

COMBATTING MALNUTRITION : An All-Stakeholders Breakthrough Summit

Keynote speech by H.E. Mr Didier Reynders,
Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs,
Foreign Trade and European Affairs

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Mr. Chairman,
Distinguished guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

As you have seen while coming to this magnificent building, we are approaching the Christmas and New Year's celebrations, often associated with good food and delicacies. It is especially the case here in Belgium where we appreciate refined cuisine. Just walking around the Christmas market at the Grand Place can give you a good flavour of what to expect...

Today's conference is sad reminder that malnutrition remains a serious problem on our planet. 1 in 8 of the 7 billion people in the world is still suffering daily from hunger. Most live in Sub-Saharan Africa and in South Asia.

We have to recognize the fact that the problem of feeding the world's growing population is changing. Hunger has so far been seen largely in terms of providing sufficient quantities of food. But the pace of biodiversity loss and ecosystem degradation, coupled with emerging health issues related to diet, make it urgent to address the quality of agriculture and food systems as well. While close to 900 million people in the world suffer from hunger, even more – about 1.5 billion – are overweight or obese, and an estimated two billion suffer from micronutrient malnutrition.

I would like to focus my presentation on 3 issues:

1. First, an evaluation of where we stand, especially as far as the 1st Millennium Development Goal is concerned
2. Second, what Belgium is doing to help combat malnutrition in the world
3. And third, how to deal with crisis such as in the Sahel and the Horn of Africa in a sustainable and holistic way.

1. Where do we stand?

First, where do we stand in the fight against malnutrition?

After a pretty good start, it seems that the first Millennium Development Goal target of halving the number of people suffering from hunger by 2015 might not be met. A strong commitment from all stakeholders is thus required if we want to succeed and get back to the right track that will bring us under the set target by 2015. And we have to keep in mind the negative impact of such a failure on other key Millennium Development Goals. Indeed, malnutrition will further complicate, or even jeopardize goals such as achieving primary education for all, reducing child mortality and improving maternal health. We cannot allow this to happen.

Balanced nutrition is particularly important during the 1000-day period from conception through the first two years of life when undernutrition and malnutrition have long-term adverse and irreversible health consequences. Eliminating malnutrition involves sustaining the quality and quantity of food a person eats, as well as adequate health care and creating a healthy environment.

Post 2015 agenda: resources and innovative mechanisms

Ending hunger and malnutrition is a critical prerequisite for sustainable development and must continue to be a top priority for the post-2015 period.

Adequate resources

Despite increased assistance, the level of resources spent on agricultural development and food and nutrition security remains wholly inadequate for the scale of the challenge.

Innovative financing mechanisms

However, it is unlikely that the donor community will be able to finance the needed funds out of traditional fiscal resources, which tend to be restricted and more unpredictable in times of economic crisis. Therefore, innovative resources are needed.

In addition to public funding, agricultural development requires high levels of private investment. However, private investment still lags behind its potential in most developing countries because of little interest for a sector associated with high climatic, price and counterpart risks, and market failures.

National ownership

Finally, we believe that more than ever, national ownership is needed as to ensure sustainability. As such, nutrition policies (including safety nets) should be embedded in national policies.

2. How does Belgian contribute to combating malnutrition?

My second point is dedicated to the Belgian contributions in the fight against malnutrition.

I am not going to elaborate on all our financial contributions to various programmes and projects. I want rather to focus on our approach.

It is first useful to remind that no single instrument, country or agency can provide all the answers to the challenge of malnutrition and hunger. An enhanced collaboration between all stakeholders, different UN-agencies, national governments, civil society, research institutions, private sector, taking into consideration the comparative advantages from each one and everybody, is thus essential to tackle the challenges ahead.

Therefore, the Government of Belgium acknowledges that through a specific Public Private Partnership/Corporate Social Responsibility approach, sustained efforts can be made to finally stop children dying of malnutrition.

In its effort to improve the effectiveness of its development aid, Belgium applies the principles of the Paris Declaration, the Accra Agenda for Action and the EU's Code of Conduct on Complementarity and the Division of Labour in Development Policy. Likewise, Belgium acknowledges the essential role of the multilateral system in the development of the agriculture and food security sector. In its own way, through its close involvement in the work of the new Committee on World Food Security, Belgium contributes to the reform of the global food security architecture.

Belgium provides food aid and food assistance through the World Food Programme (WFP) and we support projects designed to rebuild devastated agricultural production systems through the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO).

Additionally Belgium finances the agricultural sector via the European Union and the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research and specialised UN agencies as the International Fund for Agricultural Development.

Finally, many of the Belgian NGO's funded by our Development Cooperation Department are active in the agricultural sector.

Special attention to Gender

One main point of focus for the Belgian development cooperation, and closely linked to nutrition, is Gender. Indeed, women play a crucial role in the agricultural production of developing countries, which makes them important agents of economic development. Moreover, the considerable proportion of food production attributable to women makes them the primary agents of food security and of the well-being of households in rural areas. It is in fact acknowledged that an increase in the incomes and the improvement of the living conditions of women have a positive impact on the nutritional condition and education of children.

The findings of the 2010-2011 "State of Food and Agriculture" report issued by the FAO, show that, by closing the gender gap in agriculture, agricultural production can increase by

2.5 to 4 percent and this increase alone could translate into a reduction in the number of undernourished people in the world by 12 to 17 percent, or 100 to 150 million people.

Most important, access to land and other natural resources is essential to close this gender gap.

The implementation of the Voluntary guidelines on the responsible governance of tenure of land fisheries and forests, which were adopted in May 2012 by the Committee on World Food Security, is a first step forward. The next and essential step in this process is the implementation of these Guidelines. In 2012, the Government of Belgium has been financing the Voluntary guidelines with a budget of 800.000 USD through the FAO core budget, to assist developing countries in the implementation of these guidelines. And this is only the beginning.

Agricultural growth and role of smallholders and social protection systems

Agricultural growth is necessary but not sufficient for a sustained hunger reduction.

Reducing hunger is about more than just increasing the quantity of food. It is also about increasing the quality of food in terms of diversity, nutrient content and safety.

Agricultural growth involving smallholders, especially women, will be most effective in reducing extreme poverty and hunger when it generates employment for the poor. Social protection and safety net systems are needed to ensure that the most vulnerable are not left behind and can also participate in, contribute to and benefit from growth.

Social protection can improve nutrition for young children - an investment that will pay off in the future with better educated, stronger and healthier adults. With effective social protection complementing inclusive economic growth, hunger and malnutrition can be eliminated.

Market-access is also paramount. In this regard, I want to mention that Belgium is financing the highly successful Purchase for Progress (P4P) - project which promotes the development of agricultural markets and supports smallholders to become competitive players in the market place through a joint WFP-FAO programme.

Furthermore, Belgium supports smallholder farmers through its support of IFAD, to which Belgium has been the 2nd largest bilateral contributor during the last decennium.

As far as development cooperation is concerned, Belgium wants to concentrate its aide on the so called « bottom billion ». This implies giving them the necessary instruments for their own development. So in a way, less charity but more responsibility.

This is also why Belgium has reduced over the last decade the number of countries benefiting from its direct bilateral assistance. We also want to further decrease the scattering of resources. We tend thus to use more and more the best channels at our disposal in order to maximize the impact. I am here referring to the European Union and to UN specialized agencies, funds and programmes, with more and more core funding.

3. Need for a comprehensive approach

I would like to end my presentation with some remarks on how to deal with hunger and malnutrition in crisis situations. This is an even bigger challenge than dealing with such scourge in more “normal situations” if I may say so.

I am thinking here of the Horn of Africa and of the Sahel region. Both have been in the spotlights over the last few years and not for the good reasons. Beyond severe droughts, both regions have to cope with political and security challenges that have further aggravated the famine.

If we want to successfully eradicate hunger and malnutrition, we have to deal at the same time with the different key factors of instability. Humanitarian assistance is certainly required to tackle the most pressing needs but this is not enough.

This is why I welcome the efforts undertaken by the European Union, under the leadership of the High Representative and Vice-President of the European Commission Catherine Ashton, to develop comprehensive strategies for the Horn of Africa and Sahel. In those strategies, the development and security components have been combined. This is indeed crucial if we want to bring concrete and sustainable change in peoples’ lives. As we say, “without development there is no security” and “without security there is no development”.

Only a comprehensive approach can provide a way out from such crisis. This requires the involvement of all stakeholders from the political, development, humanitarian and even sometimes from the security and military sides.

The entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty in 2009 has allowed the European Union to develop a more coherent policy. As the world largest donor, providing more than 50% of global aid commitments, the EU has strived over the last few years to better combine all its instruments to that end. I am convinced that if we all push towards the same direction, we have a better chance to succeed. Timing and synchronisation are also of the essence in order to benefit from the multiplier effect. This is why, humanitarian assistance has to be accompanied by political engagement and pressure on the parties. In some cases, a military involvement might be needed to enforce and then maintain peace.

In the Horn of Africa and in Sahel, the EU is active. We provide humanitarian assistance to the people and support development programmes. We are also involved, together with the regional organisations and the United Nations, in the political efforts needed to solve the crisis. On the security front, several EU missions have been set up, be it to fight piracy or train the Somali security forces. As far as Sahel is concerned, a training mission has been launched in Niger and another one is under consideration to support the Malian forces.

The EU is thus using all its instruments available in its toolbox. Combined with the efforts of the whole international community, it can make a real difference. Belgium is contributing to those efforts and 3 Ministers and departments are involved : Development Cooperation, Defense and Foreign Affairs.

We are committed to continue this work, convinced that such a global approach is the only way to successfully deal with complex and global issues such as hunger and malnutrition.

Mr. Chairman,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me conclude by saying that hunger eradication is essential to achieving Sustainable Development. Food and nutrition security were among the top priority areas in the Outcome Document adopted in Rio last June. I share the views that hunger, food security and nutrition should be a central part of our deliberations towards the Sustainable Developments Goals that need to replace the Millenium Development Goals beyond 2015.

Our 21st century world should be able to feed all its people. Combating hunger and malnutrition is not only our moral duty, it is also in our economic, political and even security interests. We have the necessary means for that but we have to use them the right way in order not to waste them. My plea today is to do it in a manner as comprehensive as possible. And we should do it, together with our international partners, in a coordinated and strategic way in order to maximize our leverage and hence reach our common objectives. This is I believe the only option we have if we want to succeed.

We owe it to the children of this beautiful planet. They are our future and the best thing we can give them is to provide them with a healthy body and a free mind. Only when their basic needs are met, people can start dreaming !

I thank you all for your attention. I hope my few remarks will serve as useful « food for thought », hence feeding your afternoon exchanges !
