



OMD INTRODUCTORY STATEMENT: EB 1/2009

Mr. President, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

As the year opens food and nutrition security in West and Central Africa is affected or threatened by one or the combination of the following key factors,

1. Persistent high food prices and expected growing impact of the global financial and economic crisis;
2. Governance, conflict and post conflict concerns;
3. Crop pest infestation and the uncertainty of a climatic factors.

1. Food Security and Nutrition

- a) Overall, agricultural production is considered good in West Africa, thanks to good rainfall and efforts to increase output. The preliminary estimates of production point to a bumper 2008 harvest. Paradoxically, food prices for coarse grains remain above their levels for the season in several countries. As you can see, in December 2008, the average price of millet in Niger was **35 percent above a year earlier, when prices were already considered abnormally high.** The same trend is reported for other grains such as sorghum, maize and rice. Niger is not the only country affected by this phenomenon, as prices are also higher than last year's elevated levels in Burkina Faso and Togo. Furthermore, the price of imported rice in Dakar is nearly as high as it was when prices peaked in mid-2008. This suggests that the negative effects of market instability could continue to jeopardize household food access into the 2009 lean season. In such an environment, governments are sorely tempted to adopt protectionist measures. Impediments to exports were in evidence last year and are starting to reappear this year.

- b) **Some of you may be wondering why food prices are still high in West Africa**, while they have dropped in the international market. Price trends for coarse grains in the Sahel are by nature very seasonal and volatile, and are not necessarily linked to world price trends. Higher prices could be due to restocking after the difficult 2008 lean season, the expectation of high demand from institutional buyers, overstated cereal production estimates in some cases, and demand from coastal countries. Continuing high prices for imports are linked to currency movements, long lead times for imports and to concentrated import markets.
- c) The region is also facing **new patterns of vulnerability due to the effects of the global economic crisis**, which is affecting two of the region's lifelines: remittances from abroad and agricultural export sales. According to the World Bank, remittances to Sub-Saharan Africa are expected to decline in 2009 after years of growth. In countries such as Guinea-Bissau, Sierra Leone, Senegal and Togo, remittances' contribution to GDP is three times above the Sub Saharan African average, raising concern for the food access of households that depend on this income source. When a wire transfer from a loved one overseas can mean the difference between getting by and going hungry, rising unemployment in developed countries could mean having to make do with less in Bissau or Freetown.
- d) The economic crisis is hitting home in other ways, by slashing the international price of agricultural commodities cultivated by West African smallholders. For instance; by December 2008, the price of cotton was 16 percent below a year earlier. The OECD estimates that up to 16 million people in the region benefit directly or indirectly from the cotton industry, and live in mainly in Sahelian environments where alternative livelihoods are limited. The international prices of rubber and palm oil have dropped by half in the past year and are well below the five year average, potentially a threat to livelihoods and to countries that have come to rely on sales of these export crops. Thankfully, prices for cocoa and coffee remain favorable compared to long term averages, and regional livestock markets remain buoyant.
- e) As I speak, West Africa faces high food price levels in a context where the prospect of falling remittances and lower cash crop prices could threaten vulnerable groups' food access. While it is a priority for WFP to monitor these trends' impacts on household food security in continued partnership with regional institutions such as CILSS, FAO, FEWS-NET, doing so will only be possible should funding be made available.

- f) Recent surveys have found that malnutrition rates persist and may well be on the rise, especially in the Sahelian countries, where acute malnutrition remains above the 10% emergency level.

2. Current Conflict and Post Conflict Concerns

- g) Conflict continues to block social and economic progress in parts of the region. At the eastern limit of OMD, Chad, Cameroon and CAR share borders and a continuous sense of uncertainty as to when the next crisis will erupt in Chad and spill over into CAR and Cameroon. Eastern Chad is volatile. WFP staff operates in a context of constant threats, as attacks of humanitarian workers are increasingly common.
- h) **Central Africa Republic** continues to face its own instability, particularly in the northwest of the country – the border area with Chad and the Darfur region of Sudan, which is impeding humanitarian activities in that area. For many families in the conflict areas, access to agricultural fields is dangerous and therefore their production is reduced, and their food insecurity increased. The government recently held a 12-day Inclusive Political Dialogue, which brought together some 200 key people including government, civil society, politicians and leaders of armed political groups. The successful implementation of the peace accords agreed upon will contribute to improvements in the overall security situation and should allow WFP to access beneficiaries that presently we are unable to reach.
- i) In **Cameroon**, which hosts refugees from Chad and CAR, WFP, UNICEF and OCHA recently organized an interagency workshop to refine the cross border contingency planning based on a scenario where an escalation of the crisis in Chad would affect all three countries. The workshop brought together staff from the three agencies in each of those countries, who established a good working relationship and engendered a spirit of “sub regional” collaboration for emergency preparedness and response.
- j) **Cote d’Ivoire** has once again postponed Presidential elections and is still undergoing the process of normalization, or return to pre-crisis situation. The government is slowly reinstalling itself in the north, but government services are still lacking in that part of the country. This can be seen in very high Global Acute Malnutrition (GAM) rates - 17% in Korogho, which was unheard of before the crisis.
- k) **In Guinea**, after years of illness and 24-years of rule, President Lansana Conte died on 22 December 2008. The next day, a military junta calling

itself National Council for Democracy and Development (CNDD) dissolved the government and took control of government institutions. ECOWAS members have voted to suspend Guinea and the international community has called for a return to civil rule as soon as possible. So far, the change of government has not seriously affected WFP's ability to implement operations in the country.

- l) Post conflict recovery continues, with its share of promise and uncertainties for the region. **Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea** are successfully completing the first wave of post conflict country specific PRROs this year. The question now is to what extent does WFP have a role in the transition from post conflict to development? These countries have not by any means returned to the level of prosperity or well being which existed in 1980, and indeed today's GDP is a fraction of what it was before the war.
- m) Let us take the example of Liberia with a few figures: in 1980 the GDP (in 1992 dollars) was over 1.4 billion US dollars and the population was under 2 million – GDP per capita was over \$700. The GDP went down from the high of 1.4 billion to less than 200 million in the mid nineties. By 2006 it had recovered somewhat to over 400 million dollars, but now shared among some 3.5 million people. This means that GDP per capita has gone from a high of \$700 to well below \$100 in the mid 90s, to a 2006 level which was still less than \$150. Average income is only one fifth of what it was in 1980.
- n) Yet in such a situation, we are finding it difficult to mobilize funds for countries in transition and post-conflict environments. WFP, as a consequence, is downscaling.
- o) Mr. President, distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen, We have the capacity to support the livelihoods that are so fragile in a context of early recovery from conflict and at a time of global economic crisis. We can ease the destabilizing social tensions that can undermine peace and security by providing the targeted food assistance to those who need it most. We can give Governments the chance to make recovery work.
- p) Each country is at risk of the “ticking time bomb” where unemployed youth could be triggered to engage in violence and start a new conflict because they do not see the benefits of peace. Many young people have grown up in violence and perhaps participated in it or watched as others earned their livelihood through violent acts. While they are trying to find jobs and earn livelihoods through agriculture and other activities, they could become frustrated if progress is not made quickly. Arms are readily available in these countries and frustrated youth could be

tempted to revert to old behavior. What role can WFP play to stem deterioration in the current situation and avert an explosion?

- q) In a report published in January of this year, the International Crisis Group cautioned that **“Unless partners, (...), maintain their efforts to make Liberia more secure and stable over the next few years, the investment made since the end of the war could easily unravel”**.
- r) The example of Liberia was given, but the dynamics are exactly the same in Sierra Leone, Côte d’Ivoire and in Guinea. Our support helps these countries to avoid frequent and violent changes of Government. Political instability has its costs. It is destructive and wasteful.

3. Challenges to WFP’s Mission

- s) Pockets of conflict continue to plague the West Africa region, reducing stability and increasing risk for humanitarian work.
- t) Since mid-January, parts of Liberia and Guinea have been affected by a spectacular invasion of caterpillars that have damaged tree and garden crops. President Johnson-Sirleaf of Liberia declared a national emergency, and UN agencies are providing support to the Government’s actions to control the pest. Thankfully, the main rice harvest has been spared. This event again underlines the varied and surprising nature of the risks posed to livelihoods and food security in West Africa.
- u) Another challenge is erratic or irregular weather, such as severe storms or drought, the results of climate change. Over the past two years, West Africa has experienced unusual and severe flooding. In Togo, at least 10 bridges were knocked out after weeks of torrential rains. High levels of rainfall are also being reported in single storm events, where the volume of water falling overwhelms any kind of drainage system. Such storms are often accompanied by very high winds, which also destroys infrastructure. As the next rainy season approaches, we may face greater food insecurity due to drought or floods.

4. Opportunities and Priorities

- v) In terms of priorities for the region, we will continue our efforts in life saving assistance, to those displaced by conflict in Chad, Central Africa Republic, Cameroon, Cote d’Ivoire and The Gambia. Another priority area is nutritional support to malnourished children, pregnant and breastfeeding women and people needing nutritional support to complement their treatment of HIV and TB.

- w) While I have presented climate change as a threat, it can also be viewed as an opportunity. WFP is well positioned to help communities build resilience through the construction or rehabilitation of infrastructure. In Burkina Faso and Senegal, for example, WFP Food-for-Work activities are helping farmers to build water control infrastructure in their fields, which can mitigate against the effects of too much or too little rainfall. In Niger, the Keita project, supported at one time by WFP FFW activities, serves as an example of how the effects of climate change can actually be halted and reversed. The Keita valley is now a green and productive agricultural zone due to the planting of trees and the construction of simple earthen dams and other water conserving infrastructure.
- x) Moving forward in 2009 and beyond, there are many opportunities for WFP to work closely with government and communities to build local capacity to better prepare for climate change.