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## **Food prices in developing countries**

Health reporter, October 2008

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## **Feature: Food prices in developing countries**

The price of basic food commodities has increased by eighty-three percent over the last three years, significantly affecting the world's poorest people. Food prices have increased in almost all countries for the majority of food products, although the size of the increase varies between and within countries. World food markets are changing rapidly with food production and consumption affected by higher incomes, population growth, climate change, high energy prices, globalisation, and urbanisation. The threat to food security (the availability and access to food) in developing countries has increased significantly, and is disproportionately affecting poor people across the developing world.

In the long term it is 'scarcity trends', such as the cost of energy inputs and scarcity of land and water, which are likely to limit food production. While food prices are largely determined by production levels, price increases are influenced by a range of other factors that can be cyclical, structural or unique, and impact prices over both the short and long term. They include:

- land and water constraints
- higher fuel prices increasing input costs (such as for fertilisers) and transport costs

- unpredictable agro-climatic events, such as droughts and floods
- high income growth in emerging economies increasing food consumption
- ad hoc market and trade policies, such as import subsidies
- use of crops for biofuels
- relative inelasticity of food supply
- underinvestment in rural infrastructure and agricultural innovation

The consequences of increasing food prices can be seen at the country, household and individual level. Many developing countries are import-dependent, and as net food importers they struggle to meet domestic food demand. Low stock levels in many developing countries also increase their vulnerability to food shortages. At the household level, it is the poorest who are worst affected by volatile food prices, as they tend to be net food buyers and have fewer coping mechanisms available to them. Increased food prices mean the poor must increase the proportion of their budget spent on food; 50 to 70 percent in most developing countries. They eat smaller quantities less frequently, and buy cheaper, lower quality, less nutritious food. Higher food prices also reduce the income available for heating, lighting, water, sanitation, education and healthcare. The coping mechanisms used by the poor and their access to food safety nets affect the impact of high food prices on their livelihoods. Three impacts of rising food prices are of particular concern in terms of health, poverty, hunger, and their future ability to escape poverty: reduced nutritional status of pregnant and lactating women and pre-school children; withdrawal of children from school; and sale of productive assets as a coping mechanism.

Various recommendations exist for immediate responses to rising food prices, such as increasing humanitarian assistance, increasing fast-impact food production, changing to biofuel policies, and eliminating agricultural export restrictions and trade barriers. Long-term changes include stabilising volatile markets, increasing investment by developing countries in agriculture, expanding social-protection measures for the poor, and placing agricultural issues onto national and international climate-change policy agendas.

#### More information:

- Health, Nutrition and Population Division, Human Development Department, World Bank (HNP)  
<http://www.eldis.org/go/topics/resource-guides/health/nutrition/food-consumption-and-safety&id=3154&type=Organisation>
  - Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)  
<http://www.eldis.org/go/topics/resource-guides/health/nutrition/food-consumption-and-safety&id=1305&type=Organisation>
  - Impact of High Food and Fuel Prices on Developing Countries. Frequently Asked Questions by the International Monetary Fund  
<http://www.imf.org/external/np/exr/faq/ffpfaqs.htm>
  - Food security in developing countries  
<http://www.parliament.uk/documents/upload/postpn274.pdf>
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## Recommended readings

### **1. High food prices: the what, who, and how of proposed policy actions**

Authors: J. von Braun

Publisher: International Food Policy Research Institute, 2008

The sharp increase in food prices over the past couple of years has led to increasingly serious concerns about the situation of people around the world. This policy brief aims to identify what needs to be done now to address the problem. It stresses that the complex causes of the current food and agriculture crisis require a comprehensive response, and that developing and developed-country governments, as well as international organisations, have key roles to play.

In view of the urgency of assisting people and countries in need, the first set of policy actions outlined is an emergency package consisting of steps that can yield immediate impact. The steps are: expand emergency responses and humanitarian assistance to food-insecure people and people threatening government legitimacy; eliminate agricultural export bans and export restrictions; undertake fast-impact food production programmes in key areas; and change biofuel policies. A second set of actions, in the form of a resilience package, consists of the following steps: calm markets with the use of market-oriented regulation of speculation; shared public grain stocks, strengthened food-import financing and reliable food aid; invest in social protection; scale up investments for sustained agricultural growth; and complete the Doha Round of World Trade Organization negotiations.

Other key recommendations include: the design of programmes must be country driven and country owned, with accountability for sound implementation also resting with countries, and a new international architecture for the governance of agriculture, food, and nutrition is needed to effectively implement the initiatives described.

Available online at: <http://www.eldis.org/go/topics/resource-guides/health&id=37257&type=Document>

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### **2. Soaring food prices and the rural poor: feedback from the field**

Publisher: International Fund for Agricultural Development , 2008

The prices of basic food commodities have increased rapidly over the past three years and, as a result, the threat to food security in developing countries has increased significantly. This paper by the International Fund for Agricultural Development, examines what soaring food prices at the global level mean for poor rural people across the developing world.

In virtually all countries, food prices have increased in 2007 and early 2008, although the extent of the increase varies between and within countries. The factors behind the increased prices include higher input costs, higher transportation costs, civil unrest, and agro-climatic conditions. The food crisis is particularly affecting poor rural people, many of whom are absolute or net food buyers. As consumers they are responding by reducing the quantity they eat, and are shifting to lower costs and in some cases lower quality foods. As producers, they are responding either by withdrawing from the market and reverting to low-input low-output production, for home consumption or, where they are able, by shifting into higher value market-oriented production, as a means to earn the income to assure their food security. Others in the rural economy are reacting to increased market opportunities, and in a number of regions' land ownership is becoming increasingly concentrated. To date, government responses to rising food prices have been principally short-term and aimed at urban consumers. A number of countries have also introduced measures aimed at stimulating increased market supply. Yet poor rural people risk being excluded from both.

Available online at: <http://www.eldis.org/go/topics/resource-guides/health&id=37263&type=Document>

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### **3. Rising food prices: drivers and implications for development**

Authors: A. Evans; Centre on International Cooperation, New York University; Chatham House  
Publisher: Child Rights Information Network , 2008

Global food prices have risen 83 per cent over the last three years, with significant impacts for the world's poorest people. This briefing paper focuses on what this important change means for international development. It assesses the drivers of rising prices, discusses the implications of higher prices for developing countries, and surveys implications for development policy. The author argues for a revolution in global food policy and urges development actors to engage with the difficult questions at the centre of current debates.

The paper outlines a number of factors that have contributed to the current increases in food prices, including high income growth in emerging economies (probably the single most significant factor), use of crops for biofuels, the relative inelasticity of supply, historically low stock levels and some speculative investment. Describing the impact on developing countries, it notes that national concerns over inflation and prices have led some countries to reduce exports and others to try to build up stocks, creating a feedback loop that feeds on itself to drive prices up further. In the medium to longer term, however, it warns that 'scarcity trends' (climate change, the cost of energy inputs, scarcity of land and water) could limit the supply-side response. Regarding the implications for development policy, the paper argues that the immediate priority is to increase both the volume and the quality of humanitarian assistance available to poor people, including by moving away from in-kind food aid and towards cash transfers or voucher systems. However, outstanding questions are highlighted regarding how these social protection systems will work, as well as the issue of compensatory financing for some countries facing balance-of-payments difficulties.

In the longer term, the paper argues that the key challenge is to increase the supply of food, and that achieving this will require something close to a revolution in global food policy in developed as well as developing countries. In addition to the concerns about what higher food prices, the author notes that there are a range of other issues, including environmental standards; obesity and health; animal welfare; competitiveness between countries and companies and the security of globalised supply chains.

Available online at: <http://www.eldis.org/go/topics/resource-guides/health&id=36717&type=Document>

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### **4. The world food situation: new driving forces and required actions**

Authors: J. von Braun  
Publisher: International Food Policy Research Institute, 2008

The world food situation is being rapidly redefined, as income growth, climate change, high energy prices, globalisation, and urbanisation transform food consumption, production, and markets. This paper provides an overview of the key forces driving these changes, and considers what policy responses are required to address the challenges ahead.

The report outlines the key factors that are reshaping the world food situation, and describes how changes in food availability, rising commodity prices, and new producer-consumer linkages have crucial implications for the livelihoods of poor and food-insecure people.

Many small farmers are unable to take advantage of the new income-generating opportunities presented by high-value products (meat, milk, vegetables, fruits, flowers), due to high barriers to market entry. Improved capacity is needed to address safety and quality standards as well as the large scales required by food processors and retailers. Poor households that are net sellers of food benefit from higher prices, but

households that are net buyers, the vast majority of the poor, lose out. A number of countries, including in Africa, have made good progress in reducing hunger and child malnutrition, but many of the poorest and hungry are still being left behind. Higher food prices will cause the poor to shift to even less-balanced diets. The author warns that business as usual could mean increased misery, especially for the world's poorest populations. He concludes by advocating five immediate policy actions to avoid damage and foster positive responses.

Available online at: <http://www.eldis.org/go/topics/resource-guides/health&id=36256&type=Document>

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## **5. G8 and the food crisis: the real solutions**

Publisher: Greenpeace International, 2008

Millions of people around the world are suffering food shortages, unaffordable food prices and hunger, primarily due to industrial farming, bad harvests related to climate change, unjust terms of trade and the rush for biofuels.

This brief argues that there is no single solution to the crisis. However, the G8 leaders at the Toyako, Japan summit need to step up emergency assistance to the 850 million people who are suffering from hunger, and address the underlying causes of the current food crisis by: increasing public investment in research and development on ecological and climate change-resilient farming; stopping funding for genetically engineered crops and prohibit patents on seed; phasing out the most toxic chemicals in agriculture and eliminating environmentally destructive agricultural subsidies; protecting domestic food production through trade agreements; and dropping mandatory targets to increase the ratio of biofuels used in transport. In addition, other forces behind the food crisis are identified as speculation on commodities and a growing demand for meat which is diverting grain away from feeding people to feeding livestock.

In conclusion, it is argued that a fundamental change in farming practices and policies is needed to address soaring food prices, hunger and environmental disasters. A recent International Assessment of Agricultural Science and Technology for Development report clearly states food security will neither be achieved through ever increasing amounts of chemical fertilisers or pesticides, nor through resorting to Genetic Engineering. The report aims to reflect a growing consensus among the global scientific community and many governments that industrial, energy-intensive and toxic agriculture is a failed concept of the past. Small-scale farmers and agro-ecological methods provide the way forward in ending the food crisis and meeting the needs of local communities.

Available online at: <http://www.eldis.org/go/topics/resource-guides/health&id=38349&type=Document>

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## **Latest additions from the Health resource guide**

### **1. The emerging epidemic of obesity in developing countries**

Authors: A. M. Prentice

Publisher: International Journal of Epidemiology, 2005

Thirty years ago international nutritionists were focusing on finding solutions to childhood malnutrition, the 'protein gap' and strategies to feed the world's increasing population, while medical services in the developing world concentrated on the fight against infectious diseases. Today the World Health Organization (WHO) is dealing with the new pandemic of obesity and associated non-communicable diseases, such as diabetes. Despite this shift, the challenge of childhood malnutrition has far from disappeared, while TB, HIV and malaria rates are still increasing. This pandemic of obesity is in part caused by subsidised agriculture and multinational companies providing cheap, highly refined fats, oils,

and carbohydrates, as well increased use of labour-saving mechanised devices, affordable motorised transport, and an increase in sedentary pastimes. This paper in the International Journal of Epidemiology reviews these macro-environmental trends as well as considering some of the socio-behavioral influences on weight gain in traditional societies. The major points are summarised and a case study from Gambia presented.

The author highlights warnings from the WHO that the future burden of obesity and diabetes will disproportionately affect developing countries, with projected numbers of new diabetes cases running into the hundreds of millions within the next two decades. It concludes that the pandemic will continue to spread for the foreseeable future, and that, apart from educational campaigns, the governments and health services of poor countries have few effective public health strategies with which to stop this trend.

Available online at: <http://www.eldis.org/go/topics/resource-guides/health&id=39873&type=Document>

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## **2. Training manual on the human rights of persons with disabilities**

Authors: G. Griffo; F. Ortali; Disabled People International, DPI Italy  
Publisher: Association Amici di Raoul Follereau, 2007

The adoption by the United Nations of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities on 13 December 2006 is the result of years of struggles by members of the global community of persons with disabilities for the recognition and respect of their rights.

This training manual aims to help people with disabilities in developing countries understand their human rights in the context of disability and how the Convention can be used as an effective advocacy tool for policy making. It is aimed at trainers and facilitators whom have in-depth knowledge of the context in which the course is run.

Training material is provided on the following topics: human rights; human rights institutions and UN conventions; the condition of people with disabilities; the United Nations convention on the rights of persons with disabilities; DPOs in the promotion and protection of human rights; and a national strategy to support and participate in the process of ratifying the convention.

Available online at: <http://www.eldis.org/go/topics/resource-guides/health&id=39488&type=Document>

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## **3. The status of rural poverty in the Near East and North Africa**

Authors: I. Christensen; B. Veillerette; S. Andricopulos; Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO)  
Publisher: International Fund for Agricultural Development , 2007

Poverty in the Near East and North Africa region is mainly a rural phenomenon. Almost half (48 percent) the area's population live in rural areas. This report focuses on key rural poverty issues in 13 diverse countries in the region, without attempting to propose policy or programme actions at national or local levels.

Overall, the rural poor still face traditional constraints such as water scarcity, inadequate rural infrastructure, inappropriate policies and institutions, weak local-level organisations and gender inequity. They are also affected by new trends in migration, globalisation, changing trade patterns and increasing unemployment amongst young men and women. The report covers the following countries: Algeria, Djibouti, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey, Yemen.

Conclusions on some of the areas covered include:

- Hunger and food insecurity: the rate of reduction of malnutrition (amongst children) is slow and overall food insecurity is not improving
- Private investment in rural enterprise is severely constrained by poor rural infrastructure, inadequate access to rural finance, insufficient availability of local skills and competition from Chinese low cost products
- Access to or sustainability of natural resources such as water, land and pasture is rapidly deteriorating as a result of increasing population density and pressure. This scarcity is likely to be aggravated in coming years as a result of global warming and climate change
- Rural infrastructure and social services: access to water and sanitation facilities is below the world average, however, there has been a lot of progress in the areas of health and education
- Conflict and adverse climatic conditions causing food deficits, loss of livelihoods and population displacement: over 3 million people in the region are officially displaced as a result of conflict
- Gender inequity: this remains a major hindrance to rural development. Constraints on women include excessive workload as a result of poor infrastructure, scarce resources and migration of men and poor access to health services

Available online at: <http://www.eldis.org/go/topics/resource-guides/health&id=39430&type=Document>

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#### **4. Does subjective social status predict health and change in health status better than objective status?**

Authors: A. Singh-Manoux; M.G. Marmot; N.E. Adler  
Publisher: American Psychosomatic Society, 2005

Is a person's health status better predicted by their subjective or objective socioeconomic status? This article examines this question and finds that when analysed independently, both subjective and objective measures of socioeconomic status were significantly associated with health outcomes and with decline in health status over time. When analysed simultaneously, subjective measures offer a better association to health and changes in health than objective measures.

These results are discussed in terms of three possible explanations:

- subjective socioeconomic status is a more precise measure of social position
- the results support the idea that hierarchical rank influence health through direct and indirect mechanisms
- the results could be a product of common method variance, where both subjective socioeconomic status and health ratings have no meaningful relationship to each other, rather they are affected by a common underlying variable

Available online at: <http://www.eldis.org/go/topics/resource-guides/health&id=39400&type=Document>

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#### **5. Monitoring and evaluation of nutrition and nutrition-related programmes: a training manual for programme managers and implementers**

Authors: The Applied Nutrition Programme, University of Nairobi; School of Nutrition Science and Policy, Tufts University  
Publisher: AED Center for Global Health Communication and Marketing, 2000

Monitoring and evaluation is an essential part of all projects and programmes. This manual has been

designed to assist facilitators to train development and nutrition programme managers and those working on nutrition-related activities on how to design a monitoring system and develop an evaluation plan. It has two parts: guidelines for the facilitator and guidelines for the training course.

Part one provides facilitation guidelines including tips on how to get started, facilitation approaches, preparation and evaluating the training. Part two provides seven modules which cover the tasks and information necessary for a programme manager to design a monitoring system and develop an evaluation plan. Step by step instructions are given including content, exercises and facilitation techniques.

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