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The world food crisis is a wake-up call to save this generation of children

A group of eminent scientists met to map out opportunities for the global community to respond more effectively to today’s economic crisis in ways that will protect not just jobs and physical infrastructure but the lives and future productivity of the world’s poorest people.

With the global economy in turmoil, it is now critical to place nutrition back in the center of all actions designed to mitigate the worst effects of high food prices, job losses, and general economic downturn. Compelling evidence shows that improving nutrition protects health, prevents disability, boosts economic productivity, and saves lives. The billions lost by the world’s financial markets pale into insignificance compared with the economic losses due to growing hunger and its effects on human capital.

Pulling together current best practice and science, the conclusions were inescapable that not enough of what we know works is being done. As recognized by Nobel Laureates, some of the most cost-effective interventions include tackling deficiencies in vitamins and minerals through distribution of vitamin A capsules to prevent blindness and reduce mortality, using zinc tablets in the treatment of diarrhea, and fortifying salt with iodine to protect mental capacity. These and other essential nutrients should also be ensured in the food supply through fortification and dietary diversification supported by agricultural growth.

But it is not just about more food. It is about reinforcing nurture of mother and child. Exclusive breast-feeding practice for the first 6 mo of life is still insufficiently supported and practiced, effective antenatal care is inaccessible to far too many pregnant women, and appropriate low-cost, quality foods for infants and toddlers remains an unmet need.

Additionally, short-term actions are crucial to buffer the most vulnerable from economic or climatic shocks. For example, in West Africa, severe malnutrition has been reduced in the past 12 mo in countries such as Niger and Burkina Faso by a combination of targeted food distribution, increased vaccination coverage, bed nets to protect against malaria, and education of mothers in the best ways to ensure future growth and development of their surviving children.

Investments to improve the nutritional wellbeing of mothers as well as their children NOW has short-term benefits but even greater long-term rewards.

Without immediate action, we are exposing ourselves and our children to greater shocks than those we face today. We know what to do; we call upon the world’s leaders to do it.

Meeting participants

Dr. H. Alderman: World Bank
Ms. J. Badham: SIGHT AND LIFE
Dr. M. Bloem: United Nations World Food Programme
Dr. H.J. Brinkman: United Nations World Food Programme
Dr. P. Christian: Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health
Dr. I. Darnton-Hill: UNICEF
Dr. K. Kraemer: SIGHT AND LIFE
Dr. M. Ruel: International Food Policy Research Institute
Dr. R. Semba: Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health
Dr. K. Satham: Children’s Hospital of Boston, Harvard Medical School
Mr. A. Thorne-Lyman: United Nations World Food Programme/Harvard School of Public Health
Prof. P. Timmer: Stanford University
Dr. P. Webb: Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy Tufts University
Dr. K. West: Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health

All delegates attended the meeting in their personal capacity and the views expressed in this statement may not reflect those of the organization that they are affiliated to.

Other articles in this supplement include (1–16).

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Literature Cited


