

**Speech by John Holmes,
Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs
and Emergency Relief Coordinator
to the Executive Board of the World Food Programme**

Executive Director

Executive Board Members

I am delighted to be with you today, and to have this opportunity to address the Executive Board of the world's largest humanitarian organization, and one of the indispensable pillars of the UN family and the wider international humanitarian community. For more than forty years, WFP has served on the frontlines in some 80 countries, helping governments fill critical gaps in their response to hunger in all kinds of sudden or slow-moving crises, natural or - too often – man-made.

Your record of achievement is as extraordinary as it is exemplary. WFP not only feeds an average of 90 million people a year, nearly 90% of them women and children, but also sows the seeds of hope in communities around the world through nutrition and livelihoods assistance.

WFP's role is crucial, not only as a provider of emergency relief, but also as a bridge spanning the emergency phase and longer-term recovery and rehabilitation efforts. WFP is also engaged even before crises hit, through early warning networks, to alert communities to take action in time. In sum, WFP not only saves lives today, it helps save them tomorrow.

Let me pay tribute, in particular, to WFP's activities in some of the most difficult crises in which we work – for example Darfur and Somalia. In Darfur, food aid provided by WFP since the earliest days of crisis is at the core of the humanitarian response. In August of this year, WFP delivered food aid to nearly 3.2 million people in Darfur – a staggering achievement. The Humanitarian Air Service in Darfur is increasingly important, safely ferrying supplies and humanitarian workers in one of the world's most difficult and hostile environments. WFP workers have paid the price for this in attacks and deaths, most recently three WFP-contracted truck drivers who were murdered last week. I salute their courage and their sacrifice, and pledge to redouble my own efforts to improve safe areas for humanitarian workers in Darfur as elsewhere.

In Somalia, possibly an even less safe environment, WFP ships and land convoys are under threat of attack every day and WFP staff members at constant risk. Last week again, a WFP staff member was seized from the UN compound in Mogadishu, in violation of all international norms. We will continue to do all we can to get him released, and to help normal WFP service to resume in that tragic country.

WFP is also playing a crucial role in two other crises which are major current preoccupations. In Eastern DRC, the renewed fighting risks further massive displacements of populations already in considerable difficulty. The humanitarian community there is preparing for the worst, but I hope political efforts can still resolve these issues without a major confrontation. In the occupied Palestinian territories, humanitarians have been working desperately for months to maintain the flow of essential commodities into Gaza, and pressing all concerned to keep crossing points open and people and goods moving as they need to.

So far I have to say this advocacy has proved fruitless. The economic noose continues to tighten around the necks of the people of Gaza, who are being manifestly punished as part of a political strategy. Even in the West Bank, restrictions of all kinds are making normal life and normal economic activity harder and harder. Let me make this urgent appeal today to the Israeli authorities and all others with any influence there. Legitimate security concerns can and should be addressed. But open the crossing points, lift the restrictions, let the people live and breathe. It is increasingly hard to see how the desperately needed political progress in the peace process can be made on the back of the kind of human suffering we are seeing today.

WFP's services will be more essential than ever in the future, in particular, to help strengthen the way we now do business, for example through the cluster approach. We need a strong, well-resourced WFP which is firmly anchored within the broader humanitarian community, and which can contribute to further improvement of this community's effectiveness. As the ERC, I will do everything I can to support WFP as it evolves and changes to take on new challenges in what is an ever more demanding humanitarian and funding environment. Because none of us can stand still in the face of change, particularly in today's world.

My point is that we all face new and unprecedented problems on both the demand and supply side of the humanitarian equation. I will come to these in a moment. But we also face a set of challenges concerning more specifically how we work. In other words, how do we ensure that those in greatest need are getting the right kind of assistance, when they most need it, and in a manner that not only fosters a dignified, sustainable recovery, but also helps reduce the risk of another similar crisis? And how do we go about measuring how far we have achieved this goal, to become genuinely accountable not only to our supporters and donors but also to those we are trying to reach.

These are old questions, but we have to find new, more convincing answers. For example, we must find more reliable and objective ways of measuring, comparing and contrasting needs in one crisis with those in another, in a different country, often in a different continent, and with a different cause. We urgently need to devise a more coordinated system of information collection, and a common system of classification, as well as quicker, more accurate needs assessments that can be undertaken in the earliest days of a crisis. WFP's own needs assessment efforts have proved to be a valuable and impressive resource, but they are not enough by themselves. I would like to see us amplify and leverage this resource, as part of a multi-sectoral assessment base. We have to have something system-wide on which we can rely and which can operate simply and quickly.

Likewise, we must be able to evaluate much more reliably the impact of what we have provided. There has been good work on real-time evaluations. But again it is not enough. And again we need simple, reliable methods -- to establish how far we have achieved what we have set out to achieve; how far we have reached those in need with what they needed; and whether they themselves agree that we did the right thing to help them cope. And we must also become much

better at learning lessons from both our failures and our successes, so that we can make more informed decisions in the future to achieve better long-term results for communities at risk. Without much improved needs assessments and impact evaluations we cannot really be more accountable. And genuine accountability, to beneficiaries above all, is not an option today, if it ever was. It is an obligation.

Another issue which has struck me regularly in my first few months in this job is the difficulty of how we should define a humanitarian crisis. In many countries, there is chronic, widespread malnutrition or food insecurity. When this tips over the edge, which inevitably it does from time to time, and becomes an acute crisis, we rush to help. But should we not be doing more much earlier? Can we really just say that it is the job of the development agencies? In other words, a "gap" can be serious not only at the end of the relief process before reconstruction and redevelopment begin, but also before it. We need not only to make the transition more seamless between relief and reconstruction so that lives are sustained as well as saved, but also to ensure that we avert the hunger crisis in the first place. But how are we going to do that?

These are the kind of serious questions which must preoccupy WFP - and of course FAO too - in particular. Unfortunately, I have not come today to bestow answers from some humanitarian oracle. I have no one-size-fits all, magical answers to these questions any more than any one else. What I do know is that we need to work together urgently to find better answers, which is why I strongly encourage the Rome-based agencies to continue grappling with these questions in a transparent, candid, thoughtful and proactive manner – amongst yourselves and also with others who may have something to bring to the party. WFP has within its ranks a wealth of experience and an enviable record not only of practical problem-solving but also of creative innovation. You can certainly count on my full support for this process of debate and change, as it is taken forward - with the needs of our beneficiaries – the tens of millions of people who rely on WFP, FAO and other agencies every day for assistance – always at the forefront of our thoughts.

With that in mind, perhaps it may help if I try to sketch out some elements of the bigger picture of humanitarian trends over the next few years, as I see them. I hope not only to illuminate some of the road ahead, but also to shed light on what it is we need to do today to be more effective and relevant tomorrow.

The key element for me is that the global demand for humanitarian assistance, which is already considerable, is likely to grow in the coming decade, and to see a major increase in our lifetimes.

The biggest single cause, for my money, will be climate change, and the increased incidence and severity of extreme weather events associated with it. I don't think I need to convince anyone at this gathering that climate change is not just a fearful future phenomenon. It is a real and present danger, as the massive floods this summer in South Asia, Africa and elsewhere have so forcefully reminded us.

Even if no single event can reliably be attributed to global warming, the trends are clear, and clearly accelerating, with the effects felt on every continent. In 2006, there were 254 floods and related disasters, an increase of 43% compared to the 2000–2004 average. This year, OCHA has already issued 13 Flash Appeals, 3 more than the previous annual record. All but one of these was the result of extreme weather. I fear there will be more before 2007 is out.

The poorest, most vulnerable communities among us are those least responsible for causing global warming, but most assuredly they will be the ones most affected by its consequences.

As WFP knows all too well, more than 850 million people around the world are already currently malnourished. This is a horrifyingly large number, and an affront to the conscience of any citizen anywhere on the globe. But consider this: a temperature rise of 2-3 degrees Celsius – which, according to the IPCC, could be as soon as 2060 – might increase the numbers at risk of hunger by hundreds of millions more. Increasing desertification, more droughts, storms and extreme weather events associated with climate change will affect acutely millions of rural, subsistence farmers in developing nations. In short, climate change could usher in even more widespread, chronic hunger across large swathes of the developing world.

Studies indicate that Sub-Saharan Africa will be among the areas hardest hit, particularly in terms of agricultural production and access to both food and clean water. By 2020, an estimated 250 million Africans will face increasing water shortages. Consider what could happen a mere dozen years from now, given that one in three Africans is already malnourished, when some analysts say that rainfall-fed agriculture could drop by 50% in some African nations. Already we have seen worrying signs of this trend. Last year, the five countries worst affected on a per capita basis by disasters were all in Africa. In southern Africa, the Sahel, and the Horn, 10 million people were assessed to be extremely food insecure and highly dependent on humanitarian aid. This year is no different in substance. Why would next year be any better?

The indirect effects are also worth thinking about, for example the expected negative impact on the 40 million people currently suffering from HIV. The HIV pandemic is an issue that has rightly received much attention at WFP given the critical link between food security, adequate nutrition, and the health status of those with HIV. If supplies of food and clean water, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, the epicentre of the disease, become more erratic as a result of climatic shifts, thousands more people may die sooner from HIV.

Climate change will almost certainly also precipitate battles over resources – above all energy, arable land and fresh water, as we already have seen in some places such as Darfur. It was no accident that the Security Council in New York devoted a session earlier this year to climate change, whatever the protests of the purists about the Council's mandate. Climate change is a security issue, perhaps the security issue.

And perhaps the greatest risk that we as a humanitarian community face is not from nature itself, but from human nature, in other words our own propensity for not acting radically and courageously ahead of time, before disaster or conflict occurs. The lesson is that working together, we must redouble our efforts and work even more cohesively not only to respond to crises, but also to reduce vulnerability to crises -- both the chronic, so-called silent emergencies and those that strike suddenly.

Unfortunately, disaster risk reduction and disaster preparedness only became issues in the media and the heads of our politicians in the wake of a tsunami or similar catastrophe. This has to change. We must break the stranglehold of the so-called CNN effect. Above all, we as humanitarians must recognize more clearly than ever, and persuade international opinion more widely, that the magnitude of a disaster is not measured by the death toll. The opposite is the case. Death tolls are falling as early warning and better information increase people's chances of survival. But the devastating effects on lives and above all livelihoods are getting worse and these victims are the ones that need our help .

We also need to strengthen the ability of local and national governments, who of course retain

primary responsibility, to prepare for and respond to crises. This must become a much greater priority in the future. Local answers are always likely to be quicker and better if the preparedness is there. And the less the need for outside intervention, the less the fears and tensions generated by that intervention – a phenomenon we can see increasing, and which we need to work actively to reverse in any case.

In sum, this is no time for timidity. We should seek and support creative solutions, and innovative ideas like WFP's famine insurance program in Ethiopia. The close collaboration between WFP and FAO in these areas will also be more vital than ever.

Nature is not of course the only issue of major concern. There is also the new funding environment, including for WFP in particular the paradigm shift from surplus commodities to a much greater population of cash-based food assistance and the "perfect storm" arising from the combination of increasing hunger, rapidly rising food prices and the end of surpluses all over the world. I am not here to offer unwarranted policy advice or advocate one particular course of action. Rather, I would encourage WFP's leadership to do what it already does so well, which is to put the needs of its beneficiaries front and center, and to look at adapting to these new realities and extending the toolbox you have available. The more you can encourage local food production and markets, the more options you can give those in need, the more you can ensure that your food assistance is woven into the overall social safety net provided by national governments, the more likely the solutions are to be both effective and sustainable.

Meanwhile, the UN, NGOs and donors must continue to work together to increase the level of resources dedicated to humanitarian assistance. We need to find new and broader sources of funding, not least from the private sector. We also need to continue to work on the diversity of funding mechanisms, in addition to core contributions to agencies and NGOs.

The Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF), the Common Humanitarian Funds (CHF) in Sudan and the DRC, and the numerous smaller, emergency response pooled funds have in my view contributed significantly to the aim of strengthening the timeliness, effectiveness and predictability of relief, and of re-enforcing coherent and well-coordinated humanitarian action.

As far as CERF is concerned, we are reasonably on track so far to reach the 2008 goal of US \$450 million for the grant element. By December's high-level conference, we hope to have raised – and spent – not too far short of \$400 million this year, with some 70 donors contributing.

I believe the CERF is any excellent step in the right direction. WFP has been the largest recipient of CERF funds with more than USD 200 million provided since its inception, almost 40% of the disbursement so far. WFP would like more. But let us be candid. We will need much more than the CERF's resources to help us meet the likely dramatic escalation in humanitarian needs in the coming years. And we need to have an open debate. Where can we find new resources? What is the right balance between direct core funding for governments to agencies and NGOs on the one hand, and pooled funds, central or local, on the other? How can we strike a balance between immediate food assistance and improving self-reliance and livelihoods of affected populations? How do we coordinate better between humanitarian and development funding mechanisms so there is no funding gap during transitions -- a concern that's arisen lately for WFP in South Sudan and the DRC? How should we modify the Consolidated and Flash Appeals system to adapt to new realities and foster more coherent, needs-based prioritization?

WFP rightly has a keen interest in these questions. It also has a significant contribution to make in answering them. I look forward to your continued innovative thinking on these issues.

One other aspect of the humanitarian reform package agreed in 2005 and 2006 deserves a mention. The Cluster Approach is perhaps the most far reaching initiative of all. The name is admittedly awkward, but the idea is straightforward: to avoid gaps and duplications and to ensure there is a clear lead organisation in each sector in each country with corresponding responsibility and accountability, which can serve as a more predictable partner for governments. This is not a new idea - in previous years we called it sector co-ordination. The real value of this approach is that we try to take the best practice from the past and standardise it. We increase our responsibility and the accountability of the system to our partners, and above all to the beneficiaries. This must become, soon, simply the way we do business everywhere because it can make a real impact on our effectiveness. We have not always introduced it as well or as wisely as we could have done but the lessons are being learned and the potential is clear. And the cluster approach is not just about improving predictability, partnership and sectoral coordination at the country level. It is also about building up global humanitarian response capacity, particularly in areas where we often saw gaps in the past.

WFP has been an invaluable partner in this adventure, not least through its leadership of the logistics cluster. In every major emergency of the last year - and in many minor ones as well - the logistics cluster has deployed promptly and delivered impressive results. We very much appreciate WFP's continued custodianship of the UN Joint Logistics Center, as well as its management of the UN Humanitarian Air Service. With a global logistics support cell in Rome, and trained logistics response teams, we have together significantly ramped-up our capabilities in this crucial area of operations. This is a model for other areas.

Moreover, thanks to the global cluster appeal, we now have globally-accessible, centrally-managed emergency stockpiles, expert rosters and other resources that governments and humanitarian organizations can call on to complement their own response. But more funding is still needed. I hope donors will look hard at whether they can do more in this area.

So my overall message this morning is that whether we are debating transitions, the changing funding environment, needs assessments and accountability, the cluster system, or how to avert hunger at an earlier stage, one thing is crystal clear. We need WFP as a robust, effective, well-resourced and well-integrated member of the UN humanitarian system. Your success is vital to that of us all, and indeed underpins that of the entire humanitarian community.

Finally, allow me to extend a special word of appreciation to Jean-Jacques Graise, who is retiring after 42 years of service. Jean-Jacques is the longest standing UN employee – extraordinary in itself – but his achievement is not only the longevity of his service, but the many vital contributions he has made at WFP, and the generosity of spirit with which he has dedicated his life's work to the UN. I have only known him for a short time but have quickly come to appreciate his expertise and his wisdom - and also his directness. Jean-Jacques, you leave – if you really are leaving this time – with our warmest good wishes. I don't envy any successor.

Thank you for your attention and may I wish you all a successful and enjoyable Executive Committee meeting.

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