologies should be considered. Take VitaGoat, a food processing system, for instance. Because many developing countries are unable to afford the high cost of electricity and lack reliable supply needed to produce high-quality nutrition, a micro-enterprise development is needed. This efficient system can produce a variety of aqueous and dry foods without the use of electricity or water, allowing LEDCs to have such products processed<sup>3</sup>. By using fuels that are locally available such as wood or biomass, nutritious food can be cooked and grinded. Examples of inexpensive, locally available, easily grown and cultivated foods such as soya, papayas, cassava, millet, sorghum, peanuts, and ground coffee include beneficial contents of fiber, diverse types of fat, micronutrient and protein. Sponsored by many organizations including one of the grant programs of World Bank and World Initiative for Soy in Human Health (WISHH), the project of implementing VitaGoat system has been proven successful in Chad. In 2004, the VitaGoat was installed in the city Doba of Chad and government representatives have indicated that VitaGoat easily produced higher valued products with available local commodities. This showed many other African nations positive changes brought by such investment.

Sustainable strategies for improved nourishment and nutrition can begin with measuring the quality of people's diet, promoting programs that can supply nutrients for those in need, and establishing alliance at national and international levels to assist and support organizations. Because of the crucial need to combat starvation and obesity, delegates should search for

adequate, global and comprehensive implementations to ameliorate and combat the worsening malnourishment and malnutrition, especially in countries with low economic stability and a scarcity of crucial human resources.

## **II. United Nations Involvement**

The following organizations have been greatly involved in many actions taken to combat malnutrition by representing the United Nations.

**World Health Organization (WHO):** WHO is the World Health Organization of the United Nations. This organization is “the directing and coordinating authority for health within the United Nations system. It is responsible for providing leadership on global health matters, shaping the health research agenda, setting norms and standards, articulating evidence-based policy options, providing technical support to countries and monitoring and assessing health trends.”(WHO) During the 21<sup>st</sup> century, “health is a shared responsibility, involving equitable access to essential care and collective defense against transnational threats” which is the responsibility WHO is taking hold of.

WHO achieves its goals through focusing on these topics:

- Growth Assessment and Surveillance (GRS)
- Reduction of Micronutrient Malnutrition (MNM)
- Nutrition in the Lifecourse (NLU)
- Nutrition Policy and Scientific Advice (NPU)

**United Nations Development Programme (UNDP):** As United Nations’ global development network, the UNDP has collaborated and supported many countries in meeting its needs.

However, its collaboration with Lesotho demonstrated that there are many times when efforts from NGOs or other development programs may fail to be implemented due to the nation’s

unique religion, culture and dietary preferences. Lesotho, a landlocked nation in South Africa, is a country that pays the utmost respect to its domestic grazing animals. Thus, when the UNDP stepped in and proposed the project of controlling grassland use in order to optimize commercial productivity, a plan that placed economic gain above Lesotho's long existing culture, the plan was met with resistance from the people. This incident shows that tradition and cultural rules can influence the effect of a project intended to combat malnutrition and success is not always the outcome. This is something that delegates should take into consideration when formulating solutions to the problem of malnutrition.

**FAO:** The Food and Agriculture Organization is one of the United Nations agencies that takes leadership in defeating widespread hunger and malnourishment. As an impartial forum, its major aim is to have all nations negotiate and debate on projects and regulations such as the distribution of agricultural inputs that improve harvests and introduction of safety standards for food industries. Through different methods, FAO aid developing countries and those that are still in the process of modernizing in many aspects of agriculture and nutrition. Founded in 1945, FAO has put a lot of emphasis on developing rural areas, where 70 percent of the world's hungry and poor people reside. With the help from FAO, many LEDCs such as Chad, Somalia, Afghanistan, and Pakistan have benefited from the organization's effort in ensuring good nutrition.

**GAIN:** Established in 2002 at the Special Session of UN General Assembly on Children, the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition is a Swiss foundation with headquarters in Geneva and Regional Offices in New Delhi, Washington D.C, Cairo, and Johannesburg which activates "public-private partnerships and provides financial and technical support to deliver nutritious foods to those people most at risk of malnutrition." (GAIN – About

GAIN) With the cooperation of food producers, the nutrition foundation's Business Alliance concentrates its efforts on alleviating malnutrition in all parts of the world including the Caribbean, Latin America, Southeast Asia, South Asia and Africa. "GAIN's goal is to reach more than one billion people with fortified foods that have sustainable nutritional impact."

**Soil Association:** "The Soil Association is the U.K.'s leading campaigning and certification organization for organic food and farming. It was founded in 1946 by a group of farmers, scientists and nutritionists who observed a direct connection between farming practice and plant, animal, human, and environmental health." (Goodall, page 290) This association is not sponsored by any Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs), but rather, it is an alliance supported by charity and donations that advances their organization's organic farming plans.

Each organization has different leadership priorities and plays a different role in public health. World Health Organization monitors the health situation by setting standards and providing technical support, whereas the Food and Agriculture Organization helps eradicate malnutrition and food insecurity by proposing efficient food systems. The Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition, on one hand, aims to increase access of unavailable nutrients in particular which are necessary for people's diets. The Soil Association, on the other hand, works to transform highly processed food to organic food that is minimally processed and maintains the nutritional value crucial for the human body. With so many organizations working to fight malnutrition, positive outcomes are possible.

### **III. Questions to Consider**

1. What are some possible solutions that can help combat malnutrition?
2. How are malnutrition and hunger different and how are they related?
3. Why is malnutrition so widespread in least developed countries (LEDs)?
4. How can nutritious food be provided under circumstances of economic instability and severe climate changes?
5. How can food processing technologies combat malnutrition?
6. What kind of programs should be established in order to meet the demands of nutrient rich food?
7. How should NGO's or UN programs deal with cultural customs that impede the implementation of conventional nutritional development programs?

### **IV. Suggested Sites**

<http://www.who.int/en/> - WHO Website

<http://www.unicef.org/> - UNICEF Website

<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/> - CIA World Factbook

<http://www.cnn.com/> - CNN Website

<http://www.fao.org/countries/en/> - FAO

<http://www.gainhealth.org/> - GAIN

<http://www.hungerreport.org/2011/> - 2011 Hunger Report

<http://www.pam.org.zm/> - Programme Against Malnutrition (PAM)

<http://www.neifoundation.org/> - Nutrition & Education International