

# Taking Action for the World's Poor and Hungry People

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## SPEAKER SUMMARY NOTE

**Session:** OPENING CEREMONY

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**Title:** Ending Hunger Soon and Cutting Poverty Fast

Reducing poverty fast and ending hunger soon is one of the main tasks of development today. The goal is clear, but how to achieve it is less clear and must differ around the world. IFPRI and its partners called for this initiative on "Taking Action for the World's Poor and Hungry People" based on years of research with the poor and on poverty and based on new insights. The time has come to take new types of action and at large scale.

The **idea of poverty** has changed fundamentally in recent human history. Poverty has gone from being perceived as a natural phenomenon that is always with us to being an unacceptable social phenomenon. Addressing poverty has changed from a focus on solutions—that is, projects and agencies—to thinking about poverty from the side of problems—that is, economics, politics, exclusion, demographics—and newly connecting the problem perspective with the solution perspective. It has changed from a focus on charity to the recognition of rights, with a new ethical and moral underpinning, and from national initiatives to local and global initiatives, with the Millennium Development Goals acting as a force of globalism in poverty reduction. This evolution of the idea of poverty is a remarkable progress that must be pushed further. Through this conference, and the research and consultations around it, we seek to further shape the idea of poverty and hunger reduction in realistic ways.

**A re-thinking of poverty reduction** is needed. Failing to take action is risky for global harmony and security and carries a high price tag. Hunger has enormous costs in terms of ill health, lost human potential, and reduced school performance and work productivity. The world is losing scientists, artists, political leaders, and productive workers and citizens who will never be, owing to untimely deaths and stunted human development. Gandhi called for "**starting with the poorest**," but whether it is most effective to improve livelihoods of the poorest, for instance, by facilitating opportunity and economic prosperity among the not-so-poor or by providing social protection for the poorest remains a contentious issue.

**Realism and optimism** concerning poverty and hunger reduction must be balanced. Without optimism about development and poverty reduction, there will be no progress. Without realism about what aspects of poverty and hunger can be addressed and how soon, there will be frustration and deficient strategies. Balancing these attitudes is part of the larger issue of creating a culture for economic and social development.

Many of those who will be poor in 2015 are **the poorest and hungry** today. IFPRI research has shown that 160 million people live in ultra poverty on less than 50 cents a day and that progress against ultra poverty has been slower than progress against one-dollar-a-day poverty. This is largely a result of slow progress against ultra poverty in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. The fact that large numbers of people continue to live in intransigent poverty and hunger in an increasingly wealthy global economy is the major ethical challenge of our time.

We must remain conscious of the fact that there is "mischievous **ambiguity** about the word 'poor,'" as stated in England's Poor Law Report of 1834. Hunger also is an ambiguous word. To enable realistic, action-oriented policy, it is important to be precise about the concepts of poverty and hunger.

Poverty involves deficiencies of wealth, physical well-being, and social inclusion. Hunger involves deficiencies in access to food and healthy nutrition. **Ending poverty** broadly defined by 2015 is not a realistic goal, but it is realistic to expect to reduce US\$1-a-day poverty faster than in the past. Similarly, achieving healthy diets and overcoming micronutrient deficiencies and child stunting by 2015 or soon thereafter is not realistic but **ending severe hunger**—understood as lack of calories— is a realistic goal, as is ending child hunger—understood as child wasting, i.e. low weight for height—by 2015. Both will require new and larger scale action, however. One of my hopes for this conference is that it produces strategic thinking on time scales—that is, what can and should be done when and where.

## **Recognition of Those Left Behind**

Quite a lot is known about the people who are not being reached by current development efforts.

First, although **poverty and widespread hunger remain** even in regions where high economic growth and substantial reductions in poverty have taken place, the poorest are increasingly becoming concentrated in Sub-Saharan Africa and in countries with low state capacity. More than three-quarters of those living on less than half a dollar a day live in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Second, poverty and hunger **reduction has been slower among excluded groups**—ethnic minorities, disadvantaged people, and the disabled. For example, poverty reduction among tribal peoples in India in the past 20 years has been only about half of that among other groups. In addition, poor women and children are particularly vulnerable to the long-term effects of poverty and hunger on health.

Third, the poor are still **predominantly rural** and related to farming. Seventy-five percent of the world's poor are rural, even though only 58 percent of the population of developing countries lives in rural areas. The majority of those living on less than a dollar a day will be found in rural areas for the next few decades, but their links to urban development may be decisive for pathways out of poverty.

Fourth, although the total number of people living in poverty may change little, this stability masks **dynamic movements in and out of poverty**. Some above the line are vulnerable to poverty, and some below the line will move out of poverty. Others below the poverty line—usually the very poorest—may remain there for generations. And the risk of falling into poverty is increasing for many because of food price inflation, environmental destruction, and climate change.

The first day of the conference provides an opportunity for us all to bring to the table what we know about the poorest and the hungry, and the dynamics of poverty and hunger, in more detail.

## **What Must be Done?**

Reaching the most food-insecure and poverty-stricken groups will require more and more resources and investment per capita. It will also require innovative approaches to including the poor, and a focus on policies and programs that are particularly effective at improving the welfare of the world's poorest and hungry.

The kind of **growth that will bring sustainable benefits to the poorest** people needs to be identified more clearly. In most countries this will involve accelerated rural and agricultural growth, because the livelihoods of the poorest are concentrated in these sectors. Increasing rural growth will require accelerating investments in infrastructure, technology, education, and health. A sound macroeconomic framework and open trade regimes remain critical for pro-poor growth. Global imbalances with risks of economy-wide shocks and inflation work against the poor who lack assets.

Even growth that reduces poverty shows its limits in reaching and including extremely poor and hungry people. Especially in environments of high inequality, and discrimination growth often does too

little to improve the livelihoods at the bottom of the income scale. And the power of growth to reduce poverty and improve human well-being—such as childhood malnutrition—is diminishing as poverty reduction progresses. More action is needed to improve livelihoods of those people who are not in a position to take advantage of the benefits of growth—the youngest, the oldest, the sick, the disabled, and other vulnerable groups. Greater investments in health and nutrition programs to improve well-being, productivity, and livelihoods over the long term are crucial.

It is now time to take more action for **social protection**, to take it earlier in the development process, and to take it at a larger scale. This may be the central call from this conference. Social protection needs to be phased in much more comprehensively and earlier to reach those who will not benefit sufficiently from general economic growth (such as children and the elderly). Social protection helps the poor, and those at risk of becoming poor, reduce the risk of shocks, mitigate their impact, and maintain access to education and health services. As a result, effective social protection will also promote growth.

This conference will provide a global forum for exchange and for sharing and learning from international experiences. It is particularly appropriate to hold this conference in China, which is one of the few large countries to have reduced poverty fast and to come close to ending severe hunger soon. But China also experiences the problem that further reduction of poverty and hunger is more difficult and requires more resources and policy change.

## **Effective Action**

The main question is no longer whether the public has a moral obligation to the poor, but how that obligation is best translated into action. Knowing more about the problem and about what to do is only part of the solution. It is essential to become more **effective at implementing** policies and interventions. Learning from previous implementation experiences, engaging different actors, and being more cognizant of the local political context are all important in this regard. It is also important to address several difficult but crucial questions: How should interventions be **scaled up**? And who should do what in the scaling-up process? With regard to the latter, it is clear is that engaging different actors—such as businesses, foundations, and social entrepreneurs—is vital to achieving rapid and substantial reductions of poverty and hunger; government cannot do it alone. Social entrepreneurship—business-minded innovation for poverty reduction—is producing effective ways of reaching the poorest at the appropriate scale.

Successful actions for poverty reduction come from within, through the **self-empowerment** of the poor. Improving capacity to implement programs requires that skill levels among the poor and organizational arrangements for pro-poor services in education and health get more attention. The persistence of poverty in countries with low state capacity shows this to be an important issue. At the local level, it is crucial to establish capacity to mobilize resources and sound governance with accountability that gives poor people and excluded groups a voice in their own communities.

These issues surrounding effectiveness will be picked up toward the end of this conference. There is much that we currently do not know about how to act effectively, and it is important to actively learn from past experiences to understand this better.

Finally, being effective requires acting in a manner **appropriate to the context**. Although a global conference and consensus on these issues has its place, ultimately these ideas need to be adapted into specific strategies that make sense in different regions. The mix of policies for growth and for social protection will look different for countries at different stages of development. What works in Asia will not necessarily work in Africa, and context-specific mixes are needed. In some countries and regions, accelerated growth matters more, and in others, social protection needs to accelerate. The regional forums of this conference are essential in developing more specific suggestions for action in each of the major developing-country regions. These forums are led by main actors from those regions who are engaged in poverty reduction and ending hunger and who are best placed to lead the

development of specific proposals. The challenge put before the forums is not just to engage in a general debate on hunger and poverty, but to identify pathways and actions to **end severe hunger soon and to reduce poverty faster**.

IFPRI tables a draft statement for the way forward and follow up action to be discussed by conference participants and others who cannot be here with us. I invite you to make your inputs at [www.ifpri.org](http://www.ifpri.org).

## **Conclusion**

Over the next three days we will (1) bring to the table what we know about the poorest and hungry and the dynamics of severe poverty and hunger, (2) address the question of what action is needed in the major regions of the developing world, and (3) determine how to be more effective in the action we take.

Additional action, and more effective action, is needed—action that is founded on the best available research and thinking. This conference and the broader consultation process associated with it are being held to bring together such thinking. This process has garnered widespread support, as evidenced by three main developments:

1. First, this conference and the ongoing consultation process are being cosponsored by a broad consortium of governments, regional development banks, bilateral development agencies, foundations, and nongovernmental organizations including the Government of China, Asian Development Bank, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Canadian International Development Agency, Deutsche Welthungerhilfe (German Agro-Action), European Commission, the German Federal Ministry for Economic Co-operation with Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit, International Development Research Centre, Irish Aid, UNICEF, and United Nations Development Programme.
2. Second, people from a broad variety of backgrounds, including government, research, action-oriented civil society organizations, and international agencies, are participating in this process.
3. Third, other policy discussions that have been undertaken as part of this process are having widespread resonance, and we are networking with other relevant forums.

This conference will meet its stated goal of taking action if the discussions continue and remain focused once we leave this conference. We hope you will discuss these issues with your networks, colleagues, partner organizations, clients, or fellow researchers on your return home. Each of you is here because of your individual insights and commitment to poverty reduction. This conference can facilitate more collective action for ending severe hunger soon and cutting poverty faster and thereby strengthen our joint impact.