

Tackling the High Food Price Challenge:

Five Recommendations from the UK Hunger Alliance to G20 Members



Executive Summary

Three years after the 2007/2008 food price crisis, the cost of food items on both international and national markets are on the rise again. Poor people, still suffering from the impact of the previous crisis, are being hit hardest. As well as the challenge of rising prices, agricultural commodity indices on both international and national markets have been increasingly volatile over the short-term – negatively impacting on both producers and consumers. Assessments show that prices on international markets are likely to remain high for the foreseeable future.

Vulnerable households displayed a number of coping strategies to address the rising prices in 2007/8, including substituting nutritious food for cheaper items with lower nutritional value, cutting back on essential expenditure such as health and education services, and selling household assets. Partly as a result, studies show that hunger, malnutrition and poverty levels increased following 2008, a trend that is expected to continue after the recent price spikes. Analysts show that it would only take a ten percent rise in domestic food prices in developing Asia to push an extra 64 million people into poverty this year.

This policy paper builds upon the recommendations from the UK Hunger Alliance-commissioned report 'The High Food Price Challenge: A Review of Responses to Combat Hunger'¹, which analysed the policy and programming response to the

2008 crisis. It provides an update on global price increases and the transmission to local markets, illustrates the impact of food price rises on the most vulnerable, and critiques the G20 policy response to the crisis since 2008.²

The UK Hunger Alliance provides five urgent recommendations to G20 policy-makers and members of the G20 Development Working Group, which will help to reduce the vulnerability of poor and marginalised households to food price rises:

- 1. Disburse pre-existing G8 pledges to the most vulnerable countries and initiate a post-2012 commitment**
- 2. Protect the most vulnerable through inclusive, broad-based social protection and nutrition interventions**
- 3. Build longer-term resilience through investment in small-scale, sustainable agriculture and livelihoods aimed at marginal groups**
- 4. Align interventions in agriculture, food security and nutrition and apply a nutrition lens to food security and agriculture programmes**
- 5. Co-ordinate initiatives through the United Nations system and regional organisations**

Members of the UK Hunger Alliance supporting this project include:



Context: Global Food Prices on the Rise

Following a relative decline in prices after the 2008 food price spike, prices on international markets increased significantly in 2010-11, reaching record levels in February 2011. Whilst there has been a slight decline in the FAO food price index since February's peak, it is 37 percent higher than in May 2010. Furthermore, prices for many staple goods remain at levels well above those of the 2008 peak, and these price increases on international commodity markets are often being transmitted to the local markets of poorer countries.³ Assessments show that prices are likely to remain high for the foreseeable future.⁴

Cereals, which are a main staple for many poor households, have been subject to significant price increases during the last 12 months – the world wheat price is 85 percent higher than in May 2010 and the international price of maize, which reached a new record level in April 2011, is 90 percent above its level in May 2010. Although the global rice market is relatively stable and international rice prices are five percent lower than May 2010, local prices in several countries are reaching record levels.

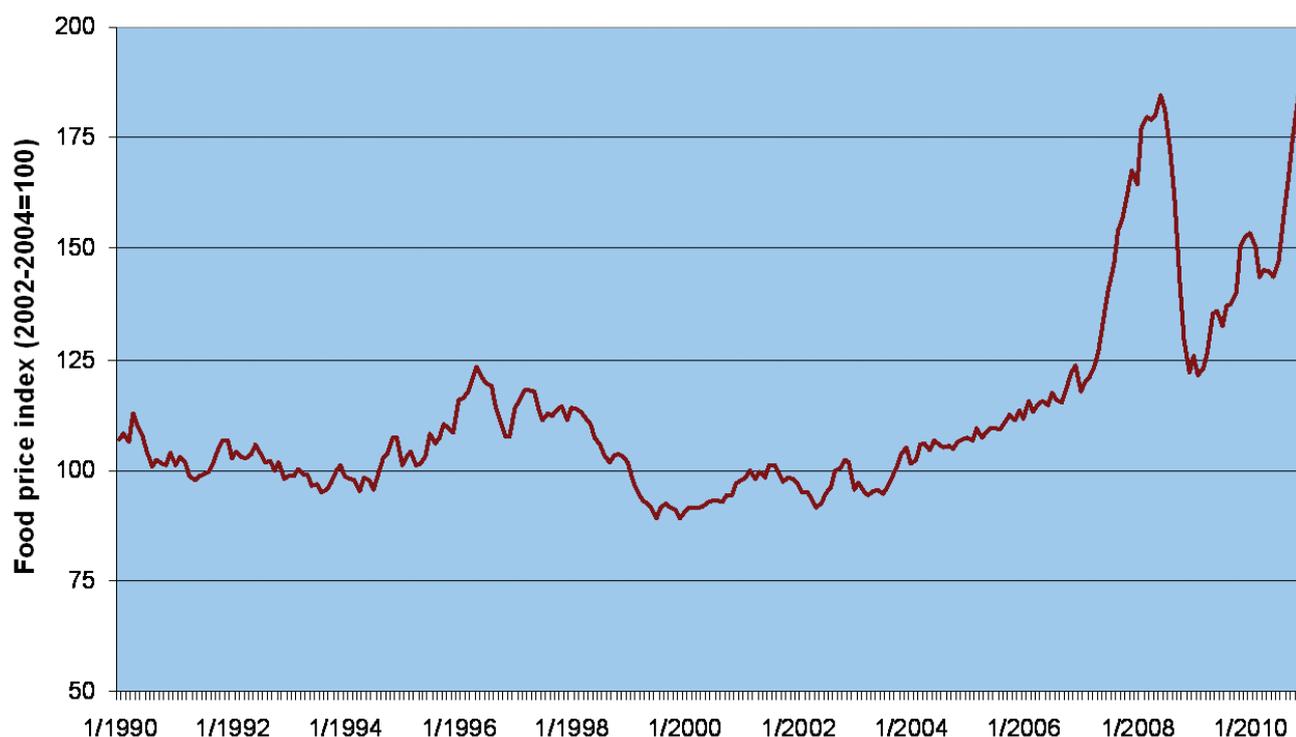
Some countries are experiencing significant price increases for certain staples in spite of international prices that are stabilising or even declining. For example, although the global price of rice is slightly declining, the price of rice in many Asian countries remains well above their levels of 2009/2010, and at close to record levels in Vietnam. Similarly in Somalia, the prices of main staple sorghum have

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reached new highs in several markets even though prices on the international market have been decreasing.⁵

Despite the fact that global food prices declined following the price spike in 2008, many countries continued to experience stubbornly high local food prices long after the initial spikes, which have undermined the resilience of poor people to cope with new increases. A UNICEF study shows that local food prices in 58 countries decreased by less than ten percent following the height of the spikes in 2008, and during late 2010 remained an average of 55 percent higher than in May 2007.⁶

Price volatility on international commodity markets since 2006 has similarly been transmitted to many poorer countries. While high food prices negatively impact food consumers, volatile domestic markets diminish the potential benefit of higher prices for agricultural producers.⁷ Price volatility over the short-run increases risk and vulnerability for food producers and others working in the food value chain by confusing market signals and complicating decision-making.



FAO Food Price Index June 2011

The Impact of Rising Food Prices on Vulnerable People

Household Coping Strategies

Vulnerable and resource-poor people in developing countries spend around 50-80 percent of their income on purchasing food.⁸ Therefore, if food prices on local markets increase, household purchasing power will be diminished, and people may reduce the quantity and quality of food that they consume.⁹ Those groups most vulnerable to price rises include female-headed households and children, the urban poor, rural landless people such as pastoralists and small-scale farmers who are net buyers of food.¹⁰

As prices increase, academic studies¹¹ and experience from UK Hunger Alliance agencies show that households displayed a variety of different strategies to deal with the crisis in 2008, including:

- Substituting nutritious food for cheaper items with lower nutritional value, or reducing the number of daily meals.¹² These changes have a direct impact on people's nutritional status, particularly children and pregnant and lactating women, due to the importance of a micronutrient-rich diet in this group.

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- Reducing expenditure on essential services such as healthcare to pay for food. For example, a UNDP study of over 1000 households in the Philippines shows that the survey group resorted to self-medication, lessened the intake of prescription drugs and deferred medical treatment in response to rising household costs in 2008.¹³
- Selling key productive assets such as land, livestock, tools or other household goods and personal items such as furniture, radios and jewellery. An ODI review focussed on the impact of the crisis shows that in Burundi, Cambodia and Nepal half of households used credit to buy food in 2008 and that in other cases, households defaulted on existing debt.¹⁴
- Increasing working hours in the informal economy, including on high-risk livelihood activities. For example, in Yemen a study showed that 30 percent of households surveyed had 'turned to begging and garbage collection' in response to high food prices.¹⁵ Studies also show an increase in prostitution within urban areas, including for younger girls.¹⁶
- Removing children from school to reduce expenditure on fees, leading to an increase in child labour. For example, 2008 survey data from five districts of Bangladesh illustrates that more than half of households surveyed in both rural and urban areas 'removed children from school' with many engaging in jobs to supplement household income.¹⁷

The Impact of rising food prices on children: lessons from Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, where more than 40 percent of children under 5 are underweight¹⁸, the 2007/2008 food price crisis negatively affected children. The price of key staples increased by as much as 50 percent between 2007 and 2008, and it has been estimated that over this period the real income of the poor in Bangladesh decreased by 37 percent. In late 2008, a study found that children from the poorest households received fewer meals per day, had less diverse diets and were less likely to be fed highly nutritious food.

Families in the community employed a number of potentially damaging strategies in response to the price rises, including sending children to work, taking children out of school, as well as selling productive assets and reducing food intake. Poor families also commonly used loans to replace or supplement income, and previous research carried out in the region showed that they prioritised repaying loans over investing in livelihoods or diets that are more diverse.

“Children from the poorest households received fewer meals per day, had less diverse diets and were less likely to be given highly nutritious food.”



Case study: Save the Children (UK), "How the Global Food Crisis is Hurting Children: The impact of the food price hike on a rural community in northern Bangladesh", April 2009
Photo: © Save the Children (UK)

Increasing levels of hunger and malnutrition and deepening poverty

Estimates indicate that the 2008 price spike may have increased undernourishment by nearly seven percent worldwide.¹⁹ In 2009, FAO estimated that the food price rises of 2007-8 pushed the number of hungry people in the world to over one billion for the first time.²⁰

Rising food prices have exposed new people to poverty and deepened levels of poverty for the already vulnerable. In 2008, estimates suggest that rising food prices increased the number of people in extreme poverty by 105 million.²¹ Analysts show it would take only a ten percent rise in domestic food prices within developing Asian countries to push an extra 64 million people into poverty this year.²²

Children appeared to be hardest hit by the previous spikes. Surveys from Bangladesh, Cambodia and Mauritania reported a 50 percent increase in acute malnutrition for poor children under the age following the food price rises in 2008.²³ Although the impact of food price rises on stunting remains unclear in many areas, a DFID study in Bangladesh shows wasting and stunting levels increased by nearly ten percent in 2008, compared with levels of 2006.²⁴

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The poorest countries and vulnerable regions most severely affected

Low-income countries were paying 8.3 percent more for foodstuffs in August 2010 than the equivalent prices in middle-income countries, even before the present spike. This difference between the low-income and middle-income countries had further jumped to 12.6 percent by late 2010, suggesting a deepening and widening of the impact on poorer countries in comparison to others.²⁵ Many countries that were the victim of rising prices during the previous crisis were already facing high pre-existing levels of malnutrition, a trend that appears consistent in the current spike.²⁶

High food prices also affected the economies of poorer countries, which reduced financial resilience to a future crisis. For example, price rises have led to increased import bills; put pressure on scarce financial resources and undermined core public services and the financing of safety nets. Rises have exacerbated the risk of inflation in developing countries, leading to possible public policy response through interest rate increases and a dampening of economic activity.²⁷

The Price Hike and the Working Children of Balochistan, Pakistan

Continuous food price hikes in 2011 have shocked the population and made life increasingly difficult for poorer people in Pakistan. The current situation highlights the negative impact of food price rises on children who have been severely affected.

Adam Khan, a ten-year-old garbage picker is the eldest among his four other siblings and shares the family's economic burden with his father. Adam said: *“my father very often fails to find work. In the past it did not matter so much because there were always some savings, but now, as a result of the increases in food prices, there are no savings at all.”*

Poor families in Pakistan are vulnerable to rising prices as they spend a higher proportion of their incomes on food. In such an economic squeeze, they cannot afford a balanced diet, and have no choice but to resort to cheaper, less nutritious substitutes, or simply going without.

“There is now often nothing for cooking at our home, and I am very lucky that I have the opportunity to fill my stomach at a [agency drop in] centre.” says Adam.

The social effects of rising prices are particularly evident in Pakistan, as pockets of regional instability have led to the deterioration of law and order in parts of the country. Member agencies suggest that there is a close correlation between the stress caused by the daily struggle for survival of the poor, and social instability.



“I am very lucky that I have the opportunity to fill my stomach at a centre.”

G8/G20 members: inadequate and poorly co-ordinated response to the crisis

The G8 and G20 members have acted both collectively and individually to the food price rises of 2007/8 and on-going volatility. However, a number of concerns remain regarding the co-ordination, coherence and transparency of these actions.

At the 2009 G8 Summit, international donors agreed to spend \$20 billion – later increased to \$22 billion - to support the country-owned agriculture and food security plans of countries most vulnerable to food price volatility and malnutrition through the three year L'Aquila Food Security Initiative (AFSI). The G20 Summit in Seoul in 2010 also placed food security as a key priority area for members, to be delivered through a multi-annual plan of the G20 Development Working Group.

At the G20 Summit in Cannes, the Food Security Task Team will provide recommendations to 'enhance food security policy coherence and co-ordination and increase agricultural productivity and food availability, including by advancing innovative results-based mechanisms, promoting responsible agricultural investment, fostering smallholder agriculture and inviting relevant international organisations to develop proposals to better manage and mitigate risks of food price volatility.'²⁸ The Development Working Group will also put forward recommendations to enhance the social protection programmes of developing countries.

G8 donors have been slow to disburse funding that was promised

Despite G8/G20 pledges on food security, a number of G8 donors are lagging behind on their commitments under the L'Aquila Food Security Initiative. The recent G8 Accountability Report shows that donors have only disbursed 22 percent of commitments over the first two years of the initiative, with 26 percent 'on track to be disbursed.'²⁹ France, Russia and the United States, have been slow to spend the money that was pledged at L'Aquila and only a small amount of the money promised by donors appears to be in addition to previous funding.

The Global Agriculture and Food Security Program (GAFSP), which was established by the G20 in Pittsburgh with the aim of channelling L'Aquila pledges into country-owned plans on the basis of need (such as malnutrition levels and a lack of investment in agriculture), has been similarly underfunded. To date, the fund has received only \$405 million of \$925 million pledged by donors.³⁰

The need to focus on consumption and utilisation as well as production outcomes

The focus on support to smallholder agriculture, including through the L'Aquila Initiative, the GAFSP and the G20 Development Working Group is to be welcomed. Investment in

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smallholder agriculture and rural livelihoods within poorer countries remains a critical component of food security and poverty reduction as well as building resilience to a future food crisis.

However, support to the poor and vulnerable should not be limited solely to agriculture. Analysis shows that safety nets and social protection schemes, critical components in supporting access to food in times of crisis, were limited and weak during the previous crisis and urgently require broadening.³¹

In 2010, the G8 leader's statement noted that “reduced malnutrition is a primary outcome of our Food Security Initiative and will contribute to improved maternal and child health.”³² To date, however, linkages between agriculture, livelihoods and nutrition interventions have been weak, and donors have failed to measure how their interventions under initiatives such as the AFSI have contributed to food security or nutrition outcomes.

Lack of accountability and co-ordination regarding G20 interventions

There remain concerns regarding the accountability of the G8 and G20 initiatives. Flaws and inconsistencies in the AFSI accounting system have made it difficult to tell if donors are keeping their promises; for example, most of the members contributing to the initiative are using different baseline data. Some donors include safety nets and nutrition interventions in their reporting, whilst others do not. A number of donors such as the EU, Germany and Japan have also failed to state whether they have disbursed the money to which they have committed.

Furthermore, G8/ G20 action following the food crisis also appears to be have been characterised by uncoordinated project-led initiatives, undermining aid effectiveness. To date, many donors have failed to state whether their pledges have been disbursed to the country-owned plans of vulnerable countries, a key aim of the original G8 initiative. It also remains unclear how either G8 and G20 action on food security is co-ordinated with either regional organisations and initiatives or the United Nations system – the most inclusive and transparent international body.



“Some households are responding to food insecurity by migrating to Mogadishu and exposing themselves to the risks of violence and further insecurity.”

Case study: Action Against Hunger (UK)
Photo: © ACF Somalia

Increasing food prices in Somalia force migration from rural to urban areas

In the main sorghum-producing area in the south of Somalia, known as the ‘Sorghum Belt’, sorghum prices have increased by 80 percent in one year. Families, who are already affected by conflict across the borders with Kenya and Ethiopia, now also face increases in the price of rice, maize and wheat, which have more than doubled compared to the five-year average and remain markedly higher than the levels they were at before the 2007/08 crisis. Other staples, such as sugar, oils and peas, have increased in price and the price of camel milk, one of the few sources of calcium, increased by 47 percent in one year and tripled when compared with the five-year average.

It is estimated that increasing prices across the board lead to a decrease in real income in the past 12 months of about 20 percent. Families affected by such soaring prices have few options. Some households are forced to trade savings and seeds in exchange for food thereby reducing their already limited assets and making them more vulnerable. Others are responding to food insecurity by migrating to Mogadishu and exposing themselves and their families to the risks of violence and further insecurity.

Recommendations

To reduce the vulnerability of poor and marginalised households to food price rises, the members of the UK Hunger Alliance provide five urgent recommendations to G20 policy-makers and members of the G20 Development Working Group:

1. Disburse pre-existing G8 pledges to the most vulnerable countries and initiate a post-2012 commitment

Given increasing food prices and continuing volatility in 2011, it is imperative that G20 governments call for the full dispersal of commitments made under the L’Aquila Initiative. In addition, the G20 members should demonstrate leadership with a longer-term plan to provide predictable funding to help poorer countries to fight food insecurity and malnutrition after the AFSI expires in 2012.

Donors and multilateral agencies must focus investments and disbursements on the country-owned plans of those nations most vulnerable to price volatility and food insecurity. G20 members should pursue this aim both as part of their L’Aquila funding but also through existing initiatives such as the Global Partnership on Agriculture and Food Security, the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP) and in support of the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) movement.

Existing G8 donors and other G20 actors that have increased their investment in agriculture overseas (such as China, Brazil, India and Saudi Arabia) must also improve accountability and transparency. In particular, donors and investors should provide information on how they have met the original aims of initiatives such as the AFSI, and how they have upheld the Five Rome Principles for Sustainable Global Food Security.

“It is imperative that G20 members support governments with vulnerable populations to invest in broad and inclusive social protection systems.”

2. Protect the most vulnerable through inclusive, broad-based social protection and nutrition interventions

In the short-term, governments and G20 donors should continue to implement immediate measures that can make a rapid impact on vulnerable groups’ access to a nutritious diet. Safety nets such as social cash transfers and packages of direct nutrition interventions (for example, micronutrient supplementation, the promotion of exclusive breastfeeding and the Community Management of Acute Malnutrition) are critical to support this aim. Gender sensitive extension services, considering women’s roles as carers and food producers also support nutrition outcomes.

However, to reduce the economic and social vulnerability of the poor and food-insecure in the long-term, it is imperative that G20 members support governments with vulnerable populations to invest in broad and inclusive social protection systems. Measures to achieve this aim can include initiatives such as the ILO social protection floor. Members with experience of successful approaches to reduce hunger, such as Brazil, should draw on and adapt their experience in integrating social protection and agricultural support to tackle food and nutrition insecurity.

3. Build longer-term resilience through investment in small-scale, sustainable agriculture and livelihoods aimed at marginal groups

2007-8 and the follow up period represented a missed opportunity for investment in smallholder agriculture, marginal groups such as pastoralists and fisher-folk, and sustainable production methods. While food production received fresh interest and investment, the focus on short-term agricultural inputs and chemical fertilisers to more productive farmers raised questions on the suitability of the response in the context of climate change, smallholder farmers' livelihoods and food security.

Investment in smallholder farmers and marginal groups is a vital tool to reduce hunger and food insecurity in the longer term. Analysts suggest that 50 percent of the world's hungry people live on small farms. Pastoralists, fisher-folk and forest users represent a further ten percent.³³ Investment in these groups can increase the supply of food on local markets, improve incomes and food security and drive wider rural development.³⁴

Sustainable agriculture methods, agro-ecology, and community management of natural resources can further build long-term resilience to external shocks.³⁵ Nutrition-sensitive agriculture interventions with emphasis on agricultural diversification and promotion of local products with high nutrition values can also greatly contribute to reducing and preventing under-nutrition.

The G20 response to the food price rises in 2011 must support governments in developing countries to invest in longer-term solutions to sustainably improve productivity, agricultural diversity and access to markets for smallholder farmers, in particular women. Vulnerable pastoralist and fishing communities must not be neglected through exclusive attention to livelihoods that depend on agriculture.

“The G20 must recognize the central role that agriculture and food security interventions play in reducing poverty and combating hunger and malnutrition.”

4. Align interventions in agriculture, food security and nutrition and apply a nutrition lens to food security and agriculture programmes

The G20 must recognise the central role that agriculture and food security interventions play in reducing poverty and combating hunger and malnutrition. As part of this recognition, members should commit to greater alignment of agriculture, food security and nutrition interventions. In order to achieve MDG 1 and 4, agricultural policies should be measured against both food security and nutrition outcomes (as indicated by the G8 in 2010) as well as indicators on productivity and economic growth.

Targeted and appropriate agricultural interventions will greatly contribute to the reduction of malnutrition and the G20 should commit to the systematic use of a 'nutrition lens' in addressing food insecurity challenges. 'Seasonal thinking' in the food security planning process (pre-positioning nutritional and health resources in the months before and during the annual hunger period) can also contribute considerably to combating hunger and malnutrition.

5. Co-ordinate initiatives through the United Nations system and regional organisations

'The High Food Price Challenge' illustrated that in response to food price rises in 2007 many donors pursued a project-led approach that bypassed country-owned plans and undermined aid effectiveness. A review of the donor commitments under the L'Aquila Food Security Initiative illustrate that members may be continuing this trend as well as operating outside of the United Nations system.

The United Nations is the only global governance system that can guarantee the representation of the poorest countries and real co-operation regarding the development and application of international investment and regulation. The reformed Committee on World Food Security (CFS) gathers states, international organisations and civil society, and is the key forum for multilateral, legitimate and inclusive decision-making on food security issues.

The G20 must ensure that its decision-making and investment priorities are coherent with the CFS Global Strategic Framework and other relevant frameworks such as the Comprehensive Framework for Action on Food Security, CAADP, the Voluntary Guidelines to Support the Progressive Realization of the Right to Adequate Food in the Context of National Food Security and the SUN Framework. The G20 should also support regional organisations, such as ECOWAS, which have established mechanisms to alleviate hunger through financial and technical support.

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Notes

UK Hunger Alliance agencies contributing to this policy paper include Action Against Hunger (UK), CARE International UK, Concern Worldwide (UK), Tearfund, Save the Children UK, and World Vision UK



Action Against Hunger is committed to ending child hunger. We work to save the lives of malnourished children while providing communities with sustainable access to safe water and long-term solutions to hunger.



CARE International works across the world to reduce poverty and injustice, placing particular emphasis on working with women to create permanent and positive social change.



Concern Worldwide (UK) helps the poorest people in the poorest countries to transform their lives. We seek out those who most urgently need our support, and work with them through thick and thin to tackle poverty, hunger and disaster.



Tearfund is a Christian relief and development agency working with a global network of local churches to help eradicate poverty.



Save the Children

Save the Children works in more than 120 countries. We save children's lives. We fight for their rights. We help them fulfil their potential.



World Vision is a Christian relief and development organisation working with children, their families and communities to overcome poverty and injustice in 100 countries around the world

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