


Newsmakers: **Josette Sheeran, WFP Executive Director**

 [Your feedback](#) | [ShareThis](#)



Josette Sheeran, UN World Food Programme Executive Director

Interview with **Josette Sheeran, Executive Director of the UN World Food Programme**

20 September 2010 – **Josette Sheeran of the United States assumed the role of Executive Director of the United Nations World Food Programme in April 2007. In that role she is responsible for guiding the agency's work in more than 70 countries where it feeds an estimated 90 million people each year - the biggest humanitarian operation against hunger in the world. A former senior US Government official, Ms. Sheeran is also currently the Chair of the UN High-Level Committee on Management, which ensures coordination and coherence across the UN system.**

UN News Centre: World leaders have gathered at UN Headquarters to discuss progress towards the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). One of those goals is halving the number of people who are hungry. How confident are you that we can reach that?

Josette Sheeran: The hunger MDG is the one most under threat today. We have seen the number of hungry people on the rise for a long time. We have seen it rise since 1995, but the projections for 2010 show that we may be seeing that these numbers are going down for the first time in a long time.

We have learned that vigorous international action can make a difference. We know what to do but we have to do it, and we have to do it vigorously. We have to put it on top of the global agenda. There's nothing more basic than hunger. It is the most severe face of poverty.

We have to put it on top of the global agenda. There's nothing more basic than hunger. It is the most severe face of poverty.

UN News Centre: A report from the World Food Programme (WFP) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) released last week says the number of chronically hungry has fallen from 1 billion to 925 million. Is this a sign we have turned the corner?

Josette Sheeran: It is a projection for this year and of course we have recently seen epic-level flooding in Pakistan which was not factored into the projections. This is no time to relax. We are seeing food prices climbing a little again. The projections are based on increased economic growth. If there isn't that growth, and there's a sudden-onset disaster or an unpredictable loss of crops, then those numbers can really swing. We're in a volatile area where the underpinning factors are more volatile than ever in recorded history.

UN News Centre: How much did the global financial and food crises set us back in overcoming hunger?

Josette Sheeran: It was a dramatic setback. It exposed structural weaknesses in the battle against hunger. There are a number of factors that play into the hunger crisis. A number of nations are food-deficit nations now. And there are individuals who simply cannot afford food for their families any more. Two million people were priced out of the food markets. This can happen for a number of reasons, but remember, food is the last thing that people will go without. When people can't even afford one good meal, then you know that really is the most extreme face of poverty.

That's why during the crisis I labelled it a 'silent tsunami.' Villages in virtually every country in every continent were affected. This was happening everywhere in the developing world. Our own access to people in need was hurt.

But I have to say to full credit to those who supported us. We had 100 nations who stood with us during the crisis and we saw new countries donate. Malawi became a donor; Thailand contributed in a huge way to help Haiti; Brazil contributed enormously too. We are seeing a solidarity of action by nations to help tackle the MDGs.

UN News Centre: What impact does fighting hunger have on the battle to achieve the other MDGs?

Josette Sheeran: The effect goes across every other Goal. Hunger jeopardizes all of them but particularly education – MDG 2. Kids do not go to school if they do not have food. They go in search of food or they do what they can to find it. That's why it's so critical

UN News Centre: Where are we doing the best – and worst – in the fight against hunger?

Josette Sheeran: The first thing I want to mention is that we have now changed our policies and strategies to focus on the under-twos. They are the most vulnerable. We have learned that the first 1,000 days of a child – from conception to two years of age – is so important. If they are undernourished then they will be damaged in their minds and bodies. New scientific evidence has reinforced what we had learned and has revolutionized the way we approach the issue of hunger: it's not only important that children get calories, but that they get the right kind of calories at the right time – that they get highly nutritious food.

UN News Centre: What about in terms of countries and regions?

Josette Sheeran: Where we are doing the best, we applaud those nations that have got themselves out of the hunger trap or are close to doing so. China is very close – it was the World Food Programme's largest programme 20 years ago but today we are not providing food there. Viet Nam has met the MDG. We are seeing in Africa that Ghana has done it, that Cape Verde has met the MDG. Just last week we held a celebration to say congratulations to Cape Verde, which took full ownership of its school meals programme. This is a huge step. In Latin America, Brazil is making huge strides forward with a very innovative and effective approach.

UN News Centre: Is there a gender divide when it comes to hunger?

Josette Sheeran: Women are the face of hunger. Hunger has a female face. It affects women disproportionately, and therefore it affects children as well, and it gets passed on inter-generationally too. We have therefore focused many of our programmes on reaching people most in need, so that includes women who are often cut off from food sources, who need emergency food assistance.

UN News Centre: WFP is known for its work at the acute end of the hunger spectrum – providing food immediately after natural disasters and other humanitarian crises. But you also help what might be described as the "long-term hungry". How do you move people off the cycle of aid dependence?

Josette Sheeran: This is one of the big stories in the world of hunger. WFP in the 1980s was about 80 per cent in development. But with a rise in natural disaster, catastrophes and conflicts, it is now about 80 per cent humanitarian and more 20 per cent developmental.

We have found that building in food safety nets such as the school feeding programme is vital. They can be the foundation for later success. With a robust school meals programme, a country can graduate and go forward – look again at Cape Verde.

This programme helps the most vulnerable children today. An estimated one third of the global population has no food safety net. The school meals programme focuses on the most vulnerable, and it's a formal part of that safety net strategy. We have helped many countries this way – Morocco, Jordan and Chile, for example, and others, such as Viet Nam.

UN News Centre: What are the biggest lessons that you have learned since taking on this job in early 2007?



Josette Sheeran meets with women taking refuge at a local girls' school after losing their homes to floods in Pakistan, September 2010.

Josette Sheeran: That we have to make sure we tap into the world's best thinking, the best technologies and the best minds to defeat hunger. WFP is involved in very complex operations today – we are not talking about your grandmother's food aid.

Yes, there are cases such as Darfur, where it takes heroic action to bring food in on planes, helicopters and trucks, or Pakistan, where we are building pulley bridges following the floods.

But we also have tailored our programmes. We have revolutionized them so that they work in different situations. One thing I have learned is that one size doesn't fit all. It is important to allow countries themselves, to allow villages themselves, to really guide the process.

In Burkina Faso, for example, there's food there but many people cannot afford it. You can have a famine when there is food present. So as an agency you have adapt to that. In emergencies we will deploy and give out cash to help out small stores and others.

Purchase for Progress (P4P) is a project where the World Food Programme purchases as much as 80 per cent of its food stocks from local smallholder producers, many of whom cannot even afford to feed their own families. With the help of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Howard Buffett Foundation, this programme is now deployed in 21 nations and we are purchasing directly from farmers' cooperatives. I saw this in action on a recent visit to Gulu, Uganda, and also when I went to Nicaragua.

UN News Centre: What inspired you to work in this field?

Josette Sheeran: I have worked many years with Africa. I headed up a programme in the US called the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act when I was in the trade office. I saw the ability of people, their power, and their amazing strength when you empower people to overcome their developmental challenges.

And I met people from the World Food Programme when I was part of the High-Level Panel on UN System-Wide Coherence that [then Secretary-General] Kofi Annan put together. They were the most innovative group of people I have ever worked with, and I felt inspired to work with them.

Read related news story:

'No time to relax' in the fight against hunger, top UN official warns