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Commission on Sustainable Development  
Sixteenth Session  
5 - 16 May 2008  
New York

**Background note on the ministerial dialogue with organisations  
of the United Nations system  
and other relevant international organizations**

During the High-level Segment of CSD-16, there will be a ministerial dialogue with heads of UN organizations and other relevant international organizations. This dialogue session provides a further opportunity to have a focused discussion on the special needs of Africa and on how the UN system and other international organizations can work together in responding to the emerging food crisis and in implementing short- and medium- and long-term measures to achieve food security, poverty eradication and sustainable development.

This background note aims to facilitate dialogue between Ministers and heads of UN organizations and other relevant international organizations, with a few questions included. Ministers and heads of UN organizations and other relevant international organizations may choose to address any of these questions and should not feel obliged to address all of them. They may also address any aspects of the issues they think relevant to the discussions. Interventions will be limited to 3 minutes to encourage interactive discussions.

**Ministerial dialogue with heads of UN organizations  
and other relevant international organizations  
(15 May 2008, 10:00 am - 12:00 pm, Room 4)**

## **Introduction**

The United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development addresses the thematic cluster of issues in an integrated and balanced manner, focusing on inter-linkages among thematic issues, as well as linkages with cross-cutting issues. At its current session, the Commission is addressing the thematic issues of agriculture, rural development, land, drought, desertification and Africa. In addition, the Commission is convening a SIDS Day and conducting a review of CSD-13 decisions on water and sanitation.

The mounting global food crisis underscores the timeliness of the Commission's work. As a high-level commission within the UN system on sustainable development, the CSD provides an important forum at its 16<sup>th</sup> session for examining the underlying factors of the current food crisis, for identifying barriers and constraints and for highlighting critical areas where urgent action is required. The rich thematic discussions of CSD-16 will also contribute to an improved understanding of what short-, medium- and long-term measures should be adopted to avert a recurrence of global food crisis.

## **Global food crisis<sup>1</sup>**

Impacts of world food price increases have been reverberating through many domestic markets. Prices of bread, rice, maize products, milk, oil, soybeans and others basic foods have seen sharp increases in a growing number of developing countries. Worldwide, 37 countries are currently facing food crises in need of international support, with two-thirds of them in Africa. The World Food Programme will need an extra \$755 million this year to meet its food aid target and this additional amount is likely to increase if food prices keep rising and the number of people in need of emergency food aid goes up.

The Least Developed Countries and low-income food deficit countries suffer most, as their food import bills go up. Latest estimates by FAO suggest that the food import bill of the world's poorest countries is forecast to rise by 56 percent in 2007/2008, following a rise of 37 percent in 2006/2007. For low-income food-deficit countries in Africa, the cereal import expenditure is projected to increase by 74 percent in 2008/2009.

Many countries have experienced social unrest as a result of rapid food price rises and shortages of food supplies. If these circumstances continue, developing countries, especially LDCs and food deficit countries, will face additional barriers in meeting MDG hunger and poverty targets.

## **Inter-linked causes**

How did the current food crisis come about? It seems that a number of related factors, rather than any single one, combined to contribute to the emergence of the current food crisis. Weather-related conditions, especially drought in some main food producing regions, have led to shortfalls in global food harvests. When coupled with gradual reductions in stocks, mainly of cereals,

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<sup>1</sup> Parts of the note are reproduced from the background notes for the Ministerial Roundtables.

tightening supply in world markets triggered off accelerating price rises in 2007. Changing structure of consumption, with shifts toward more meat and dairy products, has intensified demand for feed grains, reducing the land available for growing food crops. Increases in fuel prices have further raised the cost of production, including prices of fertilizers, as well as shipping costs. The emerging biofuels market represents a new and significant source of demand for some agricultural commodities, such as maize, oilseeds and palm oil, which have been predominantly used as food.

There are also longer-term factors behind the current food crisis. Public spending on agriculture relative to GDP has fallen in most regions in recent years, slowing down agricultural productivity growth. Official development assistance for agriculture has been falling in real terms since the 1980s, contributing to declines in investment in agriculture and rural infrastructure. Support for capacity-building and technical assistance to developing countries, including targeted support to small-scale farmers, in particular women, has likewise been scaled back. Agricultural exports from developing countries continue to face tariff hurdles, impeding their access to developed countries' markets. Drought and desertification, exacerbated by climate change, have reduced soil fertility in dry-land areas, home to nearly two billion of the world's population. Water shortages and inefficient water use have further constrained yield potentials.

### **Special needs of Africa**

The food crisis has hit Africa at a time when Africa remains confronted with a very high incidence of poverty. In sub-Saharan Africa, despite progress in recent years in reducing poverty rates, the dollar-a-day poverty rate is still 41%, roughly double the developing country average. Agricultural and industrial productivity in Africa remains low, outside of a few competitive export-oriented sectors. As a high proportion of the population of sub-Saharan Africa relies on agriculture for its livelihood, low productivity translates into low incomes and living standards. Despite a sustained effort until the mid-eighties, African economies remain insufficiently diversified. Natural constraints, insufficient infrastructure and an inhospitable investment climate have constituted major impediments to this diversification process.

African populations are heavily burdened by poverty-related diseases, and debilitating diseases keep many people in poverty. Sub-Saharan Africa is the only region of the world where life expectancy has fallen over the last decades, reaching levels below 40 years in several African countries. Child mortality is the highest in the world, with an average under-five mortality rate of 163 per 1,000 in 2005 – double South Asia's. In terms of education, African countries lag behind, but the recent efforts towards universal primary education have generated significant improvements. Hence, primary school enrolment has increased from 57% to 70% between 1999 and 2005. The challenge ahead is to maintain the moment while further improving the quality of education.

On the natural resource front, Africa is undergoing a process of rapid deforestation. More generally, biodiversity is increasingly under threat as a result of the loss and fragmentation of natural habitat as well as an overexploitation of resources. Furthermore, drought causes severe soil erosion and can lead eventually to desertification while water shortages are a growing challenge in a number of African countries.

## **Challenges and opportunities for the United Nations system**

The global food crisis and the special needs of Africa represent both a challenge to the UN system and an opportunity. The onset of the food crisis has highlighted the need for strengthening early warning systems at the national, regional and global levels and for enhancing the capacity of the United Nations system to take rapid actions on an adequate scale to meet the increases in emergency and humanitarian food aid.

In the medium- and long-term, the United Nations system should be galvanized into taking renewed action to strengthen inter-agency collaboration with a view to providing co-ordinated, coherent and enhanced support to member States in addressing the underlying causes of the current food crisis. The UN Chief Executive Board for Coordination took important initial steps in this direction at its recent meeting. Such support should aim at meeting the priority needs of African and other developing countries for enhanced agricultural research, including research on crop varieties better adapted to climate change, increased investment in agricultural and rural infrastructure, development of agri-business, increased capacity-building in extension services, and targeted support to small-scale farmers and women farmers.

### **Questions for discussions:**

1. How could the international community mobilize emergency funds to enhance emergency and humanitarian capacity of the UN system to meet emergency food aid requirements?
2. How can the UN system and relevant international organizations effectively address the special needs of food importing developing countries especially African countries, the LDCs and SIDS?
3. How can the international food and agricultural institutions, development institutions, international financial institutions and agricultural research centres work together to address the long-term needs of agricultural production in developing countries, in particular in Africa?
4. How can the UN system and relevant international organizations help mobilize financial resources, including through increased ODA and market-based mechanisms, to scale up investments to meet the long-term adaptation needs in agriculture in developing countries including, in particular, Africa?
5. In this regard, how could the international community support renewed efforts of the UN system and other international organizations in reversing declines in investment in agriculture production and in rural infrastructure?
6. What measures should be taken to scale up support to small-scale farmers, in particular women?