Remarks by **Mr Mark Lowcock**, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator

Thank you all very much for an opportunity to talk to the WFP and Executive Board and I'm really sorry that the weather prevented us meeting together in person. Particularly, cause I was looking forward to an opportunity to wish your fantastic Executive Director the happiest of happy birthdays, and I hope you are all going to do that in my absence when you get a chance to see him as this message is broadcast.

I wanted to talk to you about the end of famine. When I was appointed to do this job and people were asking me on what I thought the priorities should be, one of the things I've been saying I do think over the next period, certainly in our lifetime, we can eradicate famine from the human condition.

Famine has existed throughout the whole of the human history. And it has struck every part of the world. I am in terms of my great-grandparents five-eighths Irish, and I learned as a small boy about the potato famine, that killed a million people and forced a million people to flee from Ireland in the 1840s. And that was a common occurrence all through the world. Indeed, when I was growing up as a young boy, many people still thought that famine was going to be a big feature of the world through my lifetime.

I remember in 1967, the publication of a book by William & Paul Paddock. It was called "Famine 1975!", with an exclamation mark. You always know something about people who put an exclamation mark at the end of their book titles, which predicted the recurrence of famine. And then there was this famous book by Paul Ehrlich, "The Population Bomb" in 1968. And he of course predicted that by the 1980s, 65 million Americans and 4 billion people on the planet would be killed in famines. My favourite line from that book was when he said that by the year 2000, England would cease to exist.

So that's what people thought would happen just in the beginning of my lifetime. And what have we seen? Well of course we've seen that famines have become much rarer and much less lethal. In the last 20 years, in fact, up to last year, only one famine passing the three technical tests was declared. The tests, as you know, 20 percent of the population have access to less than 2100 kcal of food per day, 30 percent of children are acutely malnourished, and there are two deaths per day in every 10,000 people, or four deaths of children per day, caused by lack of food. Only once in the last 20 years up to last year has that happened when a quarter million people lost their lives in the famine in Somalia.

So, the forecast of the 1960s proved to be wrong, and the question for us today is: How, building on the progress that's been made, can we eradicate this horrible thing completely from the human condition? Well, we need to learn about what has enabled us to make the progress we have made so far.

The first big thing, of course, has been a transformation on the supply side with a dramatic expansion both in agricultural output and in agricultural productivity. The first of those has made a lot more food available, and the second has made it much cheaper in terms of the proportion of people's total income they need to spend for much larger numbers of people to get access to the food they need.

Improvements in plant breeding, protection, post-harvest storage, irrigation, fertilization, harvesting, transportation and marketing, among other things, produced in the 50 years after

I was born a 300 percent increase in food grain production using only a twelve percent increase in agricultural land.

That trend seems very likely to continue, not least because in lots of parts of the world where agricultural productivity is still low, there is an enormous potential for increasing productivity with existing science, today's science, to the levels achieved already in more productive parts of the world. But of course, in addition to that as we know science will improve and our ability to make agriculture more productive is bound to increase. So that's the first big thing that has changed.

The second big thing that has changed is that we have seen a transformation on the demand side. And that is mostly being produced by reductions in poverty, which have given huge numbers of people entitlements to, or purchasing power over, the larger volumes of food that are being produced.

As Amartya Sen, the Nobel Prize-winning economist, famously revealed: Famines often arouse as a result of entitlement deficits. Paul Ehrlich, in his book that I talked about earlier, argued for cutting off food aid to starving people by depriving them of their entitlements, among other things proving that his policy advice was even worse than his forecasting skills.

Now there is an analogy here with population policy I think. As Hans Rosling observed: You cannot stop population growth by letting poor children die. As we have seen in many countries, population growth falls when more children survive, when they go to school and when they are then able to choose when they get married and how many children they want to have.

So, food security and famine prevention is enhanced by the creation of entitlements. Like the safety net schemes we have seen dozens of even the poorest countries put in place over the last 20 years. Those schemes, often set up and initiated with international support, have the potential to be scaled up and scaled down as harvests fail or succeed, or other disasters hit. And they are one of the biggest break-throughs we have had in reinforcing food security and reducing famine risks. And I must say, having looked at lots of these schemes from my experience in countries as diverse as Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Pakistan, Yemen and Zambia, what I'm struck by is how quickly they have been embedded in national policy frameworks.

So we are now at a point where the remaining risk of famine is in a relatively small number of countries affected by large scale, severe conflict. And indeed, the four countries where there was a famine risk last year – in the Lake Chad basin, especially north-east Nigeria, in South Sudan and in Somalia, and in Yemen – are all countries where the principal problem and driver of food insecurity and famine risk is conflict.

In north-east Nigeria, we made very good progress to the credit of the government and the international community last year being able to reach much larger numbers of people with humanitarian assistance, because Boko Haram and the other extreme groups were forced back and the government and the international community were able to reach much larger amounts of people.

The Oslo conference in February last year, exactly a year ago today as I speak to you, was a very successful international effort to mobilize international support behind the government of Nigeria in reaching larger numbers of people. And we are working now with a number of countries to try and repeat that event this year so we can continue to make progress with stabilizing the situation. And hopefully, as I think we can do this year, getting into recovery and resilience and the development path.

In Somalia last year, we saw what was one of the best ever relief operations against the famine risk. 3 million people being reached especially through the cash transfer platform, which WFP is a prime instigator in. Together with the UK government, my office is organizing on the 6th of March in London a follow-up meeting to ensure that this year, we sustain the progress we have made and get into the recovery and relief phase. Somalia is always going to be a country, I think, which is going to be highly vulnerable to famine because of its climatic situation. But what we know is, we put in place now a safety net system that can be scaled up and down as the risks crystalize. So in my opinion there is no need for us ever again to see the horrible outrage of famine in Somalia. This is a preventable problem.

In South Sudan in 2017, we had a very, very bad year with another million people fleeing the country and more than 5 million needing assistance from the international community. But we did still manage to stave off the worst. And what we need to do now in the UN is get behind the IGAD peace process, and then get to the point where we can reach more people and help with recovery and ultimately development.

In Yemen, which has the largest number of people in acute need – 22 million people needing humanitarian assistance, 8.4 million people at very severe risk, just a step away from starvation – we in the UN, through the leadership being provided by the World Food Programme, every month at the moment are reaching 7 million people.

Three things need to happen this year in Yemen to stave off the risk: Firstly, a scale back of the military conflict, which requires political progress; secondly, consolidation including through the Yemen Comprehensive Humanitarian Operations Plan being put in place by the Gulf countries, consolidation of improved access that we have started to see over the last month or so; and thirdly, generous response to the UN appeal. And here I'm particularly pleased of the progress we have made with the Gulf countries, who have generously agreed to contribute 1.5 billion US-dollars towards our appeal this year, and to pay that money very promptly, including paying us a billion dollars by the end of next month which will enable us to ratchet up the whole relief programme.

Then hopefully, if we are able to stabilize the humanitarian situation this year, we will be able, ideally with progress on the political and security side as well, to get into a resilience and recovery and development phase in Yemen.

Lots of other problems we are dealing with this year as well, for example in the Democratic Republic of Congo and other places. But what we have seen is that if the world works together, and we collaborate in tackling problems as they crystalize, we can avoid food security problems turning into massive loss of life.

No organization has played a bigger role in that than the World Food Programme. But as you all know, famines, when they strike, kill people mostly not through the direct effects of starvation, but through the measles, or respiratory infections, or other diseases like the common cold, which kill emaciated and malnourished people in a way that do not kill healthier people who can just fight them off. And so, in order to prevent famines, we need UNICEF to do the therapeutic feeding, we need WHO to do the immunization programmes, we need the water programmes, the shelter programmes to help displaced people. We need a comprehensive effort, and an effort which is collaborative.

And that's one of the reasons why I really enjoy working with your fantastic Executive Director, David. Because David is somebody who understands the importance of collaboration in tackling problems. And what I am trying to do in my role is facilitate collaboration across the whole of the humanitarian sector so that we can work together to prevent these problems having the worst effect that in the past they have had.

There are lots of incentives in our sector for competition, and I understand the reasons for that. A lot of them come from the incentives that our donors implicitly provide us with. But our responsibility we feel is the age and the season, this is something that David and I and our colleagues, the heads of all the relevant agencies, are working as hard as we can on, is to avoid the competitive incentives overtaking and really try to drive collective problem solving and collaboration. And that is the way ultimately, that we will achieve this goal I talked about at the beginning of my message to you of once and for all eliminating famine from the human condition.

Let me say to you finally that just because famine can be eliminated, it does not follow that it will be. That depends on all of us.