NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Rising food prices hurt goal to help world's poor, malnourished

Chris Herlinger | Apr. 25, 2012

Students take a break for a meal provided by Catholic Relief Services at a school in Coteaux, Haiti, in 2010. (CNS/Barbara Fraser)

NEW YORK -- In what is probably no surprise to those who feed the hungry and care for the world's poor, the news this last week has not been encouraging.

A rise in food prices has caused progress on key goals to reduce global poverty and malnutrition to slide.

Seriously slide.

While progress has been made in achieving the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals on reducing extreme poverty and providing access to clean drinking water by 2015, the goals related to child mortality and mothers is "significantly off-track," according to a report issued April 20.

The result, economists say, is that neither of those two particular goals can be met by 2015, the year the UN set for achieving all of the eight goals, which include ending extreme poverty and hunger in the world.

"According to our projections, an estimated 1.02 billion people will still be living in extreme poverty in 2015," said Jos Verbeek, the lead economist at the World Bank and the principal author of the study, called the Global Monitoring Report 2012, which is available here [1].

"Clearly, assistance must be leveraged in new ways if we are to improve food security and nutrition, particularly for the poor and vulnerable."

The director of the Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns said the news is a setback.

"That we can't achieve this by 2015 is very upsetting," said Kathy McNeely, who heads the Maryknoll advocacy arm.

The report by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund concludes that not only has the jump in food prices kept millions in poverty, but the price hikes are impoverishing more and more people.

The food price increases in 2007 and 2008 caused the numbers of the global poor to increase by 95.6 million, the report said. The increases from 2010 and 2011 caused 36 million more to be pushed below the poverty line.

The news did not surprise humanitarian agencies that are responding to what is now an unsettled situation -- where the poor in countries like Ethiopia and Kenya are having to spend more and more of their small incomes on feeding themselves and their families.

Lane Bunkers, Catholic Relief Services' country representative in Ethiopia, told *NCR* the World Bank/IMF report "clearly lays out the impacts."

"Rising food prices have been a concern since this current food emergency was declared in Ethiopia in 2008," he said.

But the reports of worsening impacts of food prices come at a time of other unwelcome news for the drought-stricken Horn of Africa.

The Famine Early Warning System Network, a U.S.-funded body that analyzes weather information and data, has been monitoring the rainfall for the Horn of Africa. It warns that needed rains will begin late in this year's rainy season and will be below average.

That drop -- "a significant deterioration compared to earlier forecast analysis" -- would have a significant impact "on crop production, pasture regeneration, and the replenishment of water resources," a recent network report said.

That would mean two successive years of little rain for the region and would in all likelihood "negatively affect food security in a region still recovering from (the food emergency) in 2011." (A separate food crisis is afflicting the Sahel region of western and northern Africa.)

Bunkers said CRS and other humanitarian groups in Ethiopia, including Ethiopian Catholic Church partners, are preparing for another "emergency push" starting in June, which marks the beginning of what are sometimes called "the typical hungry months in Ethiopia."

At a meeting Monday in Washington, D.C., with members of the humanitarian InterAction, which includes such agencies as CRS, Verbeek and policy analyst Jennifer Rigg both stressed that the issue of malnutrition has to be seriously addressed.

The data from the Global Monitoring Report show that "malnutrition is not just a result of poverty but is a cause of it," said Rigg of the 1,000 Days partnership, a coalition of organizations working to promote improvements in maternal and childhood health.

Both Verbeek and Rigg said data continue to confirm what nutritionists have said for some time: Proper nutrition in the first 1,000 days of life -- from conception to roughly a child's second birthday -- is crucial.

If a child does not receive that, "the damage in the first 1,000 days is irreversible and can't be changed. That needs to sink in with people," said Verbeek, describing the data as "eye-opening" for an economist.

Also eye-opening, but hardly surprising, are the report's acknowledgements of the ways the poor cope with the daily pressures to keep food on the table.

"Reducing the quality of food and the number of meals was one of the most common Responses (to the increase in food prices)," the study said. "In addition, reducing nonfood consumption,

working more hours, and diversifying income sources (say, by entering a new informal occupation) were common nearly everywhere."

It added: "Migration, sometimes reverse migration to the home area, was also fairly common in response to the food price spikes. Asset sales were common, and loans from family, friends, and moneylenders were also important."

Coping "with economic crises has eroded the savings and asset base of many households, leaving them with few resources to manage future shocks."

McNeely, whose office has been involved in advocacy efforts promoting the importance of the first 1,000 days, said work must be redoubled on the issue of malnutrition as well as trying to end commodity speculation which is blamed for some of the recent jumps in food prices.

The Global Monitoring Report 2012 is available at worldbank.org/gmr2012 [1].

[Chris Herlinger, a writer for the humanitarian agency Church World Service, is a New York-based freelance journalist who reports frequently on humanitarian issues for *NCR*. He was on assignment in Kenya and Ethiopia for *NCR* late last year. His book, *Rubble Nation: Haiti's Pain, Haiti's Promise*, was recently published by Seabury Books.]

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