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WHO Statement at the High-level Conference on World Food Security

Rome, Italy, 3 June 2008

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on World Food Security
Rome, Italy, 3 June 2008**

Distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen,

The health sector is deeply concerned about the crisis caused by soaring food prices and the impact this is already having on poor and vulnerable populations.

Adequate food intake is a fundamental determinant of health throughout the lifespan. It influences pregnancy outcomes, and clinical outcomes of people infected with HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria, and many other diseases. It affects the survival of the elderly. And it has an extremely profound effect on young children, on their physical growth and cognitive development, and on their ability to survive bouts of infectious diseases.

The food crisis is a direct threat to much hard-won progress in health development. The world already faces an estimated 3.5 million deaths from malnutrition each year.

Poor households spend well over half of their disposable income on food. More money for food means less money for health care, especially for the many millions of poor households who rely on out-of-pocket payments when they fall ill.

Moreover, food choices are highly sensitive to price. The first items to drop out of the diet are usually the healthy foods – fruits, vegetables, and high-quality sources of protein, which are nearly always more expensive. Fatty processed foods or low-energy nutrient-poor staples are often the cheapest way to fill hungry stomachs.

The food crisis is thus a dual threat to health: one threat arising from malnutrition, especially in young children, and a second threat from the many chronic diseases, like heart disease, diabetes, and some cancers, that are strongly linked to improper diet. We can expect to see more malnutrition, and more obesity and chronic diseases, literally side-by-side.

I cannot overstate the need for emergency action, together with an urgent quest to ensure better food security in the future. To guide priority action, WHO has identified 21 “hot spots” around the world which are already experiencing high levels of acute and chronic undernutrition.

The health sector has very good knowledge about nutritional needs at different ages and in different high-risk groups. We have very good tools for monitoring deficiencies and sounding the alarm.

Above all, we need to gear up capacity, and very quickly, to manage malnutrition in young children.

Let me close with a word of strong commitment. WHO will do all it can to help manage the health dimensions of this crisis. As I said, a great deal of hard-won progress is at stake.

Thank you.