



Rt. Hon. Andrew Mitchell. M.P.
Secretary of State for the Department of International Development
The Department for International Development.
1 Palace Road.
London.
SW1E 5HE.

c.c Rt. Hon. Stephen O'Brien, M.P.
Under Secretary of State for the Department of International Development
c.c Anna Taylor,
DfID.

October 15, 2010

Dear Minister Mitchell,

We are writing this open letter on the eve of World Food Day 2010 to urge the United Kingdom to influence the double standard of supplying or financing nutritionally substandard food to malnourished children in developing countries. Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) is reiterating a call to ensure that food aid supported by the United Kingdom meets the nutritional needs of young children.

Malnutrition takes a heavy toll. An estimated 195 million children under 5 years of age are affected, with 90 percent living in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. This preventable condition contributes to one third of the 8.8 million deaths of children under five each year.

MSF medical teams are front-line witnesses to the human devastation caused by malnutrition. In 2010, we are operating 120 nutrition programs in 36 countries, including massive emergency interventions in the Sahel – already, our teams in Niger have treated nearly 100,000 children for severe acute malnutrition. We know there is no easy, one-size-fits-all solution to treating global childhood malnutrition and protecting children from the severe forms of malnutrition, but making sure that when food is provided to a child it meets his or her nutritional needs is a prerequisite.

The first two years of childhood provide a critical window of opportunity during which the quality of diet has a profound, sustained impact on a child's health and physical and mental development. Breast milk is the only food babies need for the first six months. After this period, the types of foods introduced into the diet are of paramount importance. Diets that do not provide the right blend of high-quality protein, essential fats, carbohydrates, vitamins, and minerals can

impair growth and development, increase the risk of death from common illnesses, or result in life-long health and developmental damage.

Countries that have successfully reduced early childhood malnutrition -- including Mexico, Thailand, the U.S., and many European countries – have done so through programs that ensure infants and young children from even the poorest families have access to quality foods, such as milk and eggs.

And yet, against this scientific evidence that is widely shared and known and was reaffirmed by a gathering of nutritional experts¹ under the auspices of the World Health Organization (WHO) in October 2008, the support provide to food-based childhood nutrition programs in developing countries continues to rely almost exclusively on cereal fortified blended flours (FBF), such as corn-soya blend. These may relieve a young child's hunger but, among other shortcomings,² they do not contain all the required nutrients in adequate amounts nor any dairy products, although these are important for growth.

Importantly, the World Food Programme (WFP) acknowledged these facts in their new nutritional implementation strategy adopted in September 2009. In March 2010, the nutritional directors of WHO, UNICEF and WFP wrote a letter³ to the European Union, calling on the EU to change the current formulation of FBF. Despite this request, the European Union continues to fund substandard food to young children.

MSF's frustration with this double standard drives our campaign to urge those countries making the largest contributions to food assistance – including the United States, Canada, the European Union, and Japan to supply the right foods and adequate resources for nutrition programs in high-burden areas. Tens of thousands of people have already signed a petition, Starved for Attention, that we will present to leaders in advance of the G8 Summit in France in 2011.

Whilst we recognize that the provision of nutritionally sufficient food to infants and children is already a part of UKs international policy, we urge that your current revision emphasizes this vital component and that you will influence the same positive change in the EU food aid policy.

We invite you to find out more on MSF's perspective at starvedforattention.org, and remain available for meetings at your convenience. Thank you for your time in this important matter.

Sincerely,

Marc DuBois, General Director
Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF)

¹ Proceedings published in Food and Nutrition Bulletin 2009; 30 supplement 3.

² Shoham, Jeremy, et. al., "Proceedings of the World Health Organization: Consultation on the Management of Moderate Malnutrition in Children under 5 Years of Age." Food and Nutrition Bulletin, 2009; 30(3): 464-474

³ Joint position WFP/UNICEF/WHO with regard to the management of moderate malnutrition, using improved formulations of fortified blended flours sent to ECHO in March 2010.