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Commentary: Solidarity in combating the food crisis

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By Dr Mirta Roses Periago, Director
Pan American Health Organization

The global food crisis precipitated by the steep rise in food prices and consequent inaccessibility of food, which has led to explosions of violence in over 30 countries, some of them in our Region, poses a threat to the progress in health, as well as in environmental protection and poverty reduction, achieved within the framework of the Millennium Development Goals.

This crisis is occurring at a critical time in Latin America and the Caribbean, when efforts are concentrating on eradicating malnutrition and developing strategies to combat both the causes and the most visible effects of this chronic problem that undermines the populations' potential for current and future development.



**Mirta Roses-Periago is the
Director of the Pan
American Health
Organization (PAHO).
AFP PHOTO**

Food assistance is urgent, as Secretary-General of the United Nations Ban Ki-moon has stated. At the same time, however, we must take care to ensure that the response to the emergency does not undo the efforts of governments, civil society, and communities to consolidate their organizational and logistical capabilities, local development strategies based on primary health care, and the intersectoral activities that impact health determinants and promote synergies with the education, water and sanitation, labor, agriculture, and production sectors.

The structural factors responsible for the nutrition and development problem in the Region amplify this crisis. Thus, the United Nations agencies in the Region have formed the Pan American Alliance for Nutrition and Development to coordinate and integrate activities and guarantee that investments have a greater impact.

I call upon our partners in the international community, financial institutions, religious groups, business and civil society organizations, NGOs, and international agencies to:

Swiftly allocate assistance commensurate with the complexity and magnitude of the problem and facilitate the creation of mechanisms for its timely delivery.

Also, in each specific place, tend to the indispensable complementary needs in nutrition, such as safe drinking water, fuel, local infrastructure, basic health services, and education, since only the synergy among them guarantees adequate nutrition.

Respect the social and institutional capital that has arduously been constructed over decades, so that the assistance provided during the crisis strengthens, rather than weakens, the countries' own capacity to overcome historical obstacles; and guarantees definitively that the scourge of chronic malnutrition in Latin America and the Caribbean will be eliminated.

It is also necessary for the countries of the Region to:

Show their solidarity by reconsidering their policies on humanitarian assistance and the export of food staples, especially in countries suffering from greater inflationary pressures, promoting extraordinary cooperation mechanisms among the countries that will contribute to self-production of food and food sovereignty.

Improve surveillance, down to the local level, of social and nutritional aspects, with active participation by the health and social services, to ensure the early detection of inequities or acute shortages that can be relieved.

Protect populations, especially the most vulnerable, and address their legitimate concerns, guaranteeing attention to the problem and equitably allocating the resources mobilized.

All of this will enable us to turn this crisis into an opportunity to speed up progress in improving the health and integrated development of our peoples.

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