



Malnutrition in Timor-Leste

Briefing for World Food Day, 16th October 2014

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Intro

Journalist Jayanth Vincent¹ recently invited readers to take a moment and think about why no Asian team had ever won the World Cup. The answer, apparently, lies in nothing simpler than undernourishment. Whilst it may or may not be that simple, it is a great way of highlighting even a small fraction of all the opportunities one is denied by inadequate nutrition. World Food Day is a great opportunity to draw attention to this issue. On October 16, people from all around the world come together to celebrate the creation of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (UN FAO) and reinforce their commitment to the fight against malnutrition - “because when it comes to hunger, the only acceptable number is zero.”²

So why should we care about hunger? Because while for the developed world it is only a temporary inconvenience, for large parts of the developing world it is very much a part of everyday life. Hunger kills and paralyses; it has life-long, irreversible effects on the quality of life and the physical and mental capabilities of people.

Hunger is an issue in many of the countries where HART works, and is a significant contributing factor to many other challenges, including conflict. As Secretary General Ban Ki-moon as stated, “we cannot know peace or security if one in eight people are hungry”.

There is enough food worldwide to go around³ and the price of neglecting those suffering goes far beyond football world cups. Ignoring such a fundamental issue is not only unethical, but is also a great risk to security, partnership and development.

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¹ <http://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2014/jun/23/nutrition-football-world-cup-asia>, article accessed on 10.10.2014.

² World Food Day USA website: <http://www.worldfooddayusa.org/what-is-wfd>; accessed: 10.10.2014.

³ World Food Day USA website: <http://www.worldfooddayusa.org/what-is-wfd>, accessed: 10.10.2014.

TIMOR-LESTE

The Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste, or East Timor, is a country in Southeast Asia, hardly bigger than the area of Northern Ireland. Shortly after gaining independence from Portuguese colonial rule in 1975 this small land was invaded by Indonesia, and only freed from its rule after a UN assisted referendum in 2002. The conflict- and hardship-ridden past left the new country with a legacy of unemployment, poverty, serious lack of political and economic stability as well as infrastructure.⁴

Despite the land of East Timor being relatively fertile, food insecurity is widespread, a single cause for which is difficult to find. The phenomenon is in part the consequence of a general lack of agricultural knowledge and farming skills exacerbated by seasonal changes of food supply such as the 4 month long hungry season before harvest, which leads to food shortages even in the most fertile periods. To add insult to injury, certain medically incorrect beliefs and cultural taboos still pose barriers to consuming a healthy diet.⁵



The government of Timor-Leste is aware of the nutrition challenge and is willing to act⁶, as the inclusion of the issue in its very own National Development Plan, in accordance with the MDGs, indicates. In 2001 the prevalence of underweight children under 5 was 45%, which got even worse by 2007, when it almost reached 50%! It is also reported that the proportion of the population below the minimum level of energy consumption required by international standards was as high as 64% in 2001, which is a higher ratio than that of those living below the national poverty line (49.9% in 2001), thus this 64% includes even people who would not classify as 'poor'. The government, while making an explicit appeal in its report for consideration of its difficult past, ensures commitment to the values of the fight⁷ as proven by the estimated slight decrease in the prevalence of malnutrition (45% in 2013 according to HIAM Health).⁸

⁴ Timor-Leste Millenium Development Goals Report 2004: http://www.undg.org/archive_docs/5382-Timor-Leste_MDG_Report_2004_-_Timor-Leste_MDG_Report.pdf, accessed: 10.10.2014.

⁵ <http://www.hart-uk.org/blog/timor-leste-leading-asia-pacific-hunger-free-future/>, blog entry accessed on 10.10.2014.

⁶ Earth Institute Summary Report on Mission to Timor-Leste, 2012
http://www.hiamhealth.org/dl/Earth_Institute%20Report_on_Mission%20to_Timor-Leste_2012.pdf, accessed: 10.10.2014.

⁷ The Millennium Development Goals, Timor-Leste <http://www.undg.org/docs/10339/Timor-Leste-MDG-Report-2009.pdf>, accessed: 10.10.2014.

⁸ HIAM Health website <http://www.hiamhealth.org/hiam.html>, accessed: 10.10.2014.

WHAT MALNUTRITION REALLY MEANS

Timor-Leste, the country with the third highest ratio of malnourished children under 5⁹ in the world, is not the only area that requires attention: this is a global problem.



Every hour 300 children die because of malnutrition worldwide, which altogether adds up to a staggering 2.6 million children a year. Half of under 5 deaths are directly or indirectly linked to malnutrition worldwide. But even those who survive suffer serious damage, with at least 170 million children affected by stunting (inadequate height to age). Studies have long been highlighting the direct, and more or less irreversible link between the adequacy of nutrition for children, especially under the age of 3, and the level of their health, productivity and intelligence in the future.¹⁰ A visual representation of the consequences can be found on the infographic on the left.¹¹

And if compassion is not urging enough to act, one should also recognise the economic importance of investing in adequate nutrition for a nation in order to be able to fully utilise the capabilities of its people.

THE RIGHT TO FOOD

The negative right to food, that is, the freedom *from* hunger, was recognised and explicitly referred to as early as in England's 1215 Magna Carta, but it has become much more widely advocated in the 20th century together with various other human rights. Famously articulated in his Four Freedoms speech (January 6, 1941), US President Franklin D. Roosevelt expressed the fundamental need for everywhere in the world to enjoy the freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, freedom from fear. Adopted in 1948, Article 25 of the UN Declaration explicitly expresses that "everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services (...)"¹² This has been taken up by various legal and non-legal international bodies and been incorporated into numerous human rights documents – more in the form of a moral obligation rather than a legally binding commitment.

⁹ <http://www.irinnews.org/report/92039/timor-leste-chronic-malnutrition-among-world-s-highest>, article accessed: 10.10.2014.

¹⁰ Save The Children: A Life Free From Hunger, <http://www.savethechildren.org.uk/sites/default/files/docs/A-Life-Free-From-Hunger-UK-low-res.pdf>, accessed:10.10.2014.

¹¹ <http://www.thousanddays.org/about/undernutrition/>, original source of infographic: Save The Children savethechildren.org, accessed:10.10.2014

¹² United Nations: The Universal Declaration of Human Rights <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/>, accessed: 10.10.2014.

HOW MALNUTRITION IS DEALT WITH WORLDWIDE

The UN Millennium Declaration, adopted in 2000, was a targeted, action-, cooperation- and achievement-oriented commitment adopted by a large gathering of world country leaders to tackle extreme poverty, hunger and disease, improve quality of life and promote self-development. These aims were manifested in the 8 Millennium Development Goals with a 2015 deadline.¹³ The first goal, to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger by 2015, expresses the desire and aim to halve the proportion of people who suffer from hunger. The issue of malnutrition is of special importance, as 6 out of 8 MDGs¹⁴ are dependent on tackling it, as demonstrated in the image below:



Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger

- Poverty is very frequently described with hunger and food insecurity amongst those affected



Achieve universal primary education

- Malnutrition has long-term effects on mental and physical capabilities: malnourished children are found to have lower school enrolment rate and poorer performance once enrolled



Promote gender equality



Reduce child mortality

- Half of under 5 deaths are directly or indirectly linked to malnutrition worldwide!



Improve maternal health

- Pregnant women and under-five children are normally the most vulnerable to health issues, which are widely accepted to be linked to the adequacy of nutrition.



Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases

- Similarly, the effects of early age malnutrition so serious that they have long-term, irreversible, impact on the level of health and the strength of immune system.

¹³ United Nations Millennium Development Program website:

<http://www.unmillenniumproject.org/goals/index.htm>, accessed: 10.10.2014.

¹⁴ Source of images: United Nations Millennium Development Program website: <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/childhealth.shtml>, accessed: 10.10.2014.

Malnourished children are more likely to have fall ill throughout their lives.



Ensure environmental sustainability

- The long-term fight against malnutrition often involves endeavours for environmentally conscious farming and sustainability – and vice versa: agricultural reforms ideally improve the quality, quantity and variety of food available.



Global partnership for development

- Hunger is a global issue and resolving it requires global effort. But a true global partnership can only work sustainably after having defeated hunger: this is when people can fully utilise their capabilities and move beyond immediate subsistence needs and struggles.

Both the 2013 and 2014 reports assessing the progress towards meeting this target express significant improvements. As the 23% of world population suffering from malnutrition in 1990 has declined to 15% by 2013, and the number of stunted children declined from 40% the 1990s to 24.5% in 2013¹⁵, the target is within reach if immediate action is taken. Yet, following Secretary General Ban ki-moon's statement, "we cannot know peace or security if one in eight people are hungry" - as the case apparently still is.

Another problem with these assessments is that there are serious disparities between regions concerning the numbers affected by malnutrition, the causes of such phenomena, as well as the vulnerabilities each region faces and capabilities to deal with such vulnerabilities. South-Eastern Asia, Eastern Asia, the Caucasus, Central Asia and Latin America are brought up as generally good examples of a good progress, in contrast with the relatively slow pace of change in the Caribbean, Southern Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, Oceania and especially Western Asia, where the situation got even worse with an increasing prevalence of undernourishment since the 1990s.¹⁶ However, even within those areas there are significant differences: despite the general good progress South-East Asia has experienced, Timor-Leste is one of the countries highly unlikely to meet the targets. The UN calls for immediate action as the 2015 deadline is fast approaching, however, it has also admitted the need to look beyond this date: a minimalist, rapid, statistics-focused intervention shall not replace a sustainable, long-term solution for the problem of malnutrition.

¹⁵ World Health Organisation: Levels & Trends in Child Malnutrition
http://www.who.int/nutgrowthdb/summary_jme_2013.pdf?ua=1, accessed: 10.10.2014.

¹⁶ United Nations: The Millenium Development Goals Report 2013
<http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/pdf/report-2013/mdg-report-2013-english.pdf>, accessed: 10.10.2014.

TIMOR-LESTE, HIAM HEALTH PROGRAM

HART partner HIAM Health, operating since 2003, is unique to Timor-Leste. It is the only local organisation to offer relief, support and targeted educational programmes to tackle malnutrition. The program, building on the recognition that a long-term solution requires a multi-sector approach, offers immediate treatment for malnourished children alongside family educational programmes.

In-centre treatments and support are available from as early as the time of pregnancy and last up until the second birthday of the child, given the importance of the first 1000 days of a child's life regarding the child's ability to grow, learn, and rise out of poverty. At the same time the program aims to educate families about topics such as the understanding of nutrition requirements for children, sanitation and basic hygiene practices, as well as cooking and horticulture. It is to ensure parents are aware of their opportunities and responsibilities to take care of themselves and their children, in the hope that this education about the need for and ways to uphold a balanced and healthy diet would be passed on to other members of the communities.

The need for education is especially apparent in Timor-Leste given the prevailing spiritual fatalism, beliefs and cultural taboos relating to eating, which are often based on experiences from accidents, myths or medically incorrect beliefs. Such taboos stop many people from consuming certain products or eating at all! Furthermore, 70% of the population of Timor-Leste is dependent on subsistence farming, therefore farming skill trainings are of special importance for food security.



Smiley faces in the HIAM Health Centre. Throughout 2013 245 children were treated and 16 community gardens established.

As a wider step, community gardening projects are also offered, whereby seeds, tools and training are provided to improve and increase the diversity of nutrients available both in families and in the wider communities. In this way HIAM enables and encourages individuals and communities alike to take an active, conscious role in eradicating hunger and sustaining a healthy population¹⁷.

¹⁷ HIAM Health website: <http://www.hiamhealth.org/programs.html#program-1>, accessed: 10.10.2014.; HART Newsletter Summer 2013 http://www.hart-uk.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/HART_Newsletter_June-2013_LowRes.pdf, accessed: 10.10.2014.

PROSPECTS, FAO WORLD FOOD DAY

Similarly, while with rapid and immediate actions the MDG target of halving the proportion of people living in hunger would be attainable, there is no short-cut solution that could get to the root of the issue. As the 2015 deadline is approaching, it is important to remember that hunger is not only about numbers. The post 2015 MDG agenda goes beyond the immediate glory of attaining the set millennium target, and emphasises sustainability alongside universal inclusion. HIAM is a wonderful example of a small-scale, step-by-step, project prioritising not only immediate relief, but also sustainability. It cares about hunger so the next generation doesn't have to.¹⁸ FAO World Food Day 2014, whose theme is family farming, is a great way to celebrate the efforts that have already been made to eradicate hunger, to encourage reinforced efforts again and again, and further emphasise the power and potential that lies in community gardening to provide "food security and nutrition, improving livelihoods, managing natural resources, protecting the environment, and achieving sustainable development."¹⁹

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

The fight against hunger is a global struggle – and it should be fought worldwide: but it could and should start in individual households. There could be enough food for everyone to go around if it was not so unevenly distributed, as represented by the comparison of a world map²⁰ and the so called 'World Fat Map'²¹ below, depicting the mis-distribution of food. Wasting food is unbelievably prevalent in the developed world. However, "In a world of seven billion people, set to grow to nine billion by 2050, wasting food makes no sense - economically, environmentally and ethically." (Achim Steiner)



¹⁸ <http://www.worldfooddayusa.org/what-is-wfd> - poster

¹⁹ <http://www.fao.org/world-food-day/home/en/>

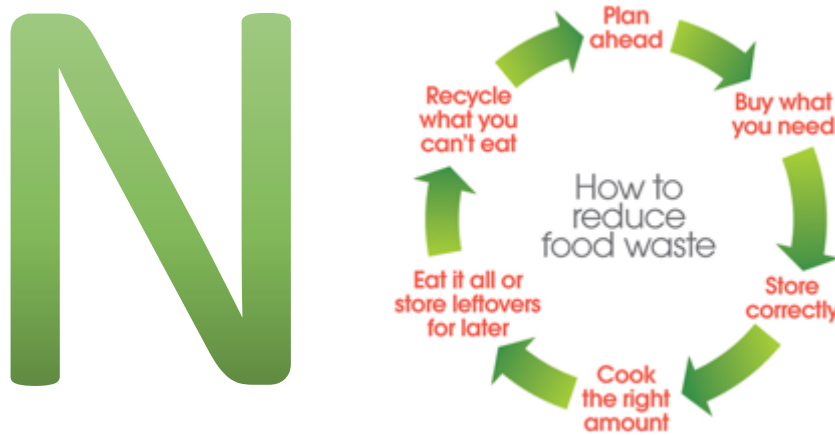
²⁰ Source of image: <http://www.outline-world-map.com/blank-world-maps-solid>, accessed: 10.10.2014.

²¹ Per capita calorie consumption on a nation by nation basis, compiled and produced by the World Food Program; http://www.huffingtonpost.com/princess-haya-bint-al-hussein/mapping-starvation-and-th_b_357352.html, accessed: 10.10.2014.

Love Food Hate Waste²² is an online campaign against food waste. According to their findings 7 million tonnes of food is wasted in UK households yearly, 19% of all food we buy. This amount could fill 9 Wembley Stadiums! However, throwing away food means not only wasting food and money, but also wasting valuable resources such as energy, fuel and water, as well as time and work that went into growing and preparing the food. It is estimated that the gain for the environment if no food was wasted would be equivalent of the gain from taking 1 in 4 car off the road!

(For more information, interesting facts about food waste and advice on how to avoid it, please visit www.lovefoodhatewaste.com!)

WOULD YOU MAKE A MEAL FOR 6 AND THROW IT STRAIGHT TO THE BIN?



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An average household throws away the equivalent of 6 meals a week. There have been countless campaigns to raise awareness and reforms to help reducing waste. Most waste comes from preparing too much meals or not using ingredients up in time. To avoid this retailers have started to introduce smaller packages, such as fridge packs or snack packs, alongside with re-closable packages for freshness. More detailed storage information and clear 'best before' dates have also been provided on the packaging.

What could **YOU** do?

- Plan ahead,
- Buy what you need,
- Store correctly,
- Cook the right amount,
- Eat it all or store leftovers for later,
- Recycle what you can't eat,

²² Love Food Hate Waste website: <http://england.lovefoodhatewaste.com/content/uk-media-resources>, accessed: 10.10.2014.

²³ source of infographic: Love Food Hate Waste ; online: <http://england.lovefoodhatewaste.com/content/food-waste-recycling-what-do-food-you-cant-eat>, accessed: 10.10.2014.

- Be creative – and get cooking! A number of recipes have been collected from HART’s partners around the world, in the book ‘A Journey Through Borderlands: Recipes from our partners’, which can be purchased on the HART website: <http://www.hart-uk.org/about-you/books-and-merchandise/>.
- Donations to support the fight against malnutrition are also genuinely appreciated. If you would like to support HART’s and HIAM Health’s work you can make or find more information about giving on the website <http://www.hart-uk.org/donate/>.