



## **Interactive Thematic Dialogue of the U.N. General Assembly on the Global Food Crisis and the Right to Food: Concept Note**

**Trusteeship Council Chamber  
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### **1. Background**

The world has experienced during the past year a dramatic increase in food prices on the international markets. During the first three months of 2008, international nominal prices of all major food commodities reached their highest levels in nearly 50 years while prices in real terms were the highest in nearly 30 years, and social unrest developed in over forty countries as a result. The number of hungry has dramatically increased in 2007-8: approximately 970 million people are hungry today in the world, which compares with 848 million in 2003-5. And this number very probably will not diminish as a result of lower prices in the immediate future, especially since a return to lower prices means that one of the most vulnerable categories – small-scale farmers, who constitute 50 percent of the hungry – will be even further marginalized and, for some, forced to abandon farming.

For many families particularly in developing countries, the sharp increases we have witnessed made food unaffordable, leading them to cut back on expenses in education or health, to switch to less varied diets, or to have fewer meals. But the crisis reaches much further, and it is much deeper, than the question of prices alone would suggest. The crisis illustrated the unsustainability of a global food system which may be good at producing large amounts of food, but which is neither socially nor environmentally sustainable: while the incomes of smallscale farmers in developing countries are below subsistence levels, often leaving them no other option but to leave their fields and seek employment in cities, the current methods of agricultural production deplete soils, produce large amounts of greenhouse gases, and use vast quantities of water, threatening food security in the long term, and making the repetition of crises such as the one we've seen unavoidable if we do not act decisively.

As a result of the global food crisis, governments have made the improvement of the global agricultural and food systems a priority on the international agenda, and the international agencies have taken a number of initiatives in order to assist their efforts at national level.

In an attempt to devise a unified response to the global food crisis, the decision was taken at the 28-29 April 2008 Bern meeting of the Chief Executives Board of the United Nations system (CEB) to establish a High-Level Task Force (HLTF) on Food Security, chaired by the United Nations Secretary-General. The HLTF includes the

relevant UN agencies, funds, and programmes, the World Bank, the World Trade Organisation, and the International Monetary Fund. The HLTF held its first meeting on 12 May 2008. In July 2008, it adopted a 'Comprehensive Framework for Action' (CFA) representing the consensus view of the agencies involved about how the immediate short-term needs should be met, and about the longer-term global strategy to ensure food security. Within that framework, the HLTF is now assisting governments in identifying ways to improve their resilience in face of prices of agricultural commodities which will remain high in the next few years, and which, especially due to the impact of climate change on agricultural production, shall be more volatile than in the past.

A number of high-level intergovernmental events also took place in 2008. These included a special session of the Human Rights Council – the first one ever to be dedicated to a thematic (i.e., non country-specific) issue, and the first one ever on a social right, which took place on 22 May. The Economic and Social Council also devoted a special meeting to the issue on 22-23 May. The General Assembly held two informal meetings on the global food crisis on 29 May and 18 June and a plenary meeting on the global food and energy crises on 18 July. The Third Committee of the General Assembly held an inter-active dialogue with the Special Rapporteur on the right to food, Prof. Olivier De Schutter, on 27 October, in which the rights-based approach to the global food crisis was debated. Subsequently, in December 2008, the General Assembly adopted a resolution on the right to food (A/63/430/Add.2), which inter alia re-called the human rights obligations of States in the context of the worsening food crisis. Prior to that, on 3-5 June, a High-Level Conference on World Food Security was convened in Rome, under the auspices of the United Nations Organisation on Food and Agriculture (FAO).

The Special Rapporteur on the right to food presented a report to the Human Rights Council on the global food crisis on 10 September, following the request expressed by the Council at the special session it devoted to the issue (A/HRC/9/23, 8 September 2008). The report is premised on the idea that the crisis is the result of insufficient incomes for those affected, imbalances of power in the food production and distribution chain, and disempowerment of the poor and marginalized segments of society. It argues that these factors can be addressed by solutions guided by the recognition of the human right to adequate food, and that solutions aimed only at increasing the volumes of food produced will not be sustainable if such factors are not dealt with. The message of the report was, in sum that food insecurity is not a technical problem, but that it is political in nature. The concluding recommendations reflect this conviction.

A number of governments expressed support for these recommendations and share the analysis presented in the report. At the same time, as a result of the financial crisis, and of the declining prices of agricultural primary commodities on the international markets, the resolution of the international community to tackle the structural factors behind the food crisis may be weaker now than back in June 2008. However, to simply return to business as usual would be a serious mistake with potentially far-reaching consequences.

The report cited above therefore emphasizes that the solution is not simply to boost production and thus to lower prices: it is to reduce the gap between the farm-gate prices and the prices paid by the consumer; and it is to combat the volatility of prices on both international and domestic markets, by appropriate government regulation of prices. The consequences of continuing volatility will be devastating. Governments need to act decisively on this issue. A failure to do so would not only mean that the number of victims of the violation of the right to food will remain at their unacceptably high levels, but also that we will not be shielded from future shocks.

The debate on what needs to be achieved at national and international level shall continue throughout 2009. On 26-27 January 2009, the Spanish Government and the UN Secretary-General convened a High-Level Conference, following upon the Rome Summit of 3-5 June 2008, in order to assess the follow-up given to the commitments made in Rome, and in order to launch the discussions on a new Global Partnership on Agriculture and Food to the realization of the right to food. The Madrid Summit re-affirmed the primary responsibility of States in the realization of the right to food; acknowledged the special problems faced by vulnerable groups, such as women and children to access adequate food, and encouraged States to seek inspiration from the Voluntary Guidelines to Support the Progressive Realization of the Right to Adequate Food in the Context of National Food Security ("Voluntary Guidelines"). At the September 2009 session of the Human Rights Council, the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food shall present a follow-up report to his initial report on the global food crisis, in which he will review the initiatives adopted at national and international level to respond to the challenge posed by the global food crisis.

## **2. The purpose of the interactive thematic dialogue on the global food crisis and the right to food**

In light of the above, the President of the 63<sup>rd</sup> session of the United Nations General Assembly is convening a High-Level Panel on the global food crisis and the right to food on 06 April 2009 not only to place again the global food crisis and the need to address its structural causes at the top of the international political agenda, but also to guide the initiatives developing at international level, in order to ensure that they do more than increase volumes of production – that they effectively serve to combat hunger.

Indeed, there is a consensus on the need to take decisive action, in order to establish an agri-food system which is able to respond to increasing demand. But how this should be achieved remains contested. The efforts described above, particularly the establishment of a new global architecture for agriculture and food, should be grounded in the human right to adequate food, as recognized in international law, in order to ensure that they are guided towards meeting the needs of the most vulnerable and the disempowered.

In 1996, the World Food Summit convened in Rome, requesting that the right to food be given a more concrete and operational content. In 2004, the 187 Member States of the General Council of the United Nations Organization for Food and Agriculture (FAO) adopted the Voluntary Guidelines. Between those two dates, the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights adopted its General Comment No. 12 on the right to food ; and the Commission on Human Rights established the mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food.

That period was one during which the normative content of the right to food was clarified. The recent crisis illustrates the need to move to concrete implementation. This is urgent. Unless the right to food is placed at the very centre of the efforts of the international community to address the structural causes which have led to the global food crisis, we will repeat the same mistakes. We will produce more out of fear of producing too little. But we will forget to ask the decisive questions which, because of their political nature, governments all too often do not want to hear : Whose incomes will rise as a result of production increasing? Will the poorest be able to afford the food which is available on the markets? Are safety nets in place, shielding the poorest from the impacts of high prices? Are stabilizing measures in place, insuring farmers against too low prices? Are initiatives being taken to narrow the gap between farmgate prices and prices paid by the consumers, which has so significantly increased over the last few years? Do victims of violations of the right to food have remedies to challenge the actions of governments and their omissions, which cause such violations? Is food being produced in environmentally sustainable ways?

The right to food obliges us to face these questions and answer them, because the primary obligation of governments is to inform themselves about the situation: to map food insecurity and vulnerability, to identify the obstacles to the full realization of the right to food, and to work towards removing these obstacles. And recognizing the right to food allows courts, or other independent bodies such as national human rights institutions, to monitor the behavior of governments, and call upon them to justify their policy choices, the impact of which on the realization of the right to food should be systematically assessed. Producing enough food is of course essential, and population growth, shifting diets, climate change, and increased competition between crops for food, feed and fuel, all challenge our ability, in the future, to meeting the growing demands of the planet. But that is only part of the equation. It is also essential that all have access – economic access in particular – to the food which is available. According to the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the right to adequate food is realized when every man, woman and child, alone or in community with others, have physical and economic access at all times to adequate food or means for its procurement. It is not about being fed. It is about being guaranteed the right to feed oneself, which requires not only that food is available, but also that each household either has the means to produce its own food, or has a sufficient purchasing power to buy the food which it needs.

### 3. The composition of the panels for the Interactive Thematic Dialogue

In order to provide the members of the General Assembly with a complete and well-informed overview of the complex challenges we are facing in the current situation, the interactive thematic dialogue on the global food crisis and the right to food would include high-level experts from different disciplinary fields, including economics, agronomics and agro-ecology, and the Special Rapporteur on the right to food, Prof. Olivier De Shutter. The composition of the panels and a detailed programme will be communicated to Member States in the coming week.

The questions the experts would be invited to address are the following:

- What are the main causes of the violation of the right to food on a large scale in a world in which wealth is abundant?
- Which initiatives should the international community take in order to achieve the First Millennium Development Goal of halving the proportion of people who suffer from hunger, and in order to put an end to the violations of the right to food? Specifically, how should the international environment be shaped in order to attain this objective?
- Is the current organisation of the food production and distribution system equipped to meet the challenge of food insecurity in the future, considering in particular the impact climate change on our ability to produce food? In which direction should agricultural production develop in order to feed the planet, taking into account the increasing demand for agricultural commodities?
- Is the global governance of the food production and distribution system satisfactory in order to combat hunger effectively? If not, which changes should be recommended?

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