WFP works worldwide to ensure that no child goes to bed hungry and that the poorest and most vulnerable can access the nutritious food they need. *International Innovation* speaks exclusively with Ertharin Cousin about their contribution to the UN Secretary General’s Zero Hunger Challenge and the biggest risks to food security.
As the 12th Executive Director of the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) what does your role entail and how did you come to take up this position?

I work at the helm of the world’s largest humanitarian agency fighting hunger worldwide. We have more than 13,000 members of staff who helped to provide food assistance to 97.2 million people in 80 countries in 2012. My goal is to inspire and lead staff towards our target of ending global hunger.

I joined the Programme in April 2012 with more than 25 years of national and international non-profit, government and corporate leadership experience, focusing on hunger, food and resilience strategies. Prior to my move to WFP, I was the US Ambassador to the United Nations Agencies for Food and Agriculture and Head of the US Mission to the UN Agencies in Rome. Before that, I worked in the Administration of US President Bill Clinton for four years and also served as Executive Vice President and CEO of Feeding America, which is the largest domestic hunger organisation in the US.

WFP is dedicated to fighting hunger worldwide; how does the Programme facilitate activities and research associated with this monumental task?

At WFP we are guided by our Strategic Plan, which sets out our mission to end global hunger. Under the plan we have four strategic objectives which outline how we will go about breaking the cycle of hunger and achieving sustainable food security and nutrition in line with the UN Secretary General’s Zero Hunger Challenge. These four objectives are:

- Save lives and protect livelihoods in emergencies
- Support or restore food security and nutrition and establish or rebuild livelihoods in fragile settings and following emergencies
- Reduce risk and enable people, communities and countries to meet their own food and nutrition needs
- Reduce malnutrition and break the intergenerational cycle of hunger

As we strive to meet these objectives we are supported by the work of our colleagues in the 80 countries around the world where WFP is providing food assistance and the guidance of senior managers at WFP’s headquarters in Rome, Italy. One of the most valuable dimensions of our work is our partnership with other UN agencies, NGOs, national governments, and the people we serve.

Can you describe the risk factors that predominantly impact food security?

Conflict and climate change are probably the foremost risk factors that affect food security around the world. If you look at the largest and most complex operations that WFP is currently involved in, then Syria is a good example where food insecurity has been driven primarily by the impact of conflict on the ability of the country to produce enough affordable, nutritious food for the population. Changes to the climate in places like the Sahel region of West Africa have left millions of people vulnerable to the effects of chronic and recurrent drought and WFP is working with national governments and other humanitarian partners to protect those whose food security is most threatened.

How are you supporting WPF’s transition from food aid to food assistance? What are the reasons for this shift and what opportunities will be realised through its implementation?

WFP’s historic shift from food aid to food assistance is embedded in our current strategic plan and it is exemplified in our push towards increasing the use of vouchers, eCards and cash so that our beneficiaries are empowered to meet their own food needs. By 2015, WFP expects about one-third of its work providing food assistance to hungry people will involve some use of cash, vouchers, or new kinds of digital food.

WFP’s partnership with MasterCard is helping us to scale up our operations as we did recently in Lebanon, launching an eCard scheme that is supporting 800,000 Syrian refugees whose food needs are being met by a monthly payment of US $27 on cards that they can use to pay for food at local shops. Another good example of our shift from food aid to food assistance is our work on the Purchase for Progress (P4P) pilot programme under which WFP has been helping smallholder farmers to increase yields, improve the quality of their produce and connect them more directly to markets.

Under P4P, WFP uses its purchasing power in local markets to help smallholder farmers to build a more sustainable future and to move beyond subsistence farming.

What activities are you involved with and how are you collaborating with other agencies like the Food and Agriculture Organization and the International Fund for Agricultural Development?

WFP works very closely with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN (FAO) and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) as they bring complementary skills and capacities that are necessary to ensure access to nutritious food while contributing to more durable solutions to food insecurity in the diverse contexts where we work together.

We work in partnership because no single organisation can address today’s complex food and nutrition security challenges. This is particularly important when it comes to reducing vulnerability and building resilience among communities that are chronically affected by food insecurity. Here, WFP is working closely with the FAO, IFAD and other agencies like UNICEF, UN Women and UNDP to strengthen resilience and develop capacity to design, manage and scale up nutrition programmes and safety-net systems, including systems linked to local agricultural supply chains.

In what ways are you working to eradicate hunger among school children? Is this an issue for both developed and developing countries?

WFP provides school meals to around 22 million children in 60 countries around the world, many of them in remote locations where our assistance
A school meal is often the only nutritious food that a child gets on a regular basis and when school meal programmes are combined with school gardens growing fresh green vegetables and improvements to sanitation and water supplies, the results in terms of improved health and nutrition are evident.

School meals are also a catalyst for development, functioning as safety nets to help vulnerable households to weather economic crises or other shocks without compromising their nutrition and food security. If school meal programmes are linked to local purchases from smallholder farmers, they provide cash injections into the local agricultural economy.

WFP’s 2013 State of School Feeding Worldwide publication found that school feeding programmes are present almost everywhere, providing food to some 368 million children in 169 countries. However, these programmes are not always as efficient as they could be. Working with governments and other agencies to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of these existing school feeding programmes should be a primary goal as we strive to reap the benefits that well run programmes can deliver.

What nutritional input is afforded by WFP? How do you establish the type and quantity of food people require?

WFP rations are based around delivering a minimum of 2,100 kilocalories a day to those who receive them. However, the food we deliver in different parts of the world is always chosen so that it is culturally appropriate and suited to the conditions in which it is delivered. This means that in programmes where we are delivering actual food, the rations are made up of staples such as rice or maize, vegetable oil and dried pulses – such as lentils or dried peas. We also focus sharply on delivering the most appropriate food in terms of the nutritional needs of the recipients. For young children, this can mean delivering ready-to-use supplementary food products such as pastes and butters that are made from peanuts, or soya, fortified with vitamins and minerals.

WFP is working with partners like the UN’s Population Fund (UNFPA) to provide nutritious food to pregnant or breast feeding mothers and women of reproductive age so that they, too, are in the best nutritional health when they become pregnant and when they are carrying children. This is important because it is now a recognised scientific fact that the first 1,000 days of life from the moment a child is conceived in the womb, to the point where the child reaches its second birthday, represents a critical window of opportunity where good nutrition can set up a firm foundation for future physical and intellectual development.

Could you discuss some of the challenges faced by the Programme’s logistics team?

WFP is the UN cluster leader for logistics in the UN system. This means we are the agency that provides a logistical service supporting the entire humanitarian system in response to emergencies.

WFP provides transport for food assistance as well as medical supplies and shelter. We also run the United Nations Humanitarian Air Service (UNHAS), which helps to transport aid workers and other specialist staff to areas that are not served well by existing transport links. Logistical support can be challenging because of the weather – where heavy rain can wash roads and bridges away – or because of conflict which endangers our colleagues and places truck drivers and the vehicles at risk of hijacking and theft.

Syria and Afghanistan are some of the most challenging places in the world from a logistical perspective because of conflict and insecurity. The rainy season in some sub-Saharan countries like South Sudan can also place a huge strain on our trucking operations and sometimes air transport using helicopters is necessary to reach isolated communities.

Where are you hoping to focus your efforts over the next few years?

In the next few years, WFP will be working towards meeting the UN’s Zero Hunger Challenge. This requires comprehensive efforts to ensure that: every man, woman and child enjoy their right to adequate food; women are empowered; priority is given to family farming; and food systems everywhere are sustainable and resilient.

There are several dimensions to the Zero Hunger Challenge, but WFP will focus particularly sharply on the challenge to provide 100 per cent access to adequate food all year round, and to end stunting in children in less than two years. While keeping our eyes on this challenge, WFP must also stand ready to respond to unpredictable natural and manmade disasters. As the world’s climate changes, the vulnerability of the poorest communities in developing countries is increasing, and while WFP and its partners are working hard to improve levels of resilience among these groups, we are still in a position where emergency assistance is required when disaster strikes.

If you would like to donate to communities affected by Super Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines, please visit: www.wfp.org/donate/typhoon