ECOSOC SPECIAL EVENT
UNDERSTANDING THE FOOD CRISIS IN AFRICA

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ECOSOC Chamber

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Thank you, Mr. President.

I am making this statement on behalf of Jan Egeland, who was unavailable for this meeting because of his engagement in the earthquake in South Asia.

You have heard from previous speakers – and I agree – that the food crises that ravage sub-Saharan Africa are not simply humanitarian emergencies that can be solved by traditional humanitarian responses or quick-impact aid.

Yet, humanitarian crises – disasters, conflict and the legacy of conflict – remain among the most immediate causes of hunger and malnutrition in Africa, and overshadow the chronic food insecurity that persists in many countries.

Where humanitarian crises occur, they shock populations into acute hunger, malnutrition and disease. And when humanitarian crises are left unattended, they prolong social and economic losses by cutting people off from the networks and markets on which their livelihoods depend.

Conversely, where humanitarian emergencies are managed and priorities are addressed, food supplies reopen, nutritional status improves, displaced populations return to their land and can begin to achieve food security and self reliance.

Unless we address the legacy of conflict and more forcefully attend to disasters with stronger risk reduction agenda, we are unlikely to make any progress in improving food security in Africa.

Conflicts

Conflict is one of the leading causes of hunger in Africa today: The United Nations estimates that 60 percent of the 200 million people in sub-Saharan Africa who are hungry and undernourished live in countries affected by conflict.

Conflict and its corollaries – civil unrest, displacement, land mines – immediately destroy infrastructure and social networks, disrupt crop production and trade, limit the delivery of agricultural supplies, restrict access to markets. Conflicts also divert scarce national resources and manpower that could otherwise be used to address humanitarian and recovery needs and develop the productive sectors of the economy.

In countries where conflict has simmered over time, huge numbers of people are violently uprooted and displaced, farmers are forced to abandon their farms in search of short-term cash incomes and the most productive land is often littered with landmines or destroyed in "scorched earth" campaigns. In such cases, the legacy of conflict is so deep and so long lasting that it fundamentally weakens the ability of local communities to rebuild food systems on their own.

The economic costs of conflict on food are staggering: According to the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations, conflicts cost Africa more than $120 billion worth of agricultural production during the last third of the 20th Century. And such costs associated are not easily or neatly contained: the UN also reports that a country bordering a conflict zone can expect about half a percentage point decline in its own growth rate.

In Sierra Leone, where some 500,000 farm families have been displaced by civil war, the production of rice, the country's main staple crop, fell to 20 percent of pre-war levels. In

northern Uganda violent conflict has disrupted of livestock markets, with devastating consequences for pastoral farmers—one of the poorest groups in the country. In Ethiopia, intractable boundary disputes and pockets of ethnic violence have limited trade and access to seed fertilizer and tools. Even where crops are produced or goods are available for exchange in conflict areas, fighting and the breakdown of infrastructure, such as transport systems routinely limits access to markets.

Likewise, the human costs of conflict are not merely the tally of battle deaths but reflect the indirect toll of disease, hunger and malnutrition. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, a fraction of the 3.3 million people who have died in the civil war were killed by violence. The rest have died from complications of civil war, including disease and hunger. And almost three-quarters of the remaining population—some 35 million people—are undernourished.

It should therefore come as no surprise that countries affected by conflict represent some of the most precarious "hunger hotspots" in the world. And it should be recognized that there can be no end to the food crisis in Africa without minimizing the impact of conflict on civilians by protecting their lives and livelihoods, by responding promptly to displacement and by adequately resourcing return and reintegration programmes.

Disasters

The human impact of disasters on the Horn of Africa, West Africa and Southern Africa has also prevented many countries from becoming self-reliant and food secure. Successive cycles of floods and drought, erratic rains, locust infestation complicated by man-made pressures on the resource base have destroyed crops and food systems, weakened already fragile populations and put close to 30 million people on the brink of starvation. Such shocks have also forced people to sell or barter valuable livestock and possessions in exchange for food – possessions on which their future livelihoods depend.

Current trends suggest that such cycles are likely to endure, yet real-world examples confirm that our approaches to date have fallen short.

Despite a good rainy season and a boost to domestic food production in Eritrea this year, it will take three to four consecutive good rainy seasons for the population to recover from five successive years of drought, requiring that the country continue to receive food assistance this year. As Ambassador Eliasson reminded us, the locust infestation in the Sahel that destroyed up to 50 percent of staple crops in some areas might have been prevented if early warnings had been heeded and well-established response mechanisms maintained. In Southern Africa, a regional crisis of immense proportions has ensued, partly because its complex causes were ignored by previous, conventional responses.

In such circumstances, prompt responses both save lives and ensure the most cost-effective assistance. Improving the performance of humanitarian giving is an important means of addressing food security.

Ending hunger in Africa requires that we actively build, reinforce and maintain the strong early warning mechanisms, response capacities and regional networks that already exist -- in places like Ethiopia, in Botswana and elsewhere. And, as reinforced in the Hyogo Framework for Action, we must encourage Africa's own efforts to reduce disaster vulnerability and risk, by supporting governments, communities and households ability to adjust their farming practices, resource management and development programmes.

Conclusions

Though humanitarian emergencies may not be the sole causes of Africa's food crises, attending to the consequences of these emergencies must be part of the food security equation.

We need to better address conflict and its legacy in a way that safeguards and sustains lives and livelihoods of African populations. This is where a humanitarian agenda that promotes access to affected populations and addresses the problems of displacement is critical.

We must intensify our efforts to drawn on and support the capacity in Africa that already exists, particularly by building on existing mechanisms such as NEPAD, SADEK, IGAD and to address vulnerability on a regional scale.

Finally, we are concerned that risk reduction has not been fully integrated into the development agenda and urge countries to implement the Hyogo Framework and prioritize risk reduction as part of development priorities and development planning.

From the humanitarian side, it is our fervent wish that by employing such measures, we will be able to more forcefully tackle the food crisis in Africa and ensure that humanitarian assistance there becomes a less commonplace concern.

Thank you.