



UNITED NATIONS SYSTEM  
**Standing Committee on Nutrition**

---

STATEMENT BY THE NGO/CIVIL SOCIETY CONSTITUENCY  
UN Standing Committee on Nutrition  
At its 35<sup>th</sup> Session, Hanoi, Viet Nam  
6 March 2008

### **World nutrition is under threat**

The mortality and loss of productivity attributable to malnutrition in all its forms, ranging from starvation to obesity, is many times higher than that caused by HIV/AIDS. The civil society participants in the 35<sup>th</sup> UN Standing Committee on Nutrition Annual Meeting in Hanoi are concerned by the dramatic lack of leadership from governments and UN agencies to address these problems. Past efforts to raise awareness have gone unheeded. No effective leadership, global plan, or global fund have emerged, unlike the case for AIDS.

New threats to nutrition are emerging. Climate change alone poses virtually certain disruptions in food production and other risks that are completely unplanned for.

US and EU policies establishing ambitious goals and quotas for the progressive replacement of fossil fuels with agro-fuels (in part based on an incorrect assumption that this will reduce climate change) are placing huge burdens on world food production. As always, the resulting unprecedented higher prices for food are impacting most on the world's poorest food consumers. There is also growing evidence that these quotas are leading to a desperate increased demand for agricultural land in some countries, in turn associated with significant increases in land prices, land grabbing, forceful and violent evictions, soil degradation, deforestation, and bonded labour.

Ironically, at the same time, new windows of opportunity for addressing nutrition problems have been opening:

1. The now-accepted human-rights based framework applied to nutrition unequivocally calls for work with both rights holders and duty bearers in a joint effort to solve the world's serious nutrition problems with an emphasis on the social determinants of malnutrition. The effort calls for empowering communities to claim their internationally sanctioned rights.

2. In a recent series of widely publicized articles, the Lancet, a leading medical journal, has put the medical establishment on notice regarding the disastrous extent of malnutrition and its consequences and outlined measures to realign health policies to reach the Millennium Development Goals related to ending hunger and to reducing maternal and child mortality.

3. Several UN and NGO agencies have begun to report exciting, indeed revolutionary outcomes from using ready to use therapeutic foods to treat severe acute malnutrition at community level. Research is currently beginning to examine whether, in certain settings, the use of such foods might sustainably guide more effective approaches to the much larger-scale problems of less severe forms of malnutrition without reducing attention to other critical approaches.

The single most effective way to bring down high infant mortality rates, six months of exclusive breastfeeding, will be achieved only when the world finds ways to support the nutritional status of adolescent girls, and of pregnant and lactating women, as well as alleviating their high work burdens.

High quality, nutrient-dense foods of many kinds are needed as part of balanced diets composed of local foods, often fortified where nutrients are known to be lacking, if we are to successfully prevent malnutrition in all its forms. A particular challenge is the age group 6 – 24 months and beyond, where, in addition to breastfeeding, complementary feeding often must be improved; community-based approaches have proven particularly valuable in this context.

But to achieve sustainable nutrition for all, a broader range of social, environmental, political and economic changes will be needed, particularly attending to the crucial roles of national and household food security, care of infants and children, and the strengthening of health care systems. The rights to universal access to basic health and education services, access to safe water and sanitation, healthy household environments, empowerment of women, and cash transfers to disadvantaged groups are among them.