

FOOD POLICY | NUTRITION

Nutrition vital factor in solving hunger issues

Food security | Chronic under-nourishment causes blindness, poor mental development and death

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MONTREAL — Tackling the international shame of chronic hunger among hundreds of millions of people requires more than producing more food and getting it to the hungry, says a food security expert.

Marie Ruel, director of the food consumption and nutrition division of the Washington-based International Food Policy Research Institute, told a McGill University global food security conference Oct. 20 that the hunger issue will not be resolved solely through more productive agriculture.

At the core of the issue is a lack of nutrition, she said.

“Achieving food security does not equal achieving nutrition goals,” she said. “We have been better at dealing with food insecurity than we have in dealing with nutrition.”

The focus of most national and international food security strategies has been to invest more money in basic small-scale agriculture.

Ruel said the hunger crisis requires getting more nutritious food to people suffering from malnourishment, as well as improving public health and sanitation.

“We must address the underlying causes,” she said, citing the need for a better health and education system as well as improved social and economic equality.

Bev Oda, Canadian minister for international co-operation, said Canada has heard the message and is acting on it.

“One of the biggest challenges to food security in developing countries is gaining access to quality nutritious food,” she told the conference.

“It’s not just about getting food on the tables. It’s about getting better, more nutritious food on those tables.”

She said Canada is making better nutrition in food a major theme of its international development work, in part through a micronutrient initiative.

“It’s a tragedy that millions of the world’s most vulnerable do not get enough iron, iodine, vitamin A, folic acid and zinc in their diets leading to illness, blindness, im-paired mental development and death,” said Oda.

IFPRI executive Ruel told the conference that Brazil has been one of the successful countries in tackling chronic hunger in its population through production increases and improvements in health and education systems while also increasing economic equality.

She also noted that while the world has been losing ground in attempts to achieve a year 2000 Millennium pledge to reduce hunger to 400 million by 2015, China actually met its goal internally in 2002 as its economy expanded and millions of people earned enough to buy adequate food.

Still, chronic under-nourishment continues in parts of Asia and Africa and the result is stunted children and lost opportunity.

At one point, the “human face of malnutrition” flashed on the screen.

Victoria Quinn, senior vice-president of the Helen Keller International organization, showed a photo of a mother from the African nation of Niger with two daughters, a five-month-old baby and a stunted three year old who was the smaller of the two.

Other speakers connected malnutrition and hunger to contaminated or declining water sources around the world.

For more on the global food security conference, see pages 16, 20, 21.