



Feeding Hunger and Insecurity

The Global Food Price Crisis

A summary of Action Against
Hunger research in Ethiopia,
Sierra Leone, Central African
Republic and Liberia

In 2007 and 2008 international food and oil prices soared causing riots in over 30 countries, threatening to undo any progress made towards Millennium Development Goals 1 and 4 – eradicating hunger and under-five child mortality. In this report, Action Against Hunger looks at the impact these global trends had on malnutrition and food security. Despite cereal prices falling on the global market, recent surveillance shows that food commodity prices have remained high or increased in 32 of the 36 vulnerable countries monitored (WFP 2008c). Action Against Hunger's assessments in Ethiopia, Sierra Leone, Central African Republic and Liberia revealed that the high cost of food in 2008 did not conclusively result in an immediate increase in acute malnutrition¹ at the national level, but had a significant and consistent impact on livelihoods and dietary diversity in all four countries. The findings presented in this report underscore the urgent need for an immediate, effective and unified response to hunger.

Key Messages

- 🌱 Even though global food prices are falling, local prices have continued to increase or have remained at their inflated level for most vulnerable countries
- 🌱 Despite no clear increase in severe malnutrition, high prices consistently forced families to adopt damaging coping strategies to maintain staple food consumption; 'seasonality' shows that this can have long-term implications for poverty, vulnerability and malnutrition
- 🌱 Context matters; urgent funding is needed to translate global policy into effective responses addressing the needs of those most affected and most vulnerable
- 🌱 Interventions must be inclusive, coordinated and comprehensive, addressing both agricultural production and nutrition in tandem, both in the short and long-run at the global, national and local level

Action Against Hunger / Action Contre la Faim (ACF) is a global humanitarian organization committed to saving the lives of malnourished children while providing families with access to safe water and long-term solutions to hunger.

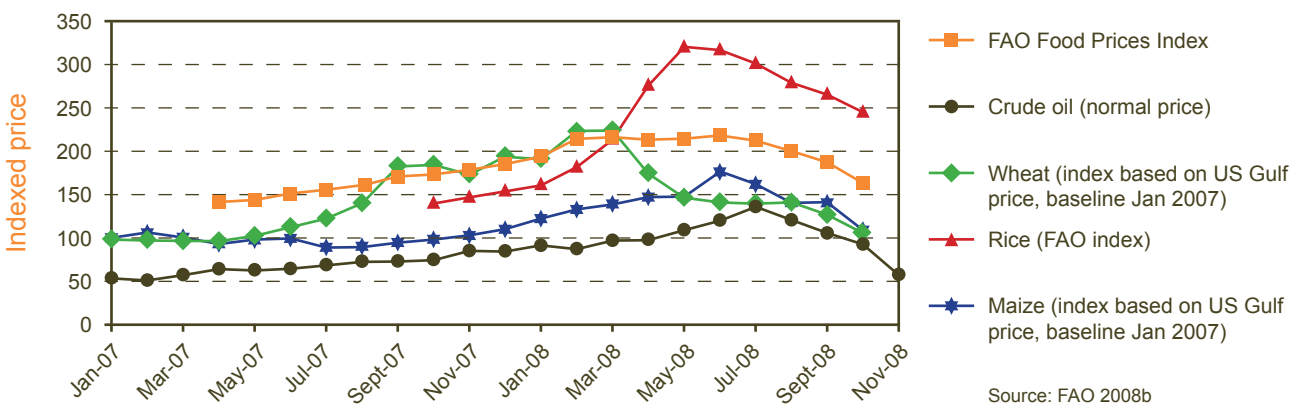


High global food commodity prices translated, in varying degrees, into higher domestic food prices, increasing the number of undernourished people from 850 million in 2005 to 963 million in 2008. While the rise in prices may come to the benefit of net food sellers, for the majority of small-scale farmers, rural farm workers and the urban poor in less developed countries who are net food buyers, the global increases were an additional threat to their survival.

Substantial evidence shows that high food prices during the annual hunger season prompt damaging household behaviour as families struggle to survive,

triggering a regular seasonal spike in malnutrition. Worries that high global prices may have a similar effect prompted Action Against Hunger to launch a number of country studies to better understand how high and volatile food commodity prices affect household food security and malnutrition. Four basic questions were asked: Do high global food prices translate into local increases in malnutrition? Are all countries equally affected? How do the effects of high prices vary within a specific context? Was the response good enough? The case studies presented in this briefing paper answer each question in turn.

Figure 1: Changes in food and oil prices between January 2007 and November 2008



The 'Old Face' of 'New Hunger': Seasonal Deprivation

Volatile food commodity prices are not new to poor households. Literature on 'seasonality' describes regular, yet unpredictable, fluctuations in various dimensions of welfare and poverty, from births to deaths, milk production to malaria, often stemming from intra-annual climatic variations (figure 2a). Despite a multitude of possible interventions, many of the world's poorest people continue to face an annual 'hunger season' in the build up to the local harvest period.

Fluctuations in food prices are compounded by lack of access to formal credit and inadequate storage facilities forcing households to sell produce rapidly after the harvest at low prices, to repay expensive debts contracted in the hunger season, pay school and hospital fees and to avoid losing a significant proportion of the harvest to pests and decay. The same farmers then return to the market only months later to buy food back at new higher prices. Seasonal increases in food prices exhibit a clear link with acute malnutrition. This phenomenon is not new. Figure 2b shows the correlation between malnutrition and changes in staple food prices in Ghana 1988/89 as the seasons progressed. Poor people throughout the developing world remain trapped by this annual cycle of seasonal deprivation.

When faced with seasonal food price increases, poor families almost universally react by restricting

the quality and, later, the quantity of food consumed. Maintaining staple food consumption at the expense of more micronutrients-dense foods, like eggs, meat or milk, can result in micronutrient deficiencies, a weakened immune system and, if prolonged, weight loss, causing malnutrition rates to rise. As food insecurity intensifies, more households adopt damaging, irreversible coping strategies such as selling assets and livestock, or borrowing at high interest rates using their land and future harvest as collaterals.

The impacts of high food prices do not always manifest in an immediate rise in malnutrition, but can have catastrophic consequences in later years. Seasonal hunger is the 'father of famine'. Individuals and communities are frequently forced to gamble their future welfare to live today, which often has serious repercussions for livelihoods in later months/years. Steadily depleted assets can increase household vulnerability to seasonal and global price rises in later years as coping mechanisms become more limited. Even if followed by a good harvest, the legacy of a past hazard may remain as assets cannot be fully restored immediately. The household will remain vulnerable to future shocks. It is this debilitating, downward spiral of seasonal suffering that preceded the food crises in Malawi (2001/02) and Niger (2005), where food crises occurred in years when harvests were better than or only marginally below the average.

Figure 2a: Malnutrition, malaria and rainfall in Niger 2007

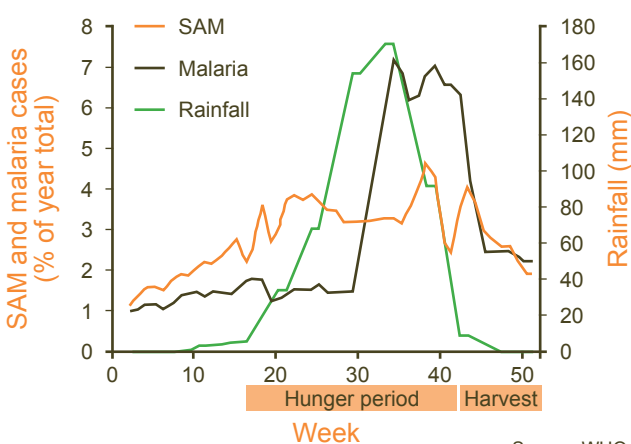


Figure 2b: Seasonality in food prices and malnutrition in northern Ghana 1988/89



Figure 3a: Percentage of families adopting each coping strategy in Malawi in 2002 and 1999

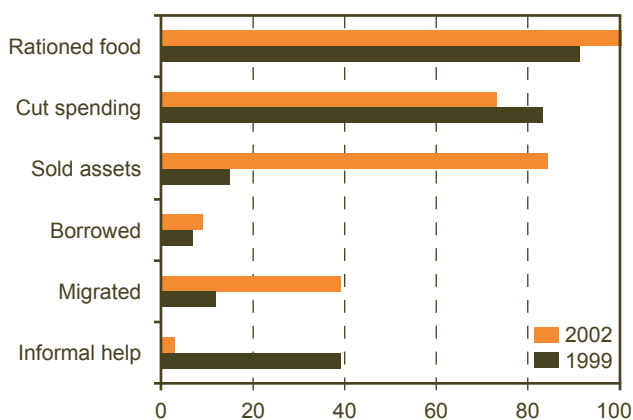
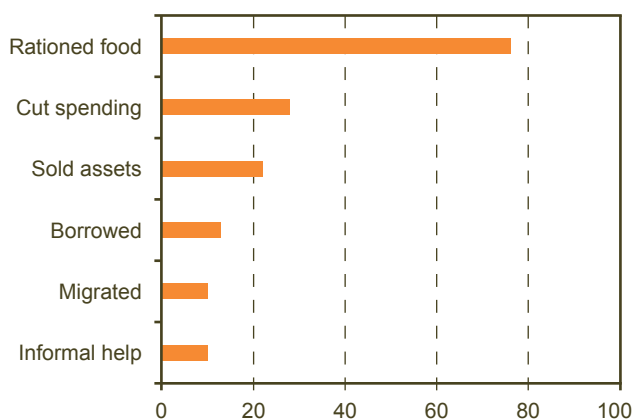


Figure 3b: Percentage of families adopting each coping strategy in Ethiopia in 2006



Source: Devereux et al 2008

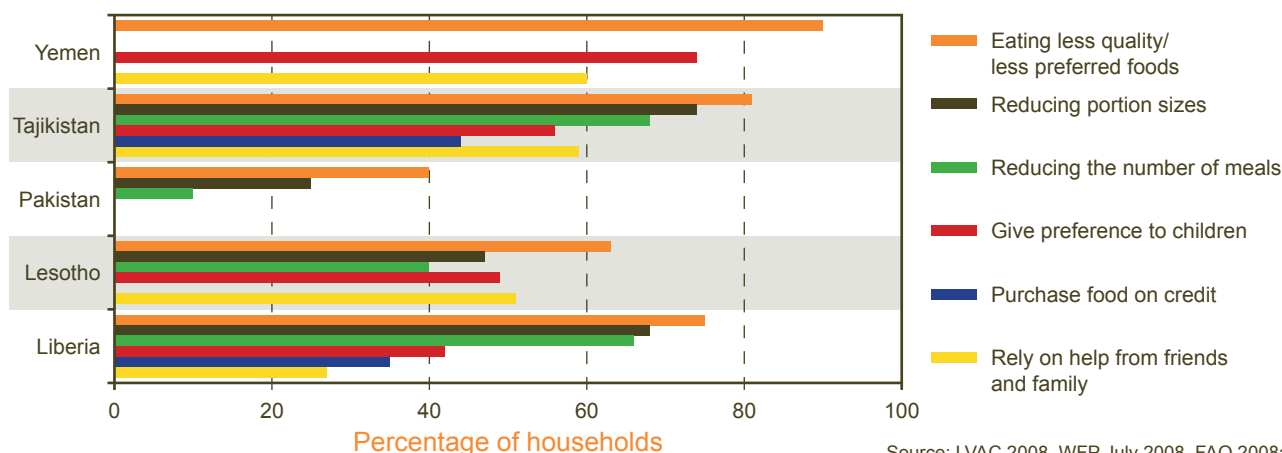
What's New?

Understanding the seasonal dimensions of poverty implies two important questions when examining the Global Food Price Crisis. Did high food prices cause an increase in malnutrition? If not did global food price rises force people to adopt damaging coping strategies paving the way for future nutritional crises?

The response to the former is mixed. Action Against Hunger's research indicates malnutrition rates increased definitively in a number of districts in Ethiopia, but statistics are unavailable or inconclusive for Central African Republic, Sierra Leone and Liberia. However, the coping strategies used by the poor in response to high global food prices are

almost identical to those adopted during the hunger season (and famines). Each case study reveals that households consistently reduced their diets in both quantity and diversity, a finding that is also supported by studies conducted in 2008 by FAO and WFP in some of the countries most vulnerable to global price shocks (see figure 4). There is a danger that the high food prices in developing countries may continue to impact millions of households already threatening to slip into greater poverty. It is beyond doubt that high global food commodity prices in 2007/08 will continue to have serious implications for livelihoods and micro-nutrient malnutrition and could trigger a slow-onset crisis if appropriate action is not taken today.

Figure 4: Coping mechanisms employed in five countries as a response to rising food prices in 2008



Source: LVAC 2008, WFP July 2008, FAO 2008a, Government of Tajikistan 2008 and WFP 2008

So far, the response has not been good enough. In order to design effective interventions, we need to stop relying on estimates and economic models and look at the facts. Action Against Hunger carried out research in Ethiopia, Central African Republic, Sierra Leone and Liberia. These countries were chosen either because our teams in the field observed an increase in admission rates to feeding programs earlier than the seasonal norm (Ethiopia / Liberia) or because of the strategic context they represent. The Central African Republic is a landlocked country and Sierra Leone is highly dependant on imported rice to feed its urban population.

A principle finding of this Action Against Hunger report is that context matters. While high and volatile global food price rises are only a single factor affecting poverty and malnutrition, all four studies show that the impacts on livelihoods are considerable and wide-spread.

SNNPR, Ethiopia: Reduced Terms of Trade and Increased Malnutrition

Action Against Hunger conducted a study in the Southern Nations, Nationalities and People's Region of Ethiopia (SNNPR). This region was affected by drought in 2008 and is characterised by agricultural communities producing enset (kocho) and maize for subsistence consumption and coffee as a cash crop.

Kocho price remains stable, maize price soars

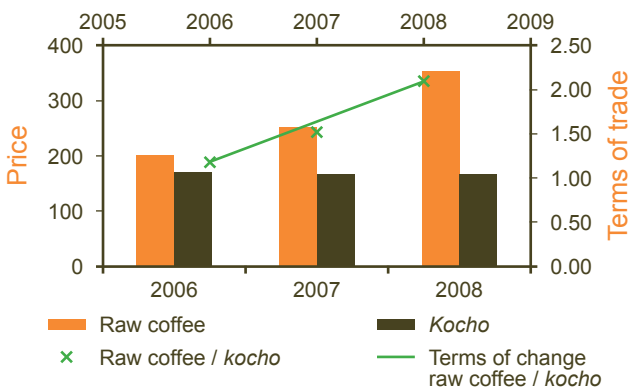
In this region *kocho* prices have remained relatively stable (figure 5), the cost of maize increased by over 75%, cabbage by over 66% and haricot beans by over 20%. High international prices of cereals and inflated oil prices in the region had some effect but drought and conflict remain the most significant factor behind the price rises of locally produced foods.

High staple food prices damage terms of trade

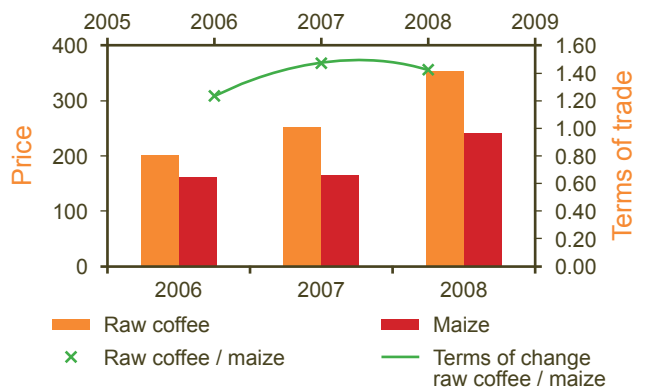
In general, the remuneration from various sources

Figure 5: Evolution of the terms of trade

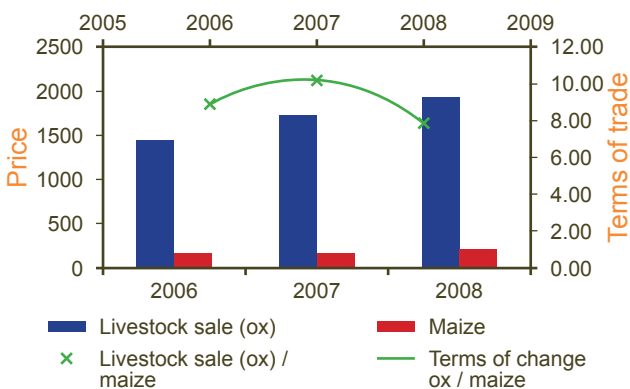
a: Coffee vs kocho



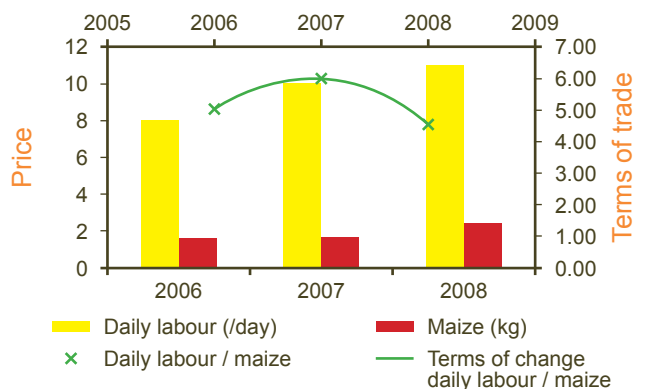
b: Coffee vs maize



c: Oxen sale vs maize



d: Daily labour vs maize



Source: ACF 2008c

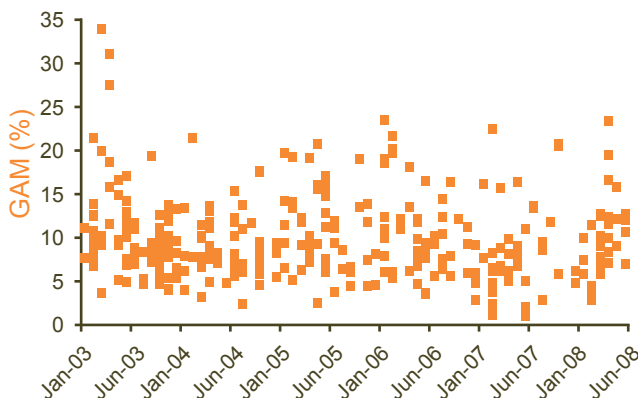
of income in the SNNPR region has improved since 2005. Coffee prices almost doubled between 2006 and 2008 leading to a significant increase in terms of trade against *kocho*. This trend can also be observed with other income sources but not with maize. A given amount of raw coffee would purchase 3 percent less maize than 2007; of oxen 23 percent less; and a day's labour 24 percent less. Farmers also received 34 percent more for oxen and 14 percent for sheep in April 2008, compared to three years earlier. The daily rate for agricultural labour also improved by 38 percent. However, superior income is unlikely to have compensated fully for increased food prices.

Malnutrition and under-five mortality rates go up

Increases in prices generally lead to deterioration in diet quality. Consumption of high-quality micronutrient-rich foods will be reduced while staple food consumption remains largely the same at first. In the case of Ethiopia it is likely that staple foods will be replaced by cheaper lower quality staples, i.e. that maize will be replaced by *kocho*, which has a lower vitamin A and protein density than maize (Abebe 2006).

In order to determine whether these changes have led to an increase in malnutrition rates at the country level, survey results from the past five years were plotted on graph. Figure 6 shows that at the national level no increase in malnutrition rates can be seen. However, data from three districts in the SNNPR indicates that rates of malnutrition and under-five mortality increased in late 2007 and early 2008 (see figure 7). While data was selected on the basis of regularity and completeness, it is not possible to as-

Figure 6: Global acute malnutrition in Ethiopia



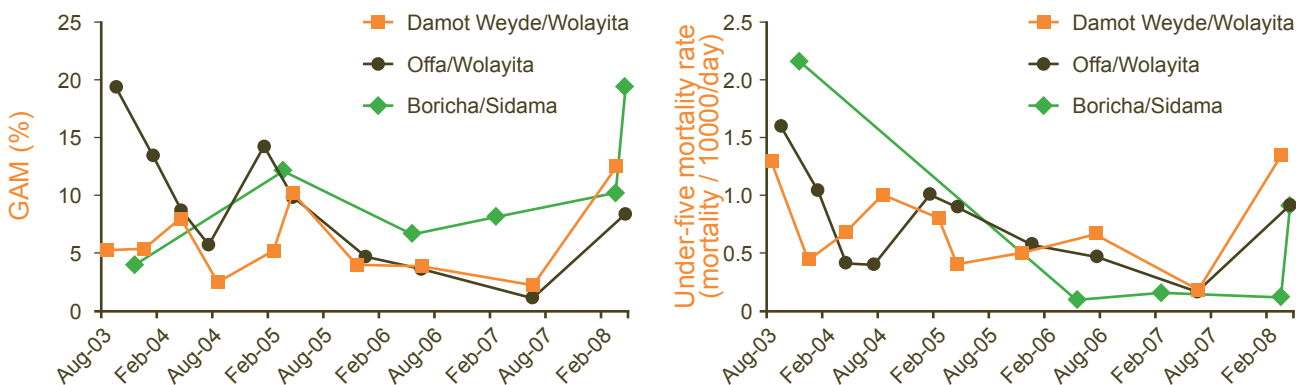
Source: ENCU Survey Library

sert that these increases were related only to food price rises.

Lessons from Ethiopia: Increased food prices were followed by increased malnutrition

Research in Ethiopia shows that high food prices have led to significant changes in terms of trade of food and livestock, with the exception of *kocho*. The impact of the prices will have depended very much on the ability and willingness of households to adapt their diets and income sources – in the SNNPR, those dependent on coffee whose staple food is *kocho* will have been least affected. Survey data shows that malnutrition and under-five mortality rates have increased in three districts within the SNNPR, corresponding with high food prices. No change in malnutrition rates was seen at the national level indicating that country level data is too imprecise for policy making and that surveillance data from the local level is needed.

Figure 7: Global acute malnutrition and under-five mortality rates in three districts of the SNNPR



Source: ENCU Survey Library



Bangui, Central African Republic: A Mixed Message

The Central African Republic (CAR) is one of the poorest countries in the world. Ranked fifth in FAO's vulnerability assessment, the country displays characteristics that make it both vulnerable and resilient to food price rises. A substantial food and oil import bill threatens the already high budget deficit. About half the population spend more than 80% of their income on food, making even small food price rises a significant burden for households. However, the CAR is landlocked, largely disconnected from the global economy and has poorly developed infrastructure. Additionally, the availability of cassava, the country's dominant staple, is largely dependent on local production. Action Against Hunger's assessment of food security and nutrition in Bangui between August and September 2008 found mixed results.

A moderate rise in prices

Food prices in Bangui rose by about 20 percent between April and July. Fuel prices increased more dramatically, rising by a similar margin in only two months after April 2008. The observed price rises are moderate on a global scale where food prices rose by 51 percent in the 12 months build-up to the Rome Summit in

June 2008 (High Level Task Force 2008), or compared with countries like Bangladesh which experienced food price rises in excess of 100 percent from 2007 to 2008.

Reduced food consumption without changes in income and expenditure

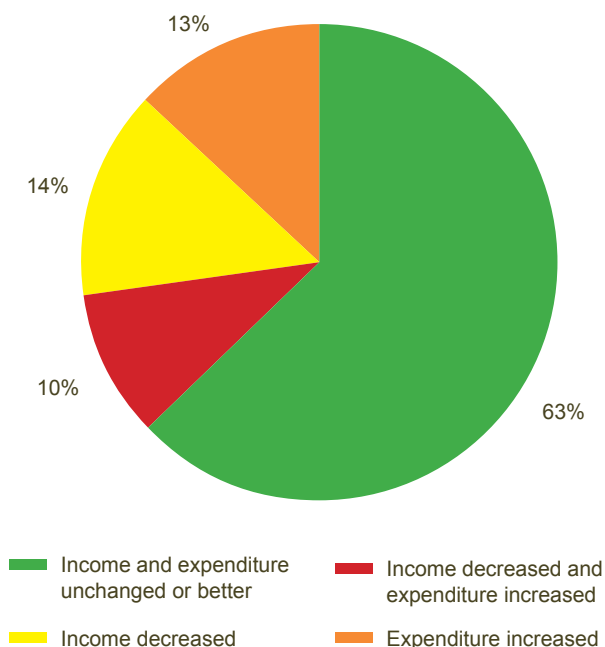
In Bangui, the most common coping strategies are eating less preferred, less expensive, less diverse foods. These 'replacement' foods are of lower quality, i.e. less nutrient-dense, putting people's nutritional status at risk. Staple food consumption, and thus carbohydrate and energy intake, remains largely the same at first, while micronutrient intake is reduced. This is followed by a reduction in portion sizes and the number of meals. In September 2008, households reported eating fewer meals than a year earlier. Before the crisis, 50% of the households surveyed ate two or more meals per day while that number had more than halved after the crisis (now 24%). However, when asked whether their situation had changed over the last few months, 63% of households felt that the impact of the food price rises had a relatively moderate impact on livelihoods (see figure 8). Only 10 percent of surveyed households reported a decrease in income and an increase in expenditure – which may have significant long-term consequences for these families.

Table 1: Results of Action Against Hunger’s nutrition surveys in Bangui

	January 2006	January 2007	September 2008
GAM (95% CI)*	4.7 (2.9- 7.2)	5.8 (4.2-7.4)	6.2 (4.5-7.8)
SAM (95% CI)*	0.7 (0.1-2.1)	0.55 (0-1.1)	0.6 (0.2-1.1)
Stunting (95% CI)*	29.5 (25.3- 33.9)	31.5 (27.7-35.3)	30.2 (25.5-35.0)
U5MR (95% CI)	0.98 (0.98- 0.99)	0.36 (0.19-0.92)	0.85 (0.13-0.97)

*NCHS reference
Source: ACF Surveys

Figure 8: Self-perceived change in household income and expenditure between 2007 and 2008



Source: ACF 2008a

A non-significant increase in malnutrition

Despite higher food prices and reduced food consumption in Bangui, there was no clear impact on malnutrition. Table 1 shows that global acute malnutrition, severe acute malnutrition and under-five child mortality rates have shown only non-significant increases between January 2006 and September 2008 – though seasonality makes it difficult to compare these statistics accurately. Admissions to Action Against Hunger’s Therapeutic Feeding Centre did in-

crease significantly in early 2008, but this may be for reasons other than an increase in malnutrition such as a better knowledge of the services available and an increase in the catchment area.

Lessons from the CAR: limited immediate impact with some cause for concern

The impact of global food price rises in the CAR appears to have been more limited than in Ethiopia and Sierra Leone. The majority of families surveyed perceived their current income and expenditure as unchanged or better than a year earlier and malnutrition rates do not appear to have increased in Bangui. However, the increase in admissions to the feeding centre and the self-reported reduction in food consumption by many households may be cause for concern. The international community must continue to monitor the situation in the CAR.



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Freetown, Sierra Leone: Varying Impacts Within A City

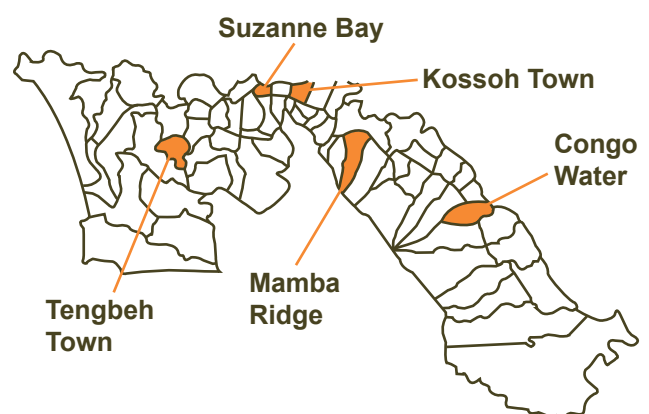
Since 2002, Sierra Leone has been recovering from civil war. Food prices are intensely political and hunger remains a threat to long-term security. Malnutrition remains very high, with 27 percent of under-fives reported underweight. High inflation (over 10 percent), stunting rates (37 percent) and poverty levels (between 65-75 percent) prompted FAO to rank Sierra Leone sixth in its assessment of national vulnerability to global price rises. Action Against Hunger's assessment concentrated on the capital Freetown, home to more than 760,000 people, of whom 60 percent are under-25 years old and 97 percent rely primarily on the market for food.

Rice prices increase as the hungry season sets in

From January to March 2008, rice prices increased by 64 percent and fuel prices by about 15 percent between January and May. Price fluctuations eased in July and were expected to fall by the end of the year following a good harvest. Discussion groups revealed that people had experienced a real increase in food prices during April and May. Participants reflected that they had been very worried as the price rises corresponded with the beginning of the annual

'hunger season', when families rely more on imported rice because local produce is more expensive and in short supply before the harvest. In October, discussions perceived the price of rice as having stabilised and starting to decrease.

Figure 9: Map of study areas in Freetown



Food price changes and malnutrition vary within the city

Not all sections of the city were equally affected. Congo Water experienced the greatest increase in rice prices compared to the same period a year ear-

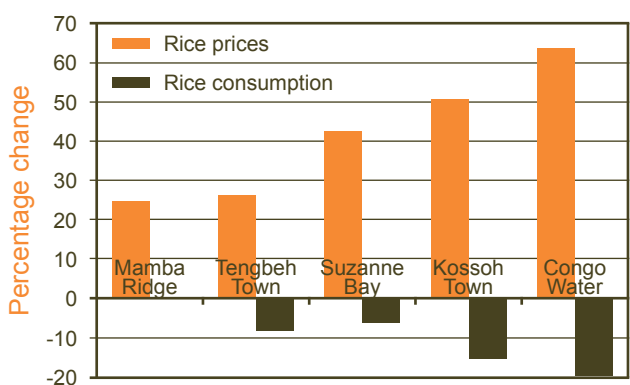
Table 2: Types of food not consumed in 2008 compared to 2007 (percentage of people)

	Any	Meat	Vegatable	Dairy	Fruit	Fresh fish	Other	Cereals/tubers
Tengbeh Town	92.5	42.5	45	37.5	35	15	0	0
Suzanne Bay	30	15	10	2.5	0	2.5	10	2.5
Kossoh Town	85	70	7.5	30	10	2.5	12.5	2.5
Mamba Ridge	92.5	52.5	7.5	20	5	17.5	5	15
Congo Water	76.2	38.1	33.3	2.4	33.3	9.5	19	16.7
TOTAL	75.2	43.6	20.8	18.3	16.8	9.4	9.4	7.4

Source: ACF 2008b

lier (60 percent from Le419 to Le680²). A snapshot of malnutrition captured during the study also shows significant variation within the city – with greatest prevalence in Suzanne Bay (2.4 SAM and 7.8 GAM) and lowest in Tengbeh Town (0 SAM and 0.6 GAM). There are fears that these levels have increased due to high food prices, but without longitudinal data no assessment of changes can be made. However, figure 10 shows that sections experiencing the greatest increase in prices, Kossoh Town and Congo Water, were also the areas where people decreased their quantity of rice eaten per day most.

Figure 10: Changes in rice prices and consumption in Freetown



Source: ACF 2008b

Dietary diversity decreased

Meat consumption was most radically affected and 43 percent of respondents reported they no longer consumed meat. This change was most extreme in Kossoh Town, where 70 percent reduced their consumption despite good access to meat in the local market. Consumption of other food types was also affected to varying degrees (see table 2) and may lead to a rise in malnutrition in later months/years stemming from micronutrient deficiencies. High food prices are putting greater strain on household budgets, restricting more than food consumption. The poorest families reported sending fewer children to school and avoiding hospitals (going to pharmacies instead) to reduce expenses.

Leone: price rises and household behaviour varied even within a city

Despite a difficult period early 2008, it seems that in Freetown the peak of the crisis is over following a good harvest. Prices started to drop in July and may return to a normal level. No conclusions can be made regarding the impacts on malnutrition, but there is concern that reduced consumption of rice and micronutrient-dense foods could cause a future rise in malnutrition. Furthermore, decreasing expenditure on healthcare and schooling may have detrimental long-term effects on welfare and development.



Monrovia, Liberia: Government Responses and ACF Recommendations

The Liberian economy has been severely affected by the two civil wars fought between 1989 and 2003. Since 2005, the Liberian trade deficit has widened due to rising import prices. Petroleum is Liberia's principle import (25 percent of total imports) followed by food (24 percent of total imports). Expenditure on petroleum and food has increased by 37 percent and 280 percent respectively since 2005. Rice accounts for 65.3 percent of all food imports and 92 percent of rice consumed in urban areas is imported. Despite great potential (some areas may permit three harvests per year), food production has never really been developed, rendering local produce uncompetitive. Transportation networks are poor in Liberia, restricting the commercialisation of local production and forcing urban coastal populations to become more reliant on imports for food.

Trading restrictions in the East affect food imports in West Africa

The study in Monrovia was the first to be conducted and no precise data was available for price changes in 2008, though food price inflation was higher than the 19 percent average of 2007. Trade restrictions

on rice imposed by India and China significantly constrained rice imports in Liberia as the cost of importing a ton of rice rose from US\$ 400 in October 2007 to over \$1,000 per ton in mid-2008. Palm oil, cassava, meat and fish, major parts of the urban diet, all increased in price.

Observed: reductions in dietary diversity coupled with increase in malnutrition

On average, households spend 52 percent of their income on food in Monrovia. Deteriorating purchasing power has reduced food consumption and altered diets. Low income groups have concentrated their expenditures on staple food and reduced expenditure on foods rich in protein and micronutrients. High transport costs have also directly affected household budgets, as they represent the second major household expenditure after food. The capacity of petty traders (a predominant income source for poor women) to invest into their running capital has been severely depleted and some claimed they had terminated their businesses as a result of high costs. The increased participation of children to household economy was also cited as a reaction to higher prices, though the scale of this trend is unknown.

In February 2008, Action Against Hunger found GAM and SAM rates of 17.6 and one percent, respectively. Action Against Hunger observed an increase of 40 percent of new admissions to its therapeutic feeding programs from April to May. However, these cannot be completely attributed to global food price rises as this period overlaps with the annual hunger season in Monrovia.

A government's responses

In response to the rising food prices, the Government of Liberia introduced a number of short- and long-term policies to combat high food prices ranging from supplementary feeding programs to import bans, a ceiling price for rice, suspension of import tax for rice, negotiations with several countries for in-kind financial support and agricultural interventions.

Agricultural interventions included increasing the national budget allocated to agriculture from 3.4 percent in 2007/2008 to 6.8 percent in the 2008/2009 fiscal year and the 'back to soil initiative', launched at the end of June 2008, encouraging the urban population to work on farms in rural areas. It is likely that benefits of urban living, such as greater work opportunities, better health and education services, and easy access to markets, will make it difficult to persuade youthful urbanites to invest their futures in farming.

The government also established a ceiling price for rice of \$30 at wholesale and \$31 at retail level for 50kg rice. However, rice is usually sold in cups on informal markets for which there is little regulation – the equivalent price of American parboiled rice sold by the cup was \$50 for 50 kilos at the time of the study. Poorer households were unable to afford the cost of a 50 kilo bag of rice and so paid a higher price than richer consumers who bought in bulk.

The government suspension of the 2.1\$/bag tax on imported rice may have been beneficial to consumers but could have adverse effects in the long-run.

Removing the import tax will cost Liberia US\$ 6 million over a one year period, leading to cuts in government expenditure or a rise in the budget deficit, with significant consequences for development.

Action Against Hunger recommendations for Liberia

The Liberian Government has taken strides to protect some citizens from high food prices and boost national food production – but these have not fully met the needs of the affected population. Therefore, Action Against Hunger proposes a number of additional short, medium and long-term interventions.

In the short-term, Action Against Hunger recommends increasing the capacity for tackling malnutrition by improving surveillance of the Ministry of Health and scaling-up treatment of acute malnutrition through feeding centres. Daily wet meals for children under three years old and cash or food vouchers to pregnant and lactating women could support these initiatives by targeting the groups most at risk of malnutrition. Efforts must also be made to improve the purchasing power of poor and vulnerable groups through cash handouts.

In the medium and long-term, policies should focus on improving dietary diversity of poor households by supporting vegetable production in the urban and peri-urban context or providing employment guarantee schemes to boost income. The government is strongly urged to seek greater independence from the international food market for staple food, particularly in the urban context of Monrovia. Swampland can be farmed, food storage improved and infrastructure developed. Greater regulation of rice prices is also needed to address the market failures that underpin seasonal price fluctuations. Finally, the government must boost small-scale farm production by increasing small-holder bargaining power, supporting community-based cooperatives and integrating markets within the country.



Why Has the World Not Experienced A Global Famine?

It is clear that seasonal price increases result in increased hunger and malnutrition. Although district-level data in Ethiopia shows that global rises in food prices may be having an effect on malnutrition rates, similar surveys at the national or global level are not indicative of a consistent sharp rise of malnutrition in all countries. There are a number of reasons why increases in malnutrition rates are not visible in the survey data:

- ✿ Survey data is not always complete or comparable. Surveys are often done in different areas, by different organizations, with different methodologies. The case study of Ethiopia shows that clear trends between price rises and malnutrition are only visible at the district-level.
- ✿ Malnutrition surveys often measure wasting, which is not the only type of malnutrition. Reducing food quality and quantity as a primary coping strategy may induce micronutrient malnutrition, a more 'hidden type' of malnutrition likely to occur before weight loss. Micronutrient deficiencies have long-term ad-

verse effects on physical and mental development of young children; it is possible that we will see an increase in stunting in the future.

- ✿ Surveys generally measure child malnutrition. Parents in developing countries often reduce their own consumption to ensure their children are fed – meaning there will be a lagged increase in child malnutrition when families begin to exhaust basic coping strategies.
- ✿ Global food price rises are only a single factor while seasonal malnutrition has many causes of which changes in food prices are only a single dimension.
- ✿ Global price changes do not entail local supply deficits, as is generally the case in the hunger season, when village stocks are low.
- ✿ Importantly, the Global Food Crisis may resemble a slow-onset disaster rather than a seasonal spike, meaning people may have more time to adjust, and malnutrition rates will only show increases months or years later.



From Global Policy to Local Action

When presented at the High Level Conference on World Food Security in June 2008, the UN Comprehensive Framework for Action conservatively estimated that US\$25-40 billion per year in additional funding is required to restore global food and nutritional security – focusing predominantly on food production and less on hunger. This figure appears insufficient; Action Against Hunger estimates that US\$38-70 billion per year would permit the implementation of an “essential minimum package” (Deveruex et al 2008 page 110) to effectively combat seasonal hunger worldwide. This ‘minimum package’ does not include any provisions required to promote agricultural development nor functioning markets.

Following the High Level Conference, world leaders pledged a mere US\$12.3 billion to tackle the Food Crisis, but donated only US\$1 billion to date – the lowest ratio of materialised funds to funds pledged of any global appeal in recent history. This disappointing sum of materialised funds illustrates once again that hunger is seen as part of the context and does not deserve specific attention or greater prioritisation, and seriously questions the commitment of governments and donors to tackling hunger strate-

gically rather than simply managing malnutrition on moral grounds. WFP’s success in achieving its target of US\$755 million in additional funds, demonstrated that food aid remains the only large-scale, comprehensive intervention that the international community is willing to support. The international response is sending an alarming and dangerous message: “we are not seriously concerned with hunger”.

The lack of response was not the result of inadequate information. Early warning systems, such as FEWS NET, did provide the international community with the information necessary to respond to growing food prices as early as 2005, but failed to trigger serious debate until riots broke out and media coverage raised the stakes in early 2008. Links between early warning systems and decision-making processes must be questioned and revised.

Effective interventions will depend largely on adequate funding and the creation of national coordination bodies that inform political leaders and policymakers about the burden hunger and malnutrition impose on all forms of development. The global community needs to overcome petty competition for resources and concentrate on the needs and rights of all citizens.

The four case studies illustrate the importance of local variation and, hence, the need for locally-adapted responses. The inability of past initiatives to address hunger to establish awareness and an inclusive sphere for policy dialogue, bringing together civil society, NGOs and national and international policy makers, must be addressed if we are to make real progress towards MDG 1 and 4. Hunger and malnutrition have to be perceived as strategic priorities by all divisions of national governments including the ministries of finance – valuing their importance the environment, economic and human development and security.

The recent emergence of the Global Partnership for Agriculture and Food Security and the UN High Level Task Force has injected new life into the debate surrounding food security and nutrition. These bodies should ultimately be judged on how responsive they are to the specific needs and context of each country. The definition and design of national and global strategies should involve a wide range of actors, particularly civil society groups. We must look past specific organizational agendas and interests to provide a comprehensive plan of action rather than a patchwork of disjointed initiatives and limited potential impact.

Chiefly concerned with the treatment of malnutrition and the sustainable eradication of its causes, Action Against Hunger is calling for major donors to demonstrate their commitment to the eradication of hunger immediately. Between US\$70 and 150 million in predictable annual funding would allow a comprehensive pilot intervention to treat one million malnourished children in five priority countries.



Conclusions

Data from Ethiopia shows that high prices have been closely followed by an increase in malnutrition and under-five mortality rates. However, not all countries have been affected equally. Findings from the Central African Republic reveal only modest increases in prices and statistically insignificant increases in malnutrition. Research in Sierra Leone showed that even within Freetown, the capital city, prices and household reactions varied. As experienced in many regional famines, the response to the current food security crisis has been poor – Action Against Hunger's investigation in Liberia identified a number of flaws in the national responses to the soaring prices and rising malnutrition rates.

While one has to be careful not to attribute changes in food security and malnutrition to only a single factor, the evidence suggests that high global food prices have had a substantial negative impact on livelihoods, and possibly malnutrition. High prices decrease access to food and lead to a reduction in the diversity and quantity of diets, especially among the poor.

The similarity between coping mechanisms employed during seasonal price spikes and the global price rises in 2008 is striking. This realisation must be adopted when designing adequate interventions, as responses to seasonal hunger are tried and tested and can be quickly budgeted into national and international action plans. To date the international response to high and volatile food price has been ineffectual. Action Against Hunger urges donors to provide the necessary funds to immediately establish a pilot intervention to comprehensively tackle malnutrition in five priority countries.

The financial crisis, the cessation of local protests, riots and violence and the decline of global food prices have led many to refocus their attention on other priorities. It would be irresponsible for national governments and the international community to assume that this crisis was a one-off event and to wait for the next to come. Despite no clear increase in malnu-

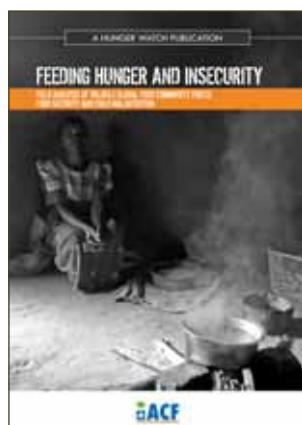
trition, globally, more and more people are sacrificing future welfare for immediate survival, adopting damaging coping strategies to maintain staple food consumption. This will have long-term implications for poverty, vulnerability and malnutrition. The picture presented here provides a glimpse of the complicated connection between high and unpredictable prices on the global market and malnutrition at the lowest level. However, not fully understanding all the dimensions of the Global Food Crisis will not prevent the future from unfolding – if action is not taken now, high food prices will trap millions of children in a downward spiral of poverty and malnutrition.

Briefing paper by **Samuel Hauenstein Swan, Sierd Hadley and Bernardette Cichon**

FEEDING HUNGER AND INSECURITY

Field analysis of volatile global food commodity prices, food security and child malnutrition

Written by
Samuel Hauenstein Swan,
Sierd Hadley and
Bernardette Cichon



Available online at www.actionagainsthunger.org

Endnotes

1 Acute malnutrition, also known as wasting, is measured as weight-for-height in children and reflects current food intake. Two commonly used terms that are often used to describe the extent of wasting in children are Severe Acute Malnutrition (SAM) and Moderate Acute Malnutrition (MAM). Global Acute Malnutrition (GAM) includes severely and moderately malnourished children. Children with severe acute malnutrition are at risk of death and require urgent treatment with therapeutic foods.

2 Leones (US\$1:Le2920)

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