



2008 ECOSOC coordination segment- Panel I
“Working towards food security: the UN system approach”
Monday, 7 July, 4:00-6:00pm

Concept Note

Background

Food security depends on the availability, accessibility, affordability and nutritional quality of food supplies. A host of factors, from both the demand and supply side of foodstuffs, can affect global food security and generate a whole host of challenges for the livelihoods, safety and security of people.

The current food crisis that is affecting many countries across the world has underscored the complexity of the challenge to ensure global and sustainable food security. The sharp rise in food prices over recent months, which is the most serious emerging threat to food security, originated from a combination of structural changes on the demand side and contingent factors affecting supply. This complexity and the strong impact of high food prices on the poor around the world, has highlighted the need to re-think current policies, both on the donors and government side, to find new ways to respond effectively to this complex crisis.

Against this backdrop, a global consensus has emerged on the need to a) substantially increase emergency assistance to the poorest countries; and b) set in place policies and measures to guarantee food security in the long-term. The ECOSOC special meeting on the Global Food Crisis held in May and the FAO High-Level Conference on World Food Security: the Challenges of Climate Change and Biodiversity in June, have both stressed the need to respond immediately and globally to the complex crisis and to put in place

policies that can turn the threatening situation into an agricultural renaissance. This consensus is also embodied in the outcome of the Berne meeting of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB) and the subsequent establishment of the United Nations Task Force on the Global Food Security Crisis.

There is a general consensus on the need to expand agricultural and food production, and to increase investment in agriculture, agribusiness and rural development in low income-food deficit countries. Differences, however, remain on the specific policies to do so. Questions remain on how to ensure that immediate measures to face the food supply emergency – e.g. targeted food and nutrition support measures, social safety nets and measures to give farmers the ability to meet the production needs for the next growing season- do not undermine but strengthen strategies/policies to ensure food security in the long-term. Differences also remain on the medium- and long-term policies necessary to address the structural causes of food insecurity to improve poor nations’ access to food and reduce their vulnerability to shocks.

The lack of a comprehensive approach to food security is also reflected in the UN system approach. The UN system support to food security consists of emergency and short-term interventions to ensure immediate food and nutrition supply and longer-term programmes to reduce poverty and hunger. These programmes are not always mutually reinforcing to ensure sustainable food security. A more effective response to the current challenges will require the system to develop a more comprehensive approach that integrates short-term food relief operations/programmes into long-term strategies for sustainable agricultural and rural development. To address these challenges, ECOSOC, during the 2008 coordination segment, will organize a panel discussion on “working towards food security: the UN system approach” on July 7th.

Objective of the panel

The proposed panel discussion on this issue will provide an opportunity to:

- Understand short- and long-term impact of the current challenges to food security;

- Identify ways to address short- and long-term challenges in the context of comprehensive strategies to promote sustainable agricultural and rural development;
- Identify ways in which the UN system approach should be strengthened to ensure an effective and sustainable response to current threats and challenges.

Focus of the panel

There are a number of areas in which the UN system’s current approach to food security could be improved:

- 1) Coherence between short-term policies and long-term interventions aimed at reducing the negative effects of food crises in the long-run;
- 2) Medium and long-term strategies to increase and sustain food supply and productivity in low income countries that ensure food and livelihood security under increasingly constrained environmental conditions;
- 3) Use of vulnerability and needs assessment concerning food security for the formulation of programmes promoting safety nets before crises erupt.

In this regard, panelists could address the following questions/issues:

- What can be done to ensure that early warning and analysis of countries’ vulnerability and needs assessments regarding food crises, which are carried out by agencies such as WFP, translate into effective and timely assistance programmes to protect vulnerable people? –e.g. programmes supporting “smart subsidies” for agricultural inputs, social protection schemes, enhancement of supply responses, etc.
- What innovations are needed in the current food aid system to shift the attention from traditional food aid to food assistance –e.g. balance of payment support - and ensure that international food aid programmes do not undermine local markets and/or distort farmers’ incentives to produce food? In particular, what is the right combination of cash and in-kind transfer programmes that will enable people to buy their own food and support local economies without triggering

inflation?- e.g. cash transfers and vouchers to purchase food from local smallholders; financial support to governments' imports of food commodities; financing of production supply.

- How can countries with large urban populations and limited arable land, which make them dependent on imported food, be supported to deal with the structural changes of higher food prices effectively?
- What should be an appropriate mechanism for the UN system to increase coherence in its approaches to food security, from emergency interventions to long-term development and poverty eradication strategies?
- What should be the appropriate UN system mechanism to agree on a comprehensive strategy to increase food production in vulnerable countries, especially in Africa and to mobilize and channel funds to finance its implementation?

Participants

Panelists will include members of HLCP and of the United Nations Task Force on the Global Food Security Crisis, such as FAO, WFP, OCHA and the World Bank, whose work and initiatives have been addressing the issue of food security. Members of relevant non-governmental organizations or private sector will also be invited.

Documentation

The present background note on the panel will be made available to participants.

Panelists:

- **John Holmes**, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator; and Coordinator of the High-Level Task Force on Global Food Crisis;
- **Julie Howard**, Executive Director, Partnership to Cut Hunger and Poverty in Africa;
- **Thimba N. Masuku**, Director of the FAO Liaison Office, New York
- **Allan Jury**, Director, Division of External Relations, WFP
- **Christopher Delgado**, Rural Strategy and Policy Adviser, Agriculture and Rural Development Department, World Bank