

# Breaking the Cycle of Hunger

An Interview With Josette Sheeran



Courtesy of UNWFP/Emilia Casella

Josette Sheeran, World Food Program executive director, visits Kassab IDP (Internally Displaced Persons) Camp in Kutum, North Darfur, Sudan.

*The means exist to cut by half the number of hungry people in the world; what is needed is greater political will in both beneficiary and donor countries, according to Josette Sheeran, executive director of the U.N. World Food Program (WFP).*

*Managing editor Bruce Odessey interviewed Sheeran just months after she assumed the WFP leadership position. Challenges to reducing hunger abound: AIDS, poverty, weak governments, climate change, rising food costs due to biofuel increases, and others. Sheeran cited hope, however, that concerted action can break the cycle of hunger that passes from generation to generation.*

*Sheeran was formerly U.S. under secretary of state for economic and business affairs, including agriculture, and before that deputy U.S. trade representative.*

**Question:** Hunger and hunger-related causes kill an estimated 25,000 people a day, and the United Nations says the number of chronically hungry in the world is rising by some 4 million a year. Are we losing the battle against world hunger?

**Sheeran:** We've made gains against hunger in the world over the past few decades. Yet because of population growth in some of the world's poorest regions, we have — in absolute numbers — more hungry people today than ever before. I strongly believe we can beat hunger; we can and we will, but we have to deploy not only all of the science and technology at our disposal, but also the political will to do so.



Courtesy of UNWFP/Judith Schuler

A girl at the Tambeye Nomad School in Niger receives from WFP the nutrition she needs to learn.

Today, we still lose a child to hunger every five seconds — an unacceptable toll. Yet we are now at a point in history where we have the science and technology to feed everyone on Earth. I hope both to raise awareness of how that can be accomplished and to give profound thanks to the citizens of the many countries that contribute so much in the fight against hunger.

**Q:** How is the World Food Program engaged in fighting hunger?

**Sheeran:** The World Food Program feeds about half of the hungry who receive food assistance, usually in the most difficult and remote corners of the Earth. That is our mission. Over many decades, we have built up a huge logistical capacity that is so effective it has become the U.N.'s primary humanitarian arm for logistics — not only for food but also for medicines, tents, blankets, whatever people need in emergency situations.

But even with a nearly \$3 billion annual budget and thousands of ships, planes, and vehicles delivering food

every day, we're only reaching about 10 percent of the hungry in the world. And so we still lose 25,000 people a day to hunger-related causes — the number-one public health problem in the world, killing more people than TB [tuberculosis], malaria, and AIDS combined. We simply must ramp up all that we are doing to get ahead of the hunger curve.

**Q:** What do you see as WFP's greatest challenges?

**Sheeran:** A number of things are happening. We have what we call the "triple threat" of AIDS and poverty and weak government capacity — especially in southern Africa — that makes it tough to get ahead of the hunger curve. We also have what could be a "perfect storm" developing among climate change, rising operational costs, and the demands that biofuels are putting on the global food system. Over the past five years at the World Food Program, we've seen the purchasing costs for staple commodities rise by about 50 percent. This is due to a combination of factors: increasing world demand for grain that — along with the advent of biofuels — has pushed up commodity prices, as well as skyrocketing fuel and shipping costs. And so, even if WFP maintains the same or a slightly larger budget, we're still feeding many fewer people. The rising price of food also means the poorest of the world are having greater trouble feeding themselves at the household level.

**Q:** What is the impact of biofuels? And climate change?

**Sheeran:** Biofuels present a significant opportunity for poor farmers but also a challenge for the hungry, because grain markets are tighter and food prices are higher than they've been for decades. With climate change, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [an international consensus body that reflects the work of hundreds of scientists] predicts that, in some areas, yields from rain-dependent agriculture will be cut in half by 2020. And in Africa, our sister U.N. agency, the Food and Agriculture Organization [FAO], estimates that 95 percent of agriculture is rain dependent. Even if these predictions do not materialize in full, we still can see huge challenges ahead for regions such as Africa that will be hit hardest by climate change — where dry areas will get drier, and wet areas wetter.



Courtesy of UNWFP-Photolibary

Women in Cajamarca, in Peru's northern Andes, tend crops at their community field as part of WFP's food-for-work activities.

**Q:** What are the political obstacles to conquering world hunger?

**Sheeran:** There has to be the political will to succeed at every level — from the village to the provinces, to the country level and on up.

**Q:** Are you talking about recipient or donor countries?

**Sheeran:** I'm talking about all of them because everyone has a stake in this battle. To cite a positive example, we know that the New Partnership for Africa's Development, or NEPAD, in Africa has worked very hard with the African Union to make agriculture and hunger a top priority for African states. That includes formulating a pledge of 10 percent of investment going to agriculture. We know that the only way to defeat poverty and hunger

— whether in Swaziland or Ireland or the United States many years ago — is to figure out how to address the plight of the poor farmer. In countries that do figure that out, we see economic gain and development. And we see deep, chronic hunger become a thing of history.

Many countries have broken out of the grasp of hunger, but it takes concerted action and almost always external help with technology and knowledge and, sometimes, investment.

**Q:** How is the world progressing toward achieving the U.N. Millennium Development Goals [MDGs] to cut the proportion of poverty and hunger in half by 2015?

**Sheeran:** Countries including Chile have already met the first MDG of cutting poverty and hunger in half, while Ghana and Brazil are close. Yet as a world community, we are not on track to achieve the MDGs.

What is revolutionary about the MDGs is that we finally got all the world's leaders to sit down and agree on a limited set of priorities to eliminate the worst disparities in poverty, hunger, health, education, etc. Forums like the G8 have produced practical action plans to achieve these goals, something I strongly support. Defeating world hunger is a big, overwhelming mission for most people. We have to find ways to make this achievable bit by bit.

**Q:** What needs to happen?

**Sheeran:** The most important thing in fighting hunger is to break the cycle of hunger that passes from generation to generation. It has been documented in many countries that hungry women give birth to malnourished children, an “inherited hunger” that can persist for generations. So part of what we're trying to do at the World Food Program is to confront this life cycle of hunger right at its root. If we can break the life cycle of hunger, then communities have a chance to break the cycle of poverty.

These things are completely interlinked. If a child is stunted physically from malnutrition, his or her brain will also be underdeveloped. Imagine the implications for economic development in countries where the rate of stunting among children exceeds 50 percent!

We need to reach the hunger right at the root — among young children and pregnant mothers — and, at the next stage, try to bring kids into school. One thing I've really looked at is the incredibly powerful effect of school feeding. When children get at least one meal a

day at school, all kinds of other social goods happen: Enrollment, especially among girls, goes up; attendance and academic performance improve. Education has also been proven to have a strong mitigating effect against acquiring HIV.

These are not unattainable goals. I am also hopeful because the sciences — the seed science, the soil science, and the science of packing and moving food in a safe and efficient manner — now hold within them the potential for the world to be able to meet the food needs of every citizen on Earth. And so within all these challenges is the potential, I think, to end hunger in a way that would meet the vision of people like scientist Norman Borlaug and others who were part of the Green Revolution that saved so many millions of lives throughout Asia and elsewhere. We know it can happen because we have seen it happen.

**Q:** Anything to add?

**Sheeran:** I think that Americans should be really proud of their contributions over many decades to fighting hunger. Not only is the U.S. government the World Food Program's most generous donor, but it also feeds almost half of the hungry that are reached through external help each year. USAID's [U.S. Agency for International Development] Office of Food for Peace has literally led the way since [U.S. President Dwight] Eisenhower created it in the 1950s and President John Kennedy expanded it in the 1960s. Food for Peace is now the backbone for fighting against hunger globally. ■

*The opinions expressed in this interview do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. government.*

## DIPLOMATIC STEWARDSHIP OF AMERICA'S AID TO THE HUNGRY



Ambassador Vasquez helps serve lunch in Honduras.

U.S. Department of State

**T**he thousands of tourists who visit the famed Roman square Piazza del Popolo pass unknowingly by the U.S.

Mission to the United Nations Agencies in Rome. Yet no other U.S. embassy is more involved in reducing hunger around the world.

As the eighth U.S. representative to the U.N. Agencies in Rome, I lead the mission staff in drawing attention to global problems of hunger and food insecurity and in managing and ensuring the effective use of U.S. resources provided to the United Nations for the benefit of the poor, the hungry, and the marginalized.

The U.S. mission serves as the primary link between the U.S. government and the three principal

U.N. organizations dedicated to food and agriculture — the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the World Food Program (WFP), and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD). The mission, consisting of personnel from the Department of State, Department of Agriculture, and the U.S. Agency for International Development, oversees U.S. relations with and plays a leading role in U.S. engagement with these Rome-based U.N. agencies.

As the biggest U.N. contributor, the United States has a large stake in ensuring that the organizations are well run and that their activities complement and enhance U.S. national and foreign policy objectives to feed the hungry. My team and I at the U.S. mission represent the U.S. government in the Rome-based U.N. agencies on policy and programmatic issues, negotiate positions with other local representatives from donor and recipient countries, and build bridges between Washington and Rome on strategic policies for the best stewardship of America's aid to the hungry.

— Ambassador Gaddi H. Vasquez