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Editorial

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The undernutrition epidemic: an urgent health priority

[The Lancet](#)

There is much at stake as delegates meet in Rome for the [World Food Summit](#) in 2 weeks' time. Despite two previous Summits, G8 and G20 promises, a plethora of new initiatives, and an increased investment in innovative technology, people around the world continue to die because they do not have enough food to eat.

One of the fundamental foundations for health—the regular supply of sufficient, nutritious food—involves complex factors such as economics, trade, agriculture, and climate change, in which there is little global consensus. Given the severity of the consequences of doing nothing, procrastination is not an option. For example, [a report by](#) the International Food Policy Research Institute stated that 25 million more children would be malnourished by 2050 because of the effects of climate change.

However, the challenge of [food security](#) is not just a future concern. The Ethiopian Government's recent plea to international donors to help feed 6 million of its population is an example of the desperate times currently faced by many people in poorer countries. Right now, over 1 billion people, mostly in Asia and Africa, are undernourished—the largest proportion of the global population for many decades. Yet donor funds to the World Food Programme, the UN agency charged with ensuring that people have sufficient food to survive, have fallen to a record low.

And of course it is poor families that suffer most. [A report by](#) the World Food Programme and the Food and Agriculture Organization recently showed that although food prices have fallen since the mid-2008 highs, the cost of food remains high by historical standards. To survive, poorer families have to make compromises, such as sacrificing health care, or simply eating less. And because of the concurrent economic crisis, there are few national food safety nets, such as school feeding programmes.

While acknowledging the crucial socioeconomic elements associated with food, and the need for the [right to food](#) agenda, the medicalisation of food might help to make this life-saving commodity more of an immediate priority for the international community and global health sector. Although there are other causes of [undernutrition](#)—such as infectious diseases that often expend energy and reduce nutrient absorption—inadequate diets are the main contributing factor. It is hard to imagine another situation that currently affects over a sixth of the global population, in which there is such abundant evidence of negative health sequelae but where the treatment is simple—food—and prophylaxis is basic—eating enough food (preferably the unprocessed variety that can be cooked and prepared locally). If undernutrition were a disease, such as H1N1, and unprocessed food were a drug or vaccine, both would have the full attention of the entire international community.

Poor terminology does not help the unacceptable situation. The international community should stop calling undernourished people hungry (a prime example is in the target for Millennium Development Goal 1). This subjective description belittles this crucial health condition into a common utterance of someone who has not eaten for a few hours. Although undernourished is a better description, its technical definition currently relies on the daily consumption of calories and so may be a confusing concept for policy makers to grasp. In view of the current global preoccupation with the obesity epidemic, which has a definite clinical description based on body mass index (BMI), the BMI of undernourished people might be a better measure for drawing international attention to their immediate health needs. For example, a BMI of 16–18.5 could be an international standard for undernutrition and a BMI of less than 16 the definition for severe undernutrition.

The current dysfunctional global nutrition system needs to be urgently fixed but the international community remains reluctant to take on this challenge. Yet even for reasons of self-preservation, it would still be in the best interests of richer countries to immediately provide the necessary resources and help devise sustainable systems to deliver food and streamline reliable supply chains. The world currently produces enough food to feed the entire global population. People become undernourished because

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the equitable global distribution of food seems to be beyond the capabilities of the international community. But with the future effects of climate change, no country can be complacent. Implementing fair and reliable global food supply and delivery systems now will have huge future benefits for all countries.

There has been enough talk and enough empty excuses. The international community can and must act now to ensure that a sixth of the world's population receive the treatment they need—nutritious food.

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