Cash transfers to the poorest people offer the most effective means of fighting hunger [1]

Frédéric Dévé [2]

"The people are crying out for food and we are going to give them pamphlets" complained John Boyd Orr, the first Director-General of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).

The various efforts made to reduce hunger over the 70 years since FAO was founded have not produced the expected results. In spite of real advances in many countries, the global situation is not very far ahead of what it was in 1945.

One out of eight people, rather than one out of six, goes to bed every night without having met their basic food energy needs. About 870 million people suffer from chronic hunger, and 2 billion people are affected by the lack of one or more micronutrients.

One out of every four children of less than five years old suffers from stunted growth, which often leads to a reduction in their mental and physical potential as adults; and 3

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million of these children die each year because of under-nourishment. Meanwhile the idea that the eradication of hunger is possible is gaining ground.

The member countries of FAO have reaffirmed their commitment to this goal. The United Nations Secretary General laid down his *"Zero Hunger"* challenge to the international community gathered at the Rio +20 summit. And in the preparation for the Sustainable Development Goals that will succeed the Millennium Development Goals after 2015, the eradication of hunger before 2030 is assigned high priority. But how are we going to succeed now, after so many setbacks?

Three Lines of Action

The countries that have made the best progress towards hunger eradication have certain common features. They prove that three simultaneous lines of action need to be taken on a massive scale: first, the introduction of cash transfers as part of social protection policies; secondly, renewed support for agriculture, and especially for small-scale farmers in those societies that are still predominantly agrarian; and, thirdly, urgent steps to improve the nutrition of very young children and their mothers, including the provision of clean drinking water supplies, sewage disposal systems and hygiene education, as well as other specifically nutritional interventions.

Three principles must guide these efforts. Above all, the highest levels of government must assure policy coordination. This must involve all concerned ministries –typically as many as a dozen – as well as the different sectors of society, especially civil society organizations.

This needs to be linked to affirmative action in favour of women so as to assure their access to social protection, to productive assets and to interventions intended to improve nutrition.

Finally, the concept of the Right to Food should become part of a nation's Constitution. This can assure a sustained commitment to improved systems of governance for hunger reduction. Dialogue between all the involved sectors of society needs to be expanded, making space for those who are most deprived – small-scale farmers, the beneficiaries of social protection and women – to assure them a strong voice in decision-making.

The challenge is to release the energies, capacities and resources of all the involved parties and to engage them in a coordinated way in overcoming the obstacles that now prevent policies, institutions, regulations and vested interests from contributing to the common goal of *"Zero Hunger"*.

Links with Agricultural Policies

The first proposed line of action relates to social protection. The big task is to ensure that *"cash transfers"* reach the poorest rural households, whether or not they are linked to conditionalities (for example, school attendance by children, vaccinations and other health measures, nutrition education etc.).

The effectiveness of transfers is enhanced if these are channelled to adult women within targeted households. Such programmes have now been tried in many countries, including a number in Sub-Saharan Africa. They have positive impacts on agricultural production as well as on local economies through their injection of additional cash into local markets.

By translating food needs into demand, cash transfer programmes can stimulate food production, leading to further food security benefits. These programmes thus help to drive agricultural and rural development.

Some people question the relevance of social protection programmes for the poorest countries and imply that they could nurture a culture of *"dependence"* amongst beneficiaries. But what form of dependence could be worse than that induced by hunger, which prevents people from leading a healthy and productive live and, often, excludes them from working?

New technologies are making it possible to extend social protection coverage even to the most remote communities. For example in pastoral areas of Kenya, groups, each consisting of about 10 women, have been provided with a mobile phone through which each of them can receive a few tens of Euros each month. This effectively doubles their cash income, enabling them to make fundamental improvements to their family livelihoods while boosting their resilience to the frequent droughts to which they are exposed.

National-scale cash transfer programmes, targeted on the poorest rural communities and households need to be quickly put in place. This can be done for a cost of as little as one or two percent of GDP, an investment which generates considerable social and economic benefits. Brazil offers one of the best examples of such programmes, and this is now being emulated by many other countries. To bring an end to hunger, even the poorest countries must redistribute their national wealth.

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