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## Oxfam Hong Kong survey reveals 1 in 6 poor families caught in a hunger trap

An Oxfam Hong Kong report on Hong Kong's food price crisis reveals that one out of every six poor families cannot meet their basic food needs.

Although Hong Kong has one of the highest human development rankings in the world<sup>1</sup>, 534,100 people in 144,400 families with children aged 15 and under fall below the poverty line. "Poor families with children are being hard hit by the food price crisis, and the situation will worsen in the second half of 2011," said Kalina Tsang, Hong Kong Programme Manager of Oxfam Hong Kong.

These trends of hunger and poverty in Hong Kong mirror trends around the world. The Food Price Index in 2011 has exceeded its 2008 peak, and according to the June 2011 Oxfam report ***Growing a Better Future: Food Justice in a Resource-constrained World***<sup>2</sup>, the number of hungry people now exceeds one billion for the first time in history.

To assist poor people through the food price crisis, Oxfam Hong Kong calls on the Hong Kong SAR Government to improve and extend the services of food banks, and to increase meal allowances for children aided under CSSA and the Community Care Fund.

The study, titled ***Survey on Impact of Soaring Food Prices on Poor Families in Hong Kong***, was commissioned by Oxfam Hong Kong and conducted from late-May to mid-July 2011 by Policy 21. Drawn from interviews with 600 poor households with children aged 15 and under in 25 geographical areas, the main findings show:

### 1. One in every 6 poor families with children is trapped in hunger

One in every six poor households with children (16%) was in a state of "high food insecurity"<sup>3</sup> in the past year, that is, they frequently suffered from hunger because they cannot acquire enough food due to a lack of money; another one third of households (30%) was in a state of "low food insecurity"<sup>4</sup>, occasionally not having enough food, and being uncertain of food sufficiency in the future (See Table 1a). Nearly 40% of parents reported that their income was not enough to feed their children a balanced diet; 38% could only buy a few types of low-cost food for their children, and 26% said their children did not eat enough (See Table 1b, Appendix).

### 2. Nearly 80% of respondents spend more on food, but get less

Low income families spent a significant portion of their income on food (40%), which is more than what earners in Hong Kong's the highest income bracket spent (21%)<sup>5</sup>. With food inflation,

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<sup>1</sup> Human Development Report 2010. United Nations Development Programme

<sup>2</sup> Oxfam. (<http://www.oxfam.org.hk/filemgr/1556/GrowingaBetterFutureFullReportENGLISH.pdf>)

<sup>3</sup> "High Food Insecurity" refers to a status under which households fail to acquire enough food to meet their basic food needs frequently during the year and thus repeatedly experience hunger.

<sup>4</sup> "Low Food Insecurity" refers to the status under which households are uncertain of having enough food, and occasionally unable to acquire enough food for meeting their basic needs.

<sup>5</sup> 2009/10 Household Expenditure Survey and the Rebasing of the Consumer Price Indices. Census and Statistics Department. The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region.

78% of respondents reported that their current expenditure on food was 25% higher than that of last year, and 34% of this group indicated that the amount of this food consumed was 15% less.

### **3. 72% of poor children eat leftover foods while 15% even eat expired foods**

The food crisis threatens people's health, especially children's: 72% of respondents reported that their children ate leftover foods while 15% ate nearly or already expired foods. On average, children ate leftover food 3.5 times per week and ate expired or nearly expired food 2 times per week. The situation was worse in CSSA households, in which 82% of children ate leftovers, on average, nearly 4 times a week. Alarming, 6% of all interviewed households reported that they had been sick with food poisoning, vomiting or diarrhoea from eating leftovers or expired foods in the past year.

Eating leftovers or expired food is a last-ditch strategy that poor people use to cope with surging food prices. Other coping strategies include "reducing the frequency of dining outside" (71%), "not consuming expensive meat, such as beef" (69%), "eating a bowl of soup for 2 days, a dish for several meals" (63%), "switching to frozen instead of fresh meat" (53%), "reducing food consumption from adults to save money for children's food expenses" (52%), "switching to eating more porridge or rice noodles" (49%), "going to fast food restaurants to eat low-priced food" (42%), "eating one less meal a day" (25%), "buying cheaper canned food that has almost expired" (22%), and "consuming food that has almost expired" (19%). (See Table 2, Appendix)

### **4. Nearly 60% of respondents do not know about food banks**

More than half of the respondents (58%) reported that they did not know about food bank assistance. Of the 42% who had heard of food banks, the majority (85%) had not applied for the assistance, with 28% of them not knowing how to apply for it.

For those who had used the services, they strongly agreed that "the food offered by food banks was neither fresh nor nourishing" (91%), "the arrangement of the maximum collection period of up to 6 weeks was too short" (74%), "food banks lacked hot food services" (71%), "the collection of food directly in food banks had a labeling effect that deterred application of people in need" (68%) and "the number of food delivery locations was very limited" (40%).

Oxfam Hong Kong maintains that all governments should provide a safety net for people who cannot produce or buy enough food, and calls for the following policy changes on the part of the Hong Kong SAR Government:

**1. Increase the accessibility to food bank assistance.** The Hong Kong SAR Government should more actively promote the food bank service to the public and should increase the number of locations of food banks. This will enable needy people to know where and how to obtain free food

**2. Extend the food bank service and assistance period** from 6 weeks to 6 months for the needy families during this extended period of high inflation. With the service extension, it is estimated that the cost of running all food banks will increase from HK\$20 million to about HK\$80 million per year.

**3. Provide poor people with continuous food bank assistance.** Food banks should arrange re-assessments for recipients as early as possible *before* the completion of the existing service. Also the Hong Kong SAR Government should turn the food bank into a regular service so as to provide food assistance for poor people in the long run.

**4. Provide poor people with fresh food through food banks.** The HKSAR Government should help food banks to liaise with the Link REIT's markets and other government-managed markets to provide fresh, nutritious food for food bank users.

**Food vouchers** could be a way to enable food bank users to purchase fresh food at wet markets or to buy hot meals. It would also be worthwhile to explore the feasibility for various

kinds of district-based hot meal services, such as community kitchens.

**Simultaneously, the HKSAR Government needs to increase funding support** to food banks and their collaborators to compensate service providers for the administration costs of managing food vouchers and other hot meal services.

**5. Increase meal allowances for children aided under CSSA and the Community Care Fund.** Student meal allowances under CSSA scheme should be increased from HK\$225 to HK\$384 (HK\$16 per meal for 24 school days per month), and should be reviewed annually. The similar scheme for non-CSSA students aided under Community Care Fund should also be adjusted; it is recommended that the amount be increased from HK\$225 to around HK\$384 per month and be provided on a long-term basis.

**6. Review to increase the level of standard rate of children CSSA<sup>6</sup>** so as to ensure that poor children are able to have an adequate, nutritious diet.

—End—

### **About Oxfam Hong Kong**

Oxfam Hong Kong is an independent development and humanitarian organisation working against poverty and related injustice. We recognise that much poverty is caused by injustice and that poverty alleviation requires economic, social and structural change. We work with people facing poverty and with partner organisations on development, humanitarian, policy advocacy and public education programmes. Founded in 1976, Oxfam Hong Kong has worked in 70 countries.

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<sup>6</sup> According to the Social Welfare Department, 'standard rate' is one type of payment under the CSSA scheme to meet different types of basic and general needs of recipients, such as food, electricity and gas, clothing and footwear, and transport.

## Appendix

Table 1a. Percentage Frequency of Food Security and Insecurity<sup>1</sup>

	Percentage	Number of Low Income Households with Child(ren)
1. Food Secure	54%	78126
2. Low Food Insecure	30%	43304
3. High Food Insecure	16%	22970
Total	100.0%	144,400

Notes:

1. 18 core food security questions widely used in United States and Canada<sup>7</sup> are adopted to measure whether households are able/unable to acquire enough food to meet their basic needs. Through this measurement tool, we can construct three types of households, 1.) food security; 2.) low food insecurity; 3.) high food insecurity.

2. "Food Security" is defined as a status of being able to acquire enough food for meeting the basic needs. "Low food insecurity" is defined as a status of being uncertain of having, and being occasionally unable to acquire, enough food for meeting the basic needs. "High food insecurity" is defined as a status of being unable to acquire enough food for meeting the basic needs frequently because of limited resources and thus repeatedly experiences hunger

Table 1b. Percentage Frequency of Each Food Security Item

	Food Security Items	Percentage
	Items relating to households' eating habit:	
1	Households were worried about running out of food	41%
2	Food bought just didn't last	38%
3	Households couldn't afford to eat balanced meals	45%
	Items relating to adults' eating habit:	
4	Adults ate less than they should have	25%
5	Adult(s) cut or skipped meals	18%
6	Adults were hungry but hadn't eaten	9%
7	Adults lost weight because of not having enough food	9%
8	Adult(s) did not eat for a whole day	5%
	Items relating to children's eating habit:	
9	Children did not have a balanced meal	39%
10	Children were given only a few kinds of low-cost food	38%
11	Children were not eating enough	26%
12	Portions of meals were cut	5%
13	Children skipped meals	7%
14	Children felt hungry	4%
15	Children did not eat for a whole day	1%

Table 2. Percentage Frequency of Various Coping Strategies

	Coping Strategies	Always and Sometimes
1	Reduce the frequency of dining outside	71%
2	Do not consume expensive meat (e.g. beef)	69%
3	A bowl of soup for 2 days, a dish for several meals	63%

<sup>7</sup> Guide to Measuring Household Food Security. Revised 2000. United States Department of Agriculture

4	Switch to frozen meat instead of fresh meat	53%
5	Reduce adults' food consumption to save money for children food expenses	52%
6	Eat vegetables instead of meat	50%
7	Switch to eating porridge, or rice noodle/ noodle	49%
8	Buy discounted products before market close	48%
9	Often eat the same kind of fruits and vegetables	46%
10	Go to fast food restaurants to eat some lower priced food	42%
11	Reduce the number of dishes and cook more rice	39%
12	Have late breakfast instead of lunch	35%
13	Delay meals to take advantage of special/discount offers in restaurants	29%
14	Reduce the number of meals to one	25%
15	Purchase in groups in the market to save money	23%
16	Buy cheaper canned food that has almost expired	22%
17	Go to mainland to buy lower priced food	22%
18	Consume food that has almost expired	19%
19	Rely on food supply from relatives and friends	15%
20	Receive free food / items	8%