The United Nations and Millennium Development Goals Study Tour spent a week in New York City meeting with representatives of various United Nations agencies, funds, and programs to learn more about their impact on global health. Bettina Leuscher, North American spokesperson for the WFP, met with the group of University of Wisconsin-Madison undergraduates on June 3rd to discuss the organization’s work.

The bulk of the WFP’s work centers on responding to disasters around the world by providing food aid to populations that are struggling with hunger in light of crises. They also aim to build individual countries’ capacities to respond to hunger and to assist people in rebuilding their lives after being stricken by a food crisis. As the world’s largest humanitarian agency fighting to address hunger, the WFP faces a daunting challenge in helping the world’s population meet their nutritional needs during times of disaster, conflict, and crisis. The WFP works in more than 70 countries, reaching about 90 million people who are in need of assistance (wfp.org). Funded entirely by voluntary donations, the WFP uses creative strategies to encourage donations from individuals. Recent campaigns by designer Michael Kors and actress Halle Berry took advantage of the magnetism of celebrities to attract attention and donations to the World Food Programme.

The funding received from individual donors as well as United Nations member states is used to distribute food aid around the world. The current focus of the World Food Programme’s food distribution is Syria. In light of the ongoing conflict in that country and the subsequent surge in numbers of Internally Displaced Persons and refugees in the region, food aid is of particular importance to ensure the basic nutritional needs of those displaced are met. While the WFP continues to distribute what one may think of as traditional food aid, such as rice and other staples, the program has also introduced products like Plumpy Nut, a ready to use therapeutic nut-based paste that offers a high nutritional value and can treat malnutrition in children.

In addition to their work in specific crises, Ms. Luescher discussed the importance of providing meals to children while attending school. The State of School Feeding Worldwide report, released in May, found that although 1 in 5 children receive a meal at school, the proportion is lowest in low-income countries (wfp.org). “School meals are a way of keeping children in school. It’s often the only way that families can afford to keep their children fed.” Showing a photo of young school children, Ms. Luescher remarked, “Maybe she will be a teacher, or him a lawyer, and her, the next big movie star. But if we can’t get them food, none of that can happen.” This personal attention to some of the children the WFP has helped provided insight into the larger mission of the WFP. Not just aiming to keep people alive, the WFP hopes to create a foundation for healthy, successful lives for children and adults everywhere, an opportunity we often take for granted in the United States.

As many of the Study Tour’s other meetings underscored, adequate nutrition is a baseline for health in both children and adults. The World Food Programme thus has an essential role to play in improving health on a global scale and in contributing to the progress made in tackling communicable and noncommunicable diseases worldwide. As the Millennium Development Goals reach their deadline of 2015, the World Food Programme will continue to have a critical role in the post-2015 development agenda.