Dear Sir Malcolm

Global Food Security Inquiry

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on how the global food system can ensure food security. The Wellcome Trust’s strategic plan 2010-2020\(^1\) includes a new strategic challenge, ‘Connecting environment, nutrition and health’. This challenge recognises that factors like food security, nutrition and climate have a fundamental connection to health. We are developing our work in this area, including addressing under- and over nutrition by supporting basic, clinical and population level studies as well as supporting research that improves the evidence base to inform policy and address health consequences.

The World Food Summit of 1996 defined food security as “when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food”\(^2\). Globally 1.2 billion people are undernourished and 99 per cent of these live in the developing world, with the majority in sub-Saharan Africa and south Asia\(^3\). However, discussion around food security often focuses on ensuring that the population receives sufficient calories, with limited attention to how nutritious this food is. Since these issues are clearly interrelated, any consideration of how the global food system can be adapted to ensure an end to hunger must take into account the importance of ensuring adequate nutrition.

As developing countries become wealthier, with rising household incomes and greater access to refined foods, there are trends towards increased consumption of processed foods and those higher in calories, as well as an increase in the quantity of sugar and oil purchased. Combined with more sedentary lifestyles, these dietary changes are leading to increasing levels of obesity. This ‘nutrition transition’ means that for some developing countries, such as India and Mexico, a ‘double burden’ of obesity and under nutrition exists. The increasing prevalence of obesity is leading to the development of a new subset of the population that suffer health problems caused by their excess weight, but also lacking essential nutrients required for good health. This complex relationship means that strategies to address global food security should take into account the need to address the double burden of undernutrition and obesity.

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\(^1\) http://www.wellcome.ac.uk/About-us/Strategy/index.htm
\(^2\) http://www.who.int/trade/glossary/story028/en/
Nutritional status has a complex relationship with other health issues, including infectious disease; hygiene and sanitation; animal health; and maternal health. It is therefore important to consider other contributing ‘nutrition-sensitive’ policy areas when addressing the issue of food and nutrition security including poverty reduction, education, gender inequalities, trade and health. There needs to be a holistic approach to these issues, with a joined up strategy that facilitates collaborations and co-operation with multiple partners. Community engagement is also important as the "most effective policies are those that have recognised and engaged all stakeholders and in particular the poor."2

There is strong scope for the private sector to play a key role in increasing access to nutritious food. The Trust has been working in partnership with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition to develop the ‘Access to Nutrition Index’ (ATNI)5. The aim of ATNI is to identify and encourage best practice in the food industry to improve global nutrition, building on the approach used by the Access to Medicine Index. A core Index, to include both under nutrition and obesity, will consider multinational companies. A further series of ‘spotlight’ indexes will focus on specific countries (India, Mexico, South Africa) and the companies that operate there. ATNI will be launched in early 2013. It is intended that ATNI will act as a tool for companies to benchmark their nutrition practices and serve as an impartial source of information for interested stakeholders, for example investment firms who wish to invest in ethical ventures. Initiatives such as ATNI offer opportunities for the food industry to reflect on the impact they have on nutrition and to identify ways to improve their practices. ATNI is currently seeking further funding to ensure its sustainability in the longer term.

Globally, significant funding is committed to supporting food security, however often these funded projects are not evaluated to understand whether nutritional status is maintained or improved6. It is vital that robust and appropriate systems are put in place to monitor the impact of interventions to evaluate whether a technology or policy is working effectively or not. This information will then enable effective interventions to be appropriately implemented and disseminated to ensure the most efficient use of resources. Where interventions are large-scale and have multiple interrelated goals, such as improving nutrition and poverty alleviation, assessing effectiveness can be complex. Therefore, while randomised controlled trials remain the gold standard for evaluating interventions, it is important to recognise that other methodologies may sometimes be more appropriate or useful in certain settings.

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Best Wishes
Yours sincerely

Sir Mark Walport
Director, Wellcome Trust

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4 Professor Sir Gordon Conway and Professor Jeff Waage, with Sara Delaney (2010) Science and Innovation for Development p.223
5 http://www.access2nutrition.net/
6 Corinna Hawkes, Rachel Turner, Jeff Waage (2012) Current and planned research on agriculture for improved nutrition: A mapping and a gap analysis