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The Food Aid Organization of the United Nations

## WFP News Release

28 November 2007

### HUNGER, HEALTH AND HIV/AIDS: A CRITICAL CONNECTION

**ROME** – As communities gather to mark World AIDS Day, and governments take stock of the progress towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals, the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) is urging that more attention be paid to the fundamental connection between *hunger* and *health*, which lies at the heart of the pandemic.

Donor countries have invested billions of dollars into anti-retroviral treatment (ART) and other medication to counter the growing impact of AIDS in developing countries. But they may overlook the irony that people receiving life-saving drugs often lack food and clean water. As with any drug, anti-retrovirals are more effective when people are adequately nourished. Food support can play an important role in ensuring that people who lack food benefit fully from their treatment.

“It is irresponsible to ignore the issue of hunger and malnutrition particularly in the battle against AIDS,” said WFP Deputy Executive Director Sheila Sisulu. “Why should we write off the benefits of medical interventions simply because people are too undernourished to absorb and benefit from the drugs they desperately need?”

The multiple relationships between hunger and poor health are explored – with particular reference to HIV/AIDS – in a major report released today by WFP. *The World Hunger Series 2007- Hunger and Health\** states that “hidden hunger” affects more than two billion people. Even when a person consumes adequate calories and protein, if they lack one single micronutrient – or a combination of vitamins and minerals – their immune system is compromised, and infections take hold.

Studies show that people with HIV have special nutritional needs. According to WHO, adult energy needs increase by 20-30 percent, while children with HIV require between 50-100 percent more energy because the intestinal tract is affected, resulting in poor absorption and loss of appetite. Surveys in Rwanda and Tanzania indicate that lack of food is a major reason for people *not* to seek treatment for HIV/AIDS - specifically the fear that when they have treatment, their appetite will grow and they lack sufficient food to meet their increased needs.

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WFP's report is being presented in Rome at a seminar ahead of World AIDS Day (1 December). The seminar, held jointly by WFP and the Comunita di Sant'Egidio, a Rome-based non-governmental organisation treating HIV/AIDS patients in Africa, focuses on scaling up proven hunger-health solutions.

Sant'Egidio's Drug Resource Enhancement against AIDS and Malnutrition (DREAM) programme at 24 centres in 10 African countries, illustrates how WFP food assistance helps people infected or affected by AIDS. Prevention and treatment are combined to tackle a variety of problems in a single continuum of health care and assistance.

"Since we started in 2002, DREAM has provided assistance to more than 25,000 people with the two-fold aim – to prevent transmission of HIV and guarantee the survival of mothers and their children. Food is a vital component of our treatment," said Leonardo Palombi, Scientific Director of the DREAM programme.

"Food is often cited by people living with and affected by HIV/AIDS as their greatest and most important need," said Elizabeth Mataka, the UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy for AIDS in Africa, speaking at the Rome seminar. "Nutrition interventions for HIV programmes are often overlooked in the international HIV policy debate and they remain critically under-funded."

In a related study, the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) has forecast that 900,000 people going onto anti-retroviral drug treatment (ART) in 2008 will require food assistance. It is estimated that the average cost of providing food support to a patient is US\$0.66 per day – a figure representing less than two percent of the current cost of drug programmes.

WFP was one of the first organizations to provide food assistance alongside ART in poor areas, and now supports ART programmes in 16 countries in Africa, reaching over 182,000 beneficiaries. With active HIV/AIDS interventions in 50 countries worldwide, WFP is giving food assistance in 21 of 25 nations with the highest HIV prevalence rates. Rations vary but include basics like rice, beans, fortified cereals, oil and iodized salt – to ensure essential nutrients to people living with HIV/AIDS.

Food also plays an important role in helping families and communities to support orphans and vulnerable children. For example, WFP assists: children in shelters, vocational training programmes, foster parents and grandparents caring for orphans. Provision of take-home rations ensures that children can go to school instead of working the fields or running away to the nearest city.

*The World Hunger Series 2007* challenges leaders to build on past successes, combining current knowledge with a will to undertake the 'essential solutions' that are proven, practical and cost-effective.

"For the first time in history, we have the knowledge to end hunger. All we need now is the will and the action to eradicate hunger from humanity," said John M. Powell, WFP Deputy Executive Director who is presenting the report in Rome. "In the context of continuing suffering – especially those affected by AIDS and malnutrition - we must do more. We must mobilise our collective will – economically, politically and, most importantly, morally."



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\**World Hunger Series 2007 – Hunger and Health* by the UN World Food Programme is the second in a series launched in 2006 with *Hunger and Learning*. The 2007 report is published by Earthscan. Pb £18.99 • ISBN: 9781844075461 • Pub date: 28th November 2007

To purchase the report visit <http://shop.earthscan.co.uk/ProductDetails/mcs/productID/825/>

WFP is the world's largest humanitarian agency: last year we gave food to 88 million people – mostly women and children – in 78 of the world's poorest countries.

WFP now provides RSS feeds to help journalists keep up with the latest press releases, videos and photos as they are published on WFP.org. For more details see: <http://www.wfp.org/english/?n=999>.

*WFP now has a dedicated ISDN line in Italy for quality two-way interviews with WFP officials.*

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