



COMMONWEALTH
SECRETARIAT

STATEMENT

by

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At The ECOSOC Special Meeting
on the Global Food Crisis

NEW YORK

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First let me thank, you, Mr President for your timely initiative and welcome the ongoing efforts of the Secretary General to provide leadership and coherence on this issue.

It is clear from what we have heard over the past two days that there is a widely shared analysis and deep understanding of the immediate challenges that high food prices pose for the entire world and especially the poorest.

Rather than repeat that analysis I wanted to highlight just some of the points from the discussion which seem most relevant from the perspective of Commonwealth members.

First, it is important to emphasise that this is an issue of human rights as much as a question of economics. The right to food is a fundamental human right set out in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. As such there is an obligation on all to cooperate to achieve freedom from hunger and malnutrition for all. It is this right and obligation which should provide the backdrop to the short and long term global response.

In the short term, you have heard from many Commonwealth members about the challenges they face. Low income countries and small island states face a twin challenge from food and energy prices. 8 of the 22 low income countries identified as particularly vulnerable to these price rises are Commonwealth countries; as are half the Small Island States suffering with particularly negative balance of payments effects. They face the most severe reversals of progress to the MDGs.

Three parts of the policy prescription to meet the short term challenge are particularly relevant.

First, financial support through the IFIs. There is a need for rapid and substantial balance of payments support. And the more flexible financial support for agricultural being considered by World Bank and Regional Development Banks is both welcome and urgently needed.

Second, the obligation for states to cooperate to secure the right to food, puts an emphasis on avoiding policies which do harm to others, wherever possible. This means addressing subsidies in the developed world, including for biofuel production and tackling export restrictions by grain exporting countries.

Third, at a domestic level the right to food implies an obligation to ensure that social safety nets are well designed and target the poor.

The Commonwealth encompasses both net food exporters and net food importers. In the long run, there are opportunities but all need to cooperate and be supported to move the world to a new sustainable equilibrium of higher and more geographically diverse production. This must create a system which not only delivers food for all, but is more resilient to all shocks including climate change.

To promote the necessary positive supply response, I would pick out five areas for emphasis

First, successful conclusion of the Doha Development Round.

Second, the need for secure land tenure, including recognising the rights of women, so the returns to investment go to the farmers,

Third, investment – including from the international community – in infrastructure, both the `soft` infrastructure of knowledge and market information and the `hard` infrastructure of warehousing; roads and ports. This is vital to turn the potential to trade into the ability to trade. Only then will it be possible to realise the opportunities for a virtuous circle of poverty reduction identified by the representative of Australia yesterday.

Fourth, greater priority to agriculture at the national and international level, including the investment in extension services.

Finally, boosting confidence in markets. History shows agricultural booms are more shortlived and less frequent than agricultural busts. Without assets to smooth the process of adjustment many poor farmers are understandably risk averse and feel no incentive to increase production. This is an area we may need international innovation.

The Commonwealth Secretariat aims to help its members in meeting the challenges and realizing the opportunities. We look forward to the concrete actions to come out of the High Level Summit in June.