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Background document

FINAL DRAFT

Agenda Item 1: Population Growth and Rapid Urbanization:
Food Insecurity on the Rise in Urban Settings

I. Introduction

In 2008, the world reaches an invisible but momentous milestone: for the first time in history, more than half its population, 3.3 billion people, will be living in urban areas. By 2030, this is expected to swell to almost 5 billion. Many of the new urbanites will be poor, with a direct impact on food security.

Over the last 15 to 20 years, the absolute number of urban poor and undernourished people has increased at an extremely rapid rate. Increased poverty, food insecurity and malnutrition will continue to accompany this process of urbanization.

The rise of food insecurity in urban settings will be one of the main topics discussed in the Joint Meeting of the Executive Boards of UNDP/UNFPA, UNICEF and WFP on 23 and 26 January 2009 in New York. This background paper has been jointly prepared by, UNDP, UNFPA, UNICEF and WFP to inform the Boards and initiate a discussion around specific key issues related to food insecurity in urban areas.

Tajikistan has been chosen as a concrete case through which to illustrate the topic. Tajikistan is the poorest country in Central Asia, with 64 percent of the population living below the poverty line of US\$2/person/day and gender inequalities resulting from high levels of labour migration. As a net importer of fuel and food, it has been directly hit by the high prices crisis.¹

II. Background

Population growth and rapid urbanization

Globally, all future population growth will take place in cities, nearly all of it in Africa, Asia and Latin America.² In contrast to the past, the role of migration in that growth will be smaller than natural increase in most countries. This indicates a decisive shift from rural to urban growth, shifting a balance that has lasted for millennia between urban and rural areas.

The world's urban population is expected to grow from 3.17 billion in 2005 to 4.97 billion by 2030; high-income countries will account for only 116 million out of the expected increase of 1.8 billion. Urban areas are currently growing by almost 1.3 million people a week, or a city the size of Munich or Orlando, every seven days.

Most of the world's urban growth in the next two decades – 92 percent – will be absorbed by cities of the developing world, which are least equipped to deal with rapid urbanization. This will be particularly notable in Africa and Asia, where the urban population will double between 2000 and 2030, making up 81 percent of urban growth during that period,³ with harmful consequences if governments do not prepare now for the coming growth.

Cities have much to offer their residents, from better access to services to greater economic and developmental potential. However, benefits of life in the city are not evenly distributed. There are two cities: part of the urban population, in the organized neighbourhoods of the cities, receives all the benefits of urban living. The other part, the world's one billion African, Asian and Latin American slum dwellers, are more likely to die earlier, experience more

¹ World Bank. 2008. The Impact of Food Inflation on Urban Poverty and its Monetary Cost. July.

² UNFPA. State of the World Population 2007: Unleashing the Potential of Urban Growth.

³ UNDESA. 2007. World Urbanization Prospects. (Revision)

hunger and disease, attain less education and have fewer chances of employment than those urban residents that do not reside in a slum. The key to better urban development is improving access to basic goods, services and opportunities for those who are excluded.

However, as cities grow, so do their slum populations, and therefore the numbers of those excluded from many of the benefits of urban life. In many sub-Saharan African cities, the slum population accounts for over 70 percent of the urban population. Slums in southern and western Asia are growing as fast as the urban population in general, but the growth rates in sub-Saharan Africa are double in slums compared to the global urban population. Globally, the slum population is set to grow at the rate of 27 million per year in the period 2000–2020.

Urban poverty

Until recently, rural settlements were considered the epicentre of poverty and human suffering. All measures of poverty, whether based on income, consumption or expenditure, showed that rural poverty was deeper and more widespread than in cities. Despite this, there is now evidence that although urban centres on the whole offer better access to health, education, basic infrastructure, information, knowledge and opportunity, a shrinking segment of their quickly growing population really benefits from these opportunities.

Poverty is now increasing more rapidly in urban areas than in rural areas, especially in Africa, but most assessments underestimate the scale and depth of urban poverty.⁴ Recent comprehensive studies show that unemployment and underemployment are characteristics of urban economies, and that the populations which are growing most in urban areas are those which cannot access the formal labour market. Further, the infrastructure of cities cannot meet the increased demands for services and this has led to increased crowding and a deteriorating urban environment.

Urban employment opportunities increasingly require higher levels of skills, hampering the ability of the urban poor to access a wide range of jobs due to their lack of skills. Changing occupational structures that favour high skills are even impacting the middle classes, which have to fight for lower-paying jobs in severely constricted and competitive job markets, becoming the “new poor.”

The purchasing power of the urban poor is also affected by their living mostly in illegal squatter settlements with limited tenure rights, poor infrastructure and access to services, and heavy burdens in purchasing fuel, water, housing, health and education. That trend is not limited to the developing world. Many other nations would see a rise in their poverty line if the real costs of expenses in urban areas were taken into account.⁵

Urban food security

Food security is usually defined as “access by all people at all times to sufficient food for an active healthy life.” Food is generally the largest expense category in the budget of the urban poor, representing 60% or more of total expenditures. The main source of food insecurity in most cases is food access (especially due to a lack of economic means), rather than food availability. Poor food utilisation is also a significant contributor due to poor water, sanitation and health conditions.

⁴ For detailed data, UNFPA June 2007 and UN Population Division “World Urbanization Prospects” 2006.

⁵ “Statistiques d’accueil 2007, familles, enfance et pauvreté” Secours Catholique, 2008.

Urban areas provide at the same time a clear potential for food security and an increased risk. Urban diets can be more varied and nutritious than rural ones for those who have the means to access diversified food. However, cities and towns are cash-intensive and residents often have to pay for goods and services (such as fuel, water and housing) that they do not have to pay for in rural areas. High costs for non-food essentials means that urban dwellers must stretch their incomes across a wider range of goods such as housing, energy, transportation, household items, education, health care and personal items, in addition to food.

Urban dietary requirements are met to a considerable extent by relatively expensive processed and prepared foods. Urban retail markets in most developing cities are small and scattered – a way to accommodate the needs of the poor, who are forced to buy food every day and in small quantities since they lack the cash to buy in bulk. Many recent urban poverty assessment studies show that the cost of a 2,000-kcal food basket is 20 percent higher in towns than in a rural area and close to 100 percent higher on average in cities and capitals. Prices therefore vary not just between rural and urban areas but also between and within urban areas. Significant additional strain on household incomes has been caused by the dramatic increases in global prices over the past 2 years.

In some developing countries, malnutrition in the poorest areas of cities and peri-urban zones already rivals that of marginal rural areas. According to recent studies over long periods of time, urban and peri-urban areas started with the lowest levels of underweight children but deteriorated the most over the years, while more rural areas tended to improve.

Urban areas contain many subpopulations vulnerable to food insecurity. For example, a growing problem is the place of adolescents and youths in the social fabric. Half of the population living in developing cities is under the age of 25. Beyond the health and malnutrition risk, these young people have special needs and require special consideration as the future of civilization. Society has to ensure that they benefit from proper educational services in order to give them structure and avoid the emergence of illiteracy, criminality and violence, especially when we know that education is linked to prosperity and is the first casualty in times of food insecurity.

In addition, people suffering from chronic diseases, particularly HIV/AIDS, which tends to have high prevalence in urban areas, have special nutritional needs that must be met, and also have decreased resilience to fluctuations in cash-based food markets. Children experience immediate and long-term developmental deficits if they are malnourished. Proper nutrition for pregnant women is essential both for the health of the mother and the development of the child. The elderly, although they have lower total caloric needs, require specific nutrients to maintain organ functions. Finally, households headed by women generally spend a higher proportion of their income on food and have reduced earning potential.

Recent studies show that urban food security is politically invisible for several reasons:

- For more than the last 20 years, development theory has reinforced the notion that food insecurity and poverty are generally rural problems.
- Urban food security is neglected by urban planners and managers because they already have to deal with urgent and visible political issues such as unemployment, the informal sector, overcrowding, decaying infrastructure and declining services – even though food security and malnutrition are all linked with these other problems
- Unless there are major problems with food supply or sudden increases in food prices, food insecurity rarely becomes a political issue and therefore must be dealt with at the household level. However, when food access does become a political issue, as evidenced during 2008 following major food and fuel price spikes, the situation can become highly volatile, threatening stability and forcing regime change, as witnessed recently in Haiti.

Urban agriculture is increasingly prevalent in developing cities and can supply some food needs and bridge some income gaps.. While it is not a panacea, it can participate in improving food security; however, many governments have laws restricting urban agriculture that undermine its potential.

It is clear that improved rural production and market networks would create benefits for both rural and urban areas. The reciprocity between rural and urban households is key here, with urban households sending cash remittances to rural families in the semi-subsistence sector, which drives the purchase of food and other necessities in the rural areas and thereby contributes to the availability of a “rural surplus” of food for remitting to the urban household. Thus, social networks are one type of infrastructure that enables the flow of goods between rural and urban areas.

III. UNDP, UNFPA, UNICEF and WFP Contributions and Coordination Mechanisms

As the proportion of poor and undernourished people in urban areas increases, it is important that UN agencies together with relevant partners increase their involvement in urban settings and engage Governments and city administrators in the planning and implementation of relief and longer-term interventions on the basis of tailored urban livelihood analysis and appropriate response mechanisms. This calls for a more systematic approach to both understand urban food insecurity and targeting aspects, and to identify immediate (crisis related) and long term solutions.

The use of food assistance in urban areas poses additional considerations and challenges that differ substantially from those of food-assisted interventions in rural areas. Most of these special issues, and their implications for WFP food-assisted interventions, relate to the assessment/analysis and the design and planning phases of the programme cycle. The targeting of food aid in urban areas is a significant challenge as well as determining appropriate exit strategies which is less easily defined than in rural areas where a successful harvest normally triggers the handover. WFP has a policy on urban interventions and has issued guidance related to assessing and analysing urban poverty and food insecurity, and on the design and planning of food-assisted interventions in such areas, which merit continued review and updating based on growing experience in the urban context.

In the predominantly cash economies of urban areas, interventions to address hunger and food insecurity typically include cash and/or food for work, food and nutrition assistance for targeted vulnerable groups such as pregnant and lactating women, young children, and people living with HIV/AIDS, cash and voucher initiatives, and school feeding. Supporting and avoiding any negative impact on food and labour markets is a key consideration for urban interventions, including avoiding creating a pull effect from rural areas. Partnerships are key in their design and deployment, taking in to account that addressing urban food insecurity demands considerable attention on areas such as hygiene and sanitation, particularly in areas of high concentration of people and extreme poverty coupled with a lack of basic services.

UNICEF work relevant to the urban poor include its attention to nutrition security, linked to child survival, access to health and education services, the availability of water, sanitation and general hygiene, and child protection interventions including street children and children affected by HIV/AIDS. Generally speaking, chronic malnutrition is much more prevalent than acute malnutrition in urban areas because of poor infant and child feeding practices. The urban poor’s access to services is often hampered by their status as unregistered and they are more likely to use private-sector services, which are more accessible although at times unaffordable. UNICEF is engaged in promoting a greater balance in the urban–rural focus in

respect of its country programmes of cooperation with governments. In addition, work in a number of countries is focused around the Child-Friendly Cities Initiative, which aims to address with municipal governments the challenges faced by children in urban areas, requiring policy and budget changes.

UNFPA seeks to influence public policy to respond to the challenges posed by rapid urbanization and to meet the needs of all people, especially the poor and most vulnerable. UNFPA's *State of World Population 2007* focused expressly on urbanization, making the argument that a fundamental shift in urban planning is necessary. The divide between the formal areas of developing cities and their slums remains the largest factor in shaping future urban growth. The starting point for governments in preparing for urbanization must be to narrow this divide by improving access to minimally serviced land and housing. This improved access is a precondition for improving the lives of the urban poor, and for ensuring their longer-term food security.

UNFPA is also supporting evidence-based, policy-oriented research on the vulnerability of specific populations to food insecurity, focusing particularly on urbanization and urban-rural linkages. UNFPA is conducting this work in collaboration with FAO and the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED).

UNDP contributes to this program along three dimensions. One is through its role at the country level where, through the RCs, UNCTs develop a collaborative response to food insecurity, including the particular problems of urban areas. This includes UNDP's involvement in the Common Framework of Action (identified by the SG's High Level Task Force) where it coordinates with agencies, governments, NGOs and other partners on the ground to conduct quick assessments; devise feasible, adequately funded and nationally owned programs that address the various elements of vulnerability raised earlier; and contribute to monitoring and evaluation. A significant part of this partnership is in helping to improve food production and management, an important component of food security. The second is in making its experience with safety nets available for designing efficient, effective and sustainable mechanisms to address food insecurity in both urban and rural areas. This is being put to use in several countries in the Latin America and Arab States regions. The third is through applied policy research that contributes to emerging policy issues such as the design of agricultural input subsidies, youth employment programs, measuring the gender and social dimensions of vulnerability, assessing the environmental effects of increased production to meet demand and others.

IV. Challenges and Issues for Discussion

1) Urbanisation is an unstoppable phenomenon. Hence, there is a global need to adequately prepare for the challenges that it generates, rather than concentrating on measures to avoid or to exclude people from cities. This will include to the extent possible, making sure that urban dwellers have access to land, housing, services such as health and education and adequate access to food and nutrition. Cities have the potential to be places of better nutrition and heightened food security, and so should not be viewed negatively. In an organized city, people can more easily access basic services than in rural areas. While cities may have poverty, they should also be an escape from poverty, by offering various job and education opportunities.

2) There is an urgent need to collect evidence on, and monitor, the food and nutrition security situation of the urban poor, recognizing the complexity involved given the mobility of the urban poor within and across cities. Such data collection faces a number of challenges, including:

- *Needs Assessments*: urban assessments need a household and neighbourhood assessment model which is very different from the community-based or geographical models used in rural areas
- *Targeting*: In urban settings, poor people and more prosperous people live in close proximity. Unregistered urban residents have to be taken into account and safety nets need to vary to match fluctuating demand.
- *Monitoring*: Different criteria need to be developed that take into account the effects of different food consumption patterns on food security.
- *Rural bias*: Because existing guidance among the organizations is intended to be applicable in both rural and urban contexts, it tends to exhibit a rural bias. Indeed, the same may be said of staff experience and expertise. Both are a reflection of the fact that – prior to recent global food and fuel price increases – most needs assessments and programmatic activities have been focused primarily on rural areas

3) An extensive and comprehensive knowledge of the urban context will allow for enhancement of targeted safety nets, including fortification of household food and food/cash transfers, as well as longer-term social protection systems that are critical actions in addressing food and nutrition security in urban areas. This is fully consistent with the outcomes recommended in the High-Level Task Force on the Global Food Crisis Comprehensive Framework for Action (CFA).

4) Rural and urban areas cannot function separately and must develop exchanges for mutual benefits. The rural–urban partnership should be an important basis for a rural renewal policy. For those who continue farming, direct access to markets is essential and markets are usually located in urban centres. Better access to markets can increase farming incomes and encourage shifts to higher-value crops or livestock. Strengthening agricultural production in rural areas, especially that of smallholder farmers, would certainly enhance food availability and support food and nutrition security in urban areas – as recognized by the CFA.

5) Partnerships: Coordinated action among United Nations agencies in support of government responses needs to mobilize a wide coalition of actors especially among non-governmental and civil society groups engaged in addressing urban poverty; multi-stakeholder participation in urban contexts should be a major element of interventions.