

Towards global governance of food security

Can the new food governance system and strategic thinking on food security and rural development, prompted by the 2007–09 food “crisis”, prevent future crises and lead to the lasting eradication of hunger?

Since the 1950s, a growth in cultivated area along with technical progress have enabled the world to expand food production hugely. Today, food supplies are able to meet the nutritional needs of almost seven billion people. But this success has been achieved with a very uneven distribution of benefits. In too many places expanding production has also caused enormous harm to the world’s future capacity to feed its people sustainably.

The world now faces the absurd situation of having abundant food but over a billion people chronically undernourished and three billion facing various forms of malnutrition, including over-nourishment. Paradoxically, chronic hunger and poverty are heavily concentrated in the rural populations that produce much of the food in developing countries. However, as more people migrate to the cities, the fastest growth in chronic food insecurity is now there.

The 2007/09 food crisis was a sharp reminder that the global food system is highly vulnerable. Weather-related production shortfalls, biofuel subsidies and unregulated speculation prompted a

dramatic rise in food prices. Consumers felt the pinch, and some were driven by their desperation to riot.

The crisis pushed food security briefly to the top of the international agenda. The need to revive rural development and invest in food security was widely recognised. Now that the spotlight is on other global concerns, it is timely to question whether the emerging system of global governance will be able to cut hunger, prevent similar

future crises, and ensure sustainable resource use.

■ Global governance

In the broadest sense, global governance is the institutionalised process of bringing about cooperative actions among state and non-state actors at transnational levels to resolve problems that affect more than one state or region.

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The need for global governance of food led to the creation of FAO in 1945. Its founders' vision is still valid today: *"Progress toward freedom from want is essential to lasting peace; for it is a condition of freedom from the tensions, arising out of economic maladjustment, profound discontent, and a sense of injustice, which are so dangerous in the close community of modern nations"* (United Nations Interim Commission on Food and Agriculture, *The Work of FAO*, Washington D.C. 1945).

These last 65 years have seen a massive growth in food output and quality, enabling a 40 percent rise in food intake per person for a population that has swollen from 2.5 billion to almost 7 billion. Yet the extra food has not led to "freedom from want" for all.

With each food crisis, new institutions have been launched, including the World Food Programme (WFP), the International Fund for Agricultural

Development (IFAD) and the short-lived World Food Council. Typically, crises have also led to summits and pledges to cut hunger. Today, almost every country subscribes to the global target of halving hunger between 1990 and 2015. In spite of this, the number of hungry people is rising.

Put bluntly, few governments genuinely attach high priority to ending hunger. These few have indeed been very successful, but for various motives, many take no effective action. And support for an effective global governance has been elusive.

Nevertheless, the evolving system fulfils some valuable functions, such as global information and early warning, forum for policy debate, standard setting, technical cooperation, food aid and emergency assistance. It has been less effective on price stabilisation, buffer stocks and food import financing.

The recent food price rise spawned the "temporary" UN High-Level Task Force, the Global Partnership for Agriculture and Food Security and the L'Aquila Food Security Initiative. It also triggered moves to strengthen the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) to become *"the foremost inclusive international and intergovernmental platform... to work... towards the elimination of hunger"*.

Key features of this new architecture are a broader involvement of stakeholders and a widening role for the CFS. In phase I, it will focus on improving global coordination, policy convergence and country-level support, including the application of the Voluntary Guidelines for the Right to Food. In phase II, its roles will include coordination at national and regional

The crisis is stalking the small-scale farmers and rural areas, where 70 percent of the world's hungry live and work.

levels, promoting accountability, and developing a Global Strategic Framework for food security and nutrition.

We propose three simple criteria against which the effectiveness of this new array of institutions can be assessed. Can they:

1. prevent future food crises and cushion their impact on the food consumption of the poor?
2. assure that all countries deliver on their repeated commitments to halve hunger by 2015?
3. offer dynamic leadership towards the lasting eradication of hunger, respecting the human right to adequate food?

Both singly and collectively, the new structures risk failing on all three counts. None has been endowed with the authority to act effectively on any of the above issues in spite of their undeniable importance for humanity. Surprisingly, the new architecture has emerged without a consensual vision of binding goals, the range of tasks to be performed, or the tools and authorities needed to achieve desired outcomes.

■ Reviving rural development is necessary, but more is needed

In spite of available knowledge, few governments have addressed the issue of hunger on the scale required. Many have applied flawed strategies. One weakness has been discrimination against rural areas. Although three out of every four poor people in developing countries live in rural areas and depend directly or indirectly on farming, their governments and donors have cut investment in rural infrastructure, agricultural research and smallholder support. Secondly, most programmes have prioritised measures to increase production rather than to expand access to food.



Photo: FAO/Alessandra Bernadetti

All recent declarations stress a determination to revive agriculture and rural areas as the engine for development. This is welcome. However, as the World Development Report (WDR) 2008 points out, strategies must be context-specific. In agriculture-based countries, typical for most of sub-Saharan Africa, success will require heavy investment in the productivity of smallholder farming. Measures aimed at transforming countries in Asia, the Middle East and North Africa must also address rising income disparities through multi-sectoral approaches, facilitating multiple sources of income and improved rural-urban linkages. With further urbanisation, as in much of Central Asia and Latin America, agriculture's role in reducing poverty is declining and shifting further towards higher value products, direct supplies to modern food markets and environmental services.

The WDR 2008 proposes numerous entry points for agricultural and rural development strategies. They relate to all four components of sustainable food security: food availability, economic and physical access to food, stability of supplies and food utilisation for healthy nutrition.



Photo: FAO/Marco Longari

To sum up, the time is ripe for a revival of rural areas as an engine for growth and poverty reduction. However, to achieve adequate nutrition for all, more is needed than investment in agriculture. The following issues must be addressed urgently:

- **Better governance:** Poverty and hunger fall faster under conditions of peace and security, government effectiveness, the rule of law, a functioning infrastructure and respect of human rights.
- **Make food security a central aim of rural development:** Actions within rural areas need to respond better to the food insecure. It is not enough to support smallholder producers and expect hunger levels to fall. Actions must also include social protection programmes, clean water, sanitation, health services and nutrition education. Unless the hungry are better nourished, they get caught in a downward spiral, with undernutrition leading to ill health and loss of learning and earning potential.
- **Respond to urbanisation:** By 2050 more than 70 percent of the world's population could be urban, implying changing consumption patterns and marketing channels. New strategies targeting the urban poor will be needed.
- **Reduce the pressure on natural resources:** Population and income growth could cause a 70 percent growth in food demand by 2050, if trends towards over-consumption and excessive animal products in diets are not halted. The bioenergy industry may require additional production. Almost all production growth will have to come from

The new Committee on World Food Security must be able to take decisions on life-saving MDGs as well as on the right to food, social protection and trade issues.

higher yields and cropping intensity, but in ways that are truly sustainable. This requires heavy public investment in research.

- **Strengthen preparedness for future food crises:** The food, finance and economic crises of 2007/2009 have driven about 100 million more people into hunger, forced to adopt coping strategies involving cuts in food intake, selling assets and taking children out of school. In spite of the huge risks posed for humanity by potential shortages, there are no global strategies for maintaining "safe" levels of food stocks or safeguarding the ability of poor nations to access food in times of crisis.

■ Time to act

New momentum for action to achieve the MDGs. Even with a billion hungry, MDG 1 can still be met by 2015. The very least that the UN Summit in September 2010 should do is to commit to ensuring rapidly that more people have the means to eat adequately. This will speed progress towards other MDGs and allow millions more people to participate in and contribute to economic growth. Experience shows that a rapid drop in hunger and malnutrition can be attained through targeted fast-acting social protection programmes: these should, therefore, become the main immediate call on funds for food security.

At the same time, leaders should confirm their political will to complement social protection with enhanced investments in long-term pro-poor growth.

Global Governance. Within the new array of institutions, the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) is the only one that is inter-governmental and thus able to take decisions that are binding on nations. It must now, as a matter of urgency, be endowed with



Photo: FAO/Walter Astrada

the power, authority and resources to act effectively on the really critical issues that affect our ability to ensure that all people can eat adequately, now and in the future.

- **Breadth of mandate:** the CFS must be able to address the full range of inter-dependent life-saving MDGs (see Box), as well as the right to food, nutrition, social protection, food stocks and trade issues;

Life-saving MDGs 1, 4, 5, 6, and 7

MDG 1 target 2: Halve, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people who suffer from hunger.

MDG 4 target 5: Reduce by two thirds, between 1990 and 2015, the under five mortality rate.

MDG 5 target 6: Reduce by three quarters, between 1990 and 2015, the maternal mortality rate.

MDG 6 target 8: Have halted by 2015 and begun to reverse the spread of malaria and other major diseases.

MDG 7 target 10: Halve, by 2015, the proportion of people without access to clean water and basic sanitation.

- **Food crisis prevention:** the CFS should be:
 - required to draw up contingency plans for the equitable management of global food supplies in the event of future shortages and sudden rises in market prices;
 - endowed with reserve powers and resources to implement these plans in the event of future crises, including intervention in managing global food stocks and in national food policies, including food rationing;
- **Accountability for delivery on commitments:** the CFS should require all governments to submit plans and time lines to achieve the MDG targets (and to help other nations to do so), and report on actions taken and results achieved.
- **Eradicating hunger:** the CFS should create space within its structure for a Voluntary Country Group for the Eradication of Hunger and Malnutrition, which would prepare a timetabled plan for ending all forms of undernutrition and support its implementation.

Investments of 30 billion USD would generate an annual benefit of 120 billion USD. Agricultural productivity could be enhanced and livelihoods in rural areas be improved.

Strategic approaches. Work by the CFS on preparing a Global Strategic Framework is just starting. Hopefully it will address, at least, the following options:

- **Sponsor a massive global campaign:** The aim would be to raise popular awareness that hunger eradication will not only fulfil the most fundamental of human rights but also lead to economic growth and greater equity, justice and political stability.
- **Greater international solidarity and cooperation:** Solidarity must begin with a more equitable distribution of access to food and resources inside countries. Global bodies should push for the same between countries, including making trade rules more conducive to food security, expanding financial and technical cooperation and complying with the international measures of the Right to Food Guidelines.



Photo: FAO/Guilio Napolitano

To end hunger in this world a truly global solidarity is needed; effectively strengthening CFS would clearly demonstrate this intent.

- **Stronger focus on access to adequate food and nutrition:** Countries need to set up social protection programmes that ensure nutrition security and expand access to water, sanitation and health protection, ideally combined with measures to enhance productivity. They should be implemented in line with the Right to Food Guidelines, including actions towards ensuring justiciability of infringements of the right to food.
- **Reviving rural development:** In many countries, pro-poor growth will con-

tinue to require higher and well-designed public investment in rural areas.

- **Better crisis preparedness:** A higher level of preparedness must reduce the likelihood of future food crises and empower the poor to cope better, should crises occur.
- **Reconciling supply growth and hunger eradication with the sustainable use of natural resources:** The debate on the sustainable use of natural resources and responses to climate change must also address options

for curbing demand through cutting waste, excessive consumption and subsidised non-food uses of agricultural products. Innovative ways of linking sustainable techniques in agricultural systems with poverty reduction through payments for environmental services should be adopted.

■ Conclusions

Eradicating hunger and other serious forms of malnutrition can be one of the great achievements of this century. It will only happen if there is a truly global solidarity and consensus that it must be done.

It requires every nation to do all within its power to end hunger within its borders and to agree to endow the instruments of global governance, especially the CFS, with the authority to act decisively in the global interest, even when this infringes on national sovereignty.

Anything less implies great risks for humanity.

Zusammenfassung

Das bisherige System der „global governance“ von Ernährungssicherheit bietet keine angemessene Sicherheit vor weiteren Ernährungskrisen und sichert keinen Erfolg im Abbau des chronischen Hungers. Trotz enormer Steigerungen der Nahrungsproduktion steigt die Zahl der Hungernden. Um diesen Trend umzukehren, sollte das Committee on World Food Security in seinen Kompetenzen deutlich gestärkt werden. Als strategische Ansatzpunkte werden höhere Investitionen in nachhaltige ländliche Entwicklung in vielen Ländern zwar weiter wichtig bleiben, aber eine umfassende Ernährungssicherung braucht ein sehr viel breiteres Spektrum von Maßnahmen. Insbesondere die Sicherung eines unmittelbaren

Zugangs zu Nahrung könnte Millionen von Menschen einen dauerhaften Ausweg aus dem Circulus vitiosus von Hunger und Armut ermöglichen. Hierfür sollte der UN-Gipfel im September 2010 die Weichen stellen und damit zugleich zum Erreichen mehrerer Millenniumsziele beitragen.

Resumen

El actual sistema de gobernanza global de la seguridad alimentaria no ofrece una seguridad apropiada frente a nuevas crisis alimentarias y no asegura el éxito en la reducción del hambre crónica. A pesar de los enormes incrementos en la producción de alimentos, el número de personas que padecen hambre aumenta. A fin de revertir esta tendencia, debería reforzarse decisivamente las competencias del Comité de Seguridad Alimentaria Mundial. Si bien las crecientes inversiones en el desarrollo rural sostenible de muchos países seguirán siendo importantes como puntos de enfoque estratégico, debe considerarse que una seguridad alimentaria integral requiere una gama mucho más amplia de medidas. Sobre todo el aseguramiento de un acceso directo a la alimentación podría representar para millones de personas una posibilidad permanente para salir del círculo vicioso de la pobreza y el hambre. Para ello, la Cumbre de las Naciones Unidas – que tendrá lugar en septiembre de 2010 – debería fijar los parámetros respectivos y contribuir al mismo tiempo al logro de varios de los Objetivos de Desarrollo del Milenio.

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