

## Moving from food aid to food assistance

In a process that has gone practically unnoticed by the public, the Food Aid Convention, FAC, is currently being renegotiated. It was forged more than 40 years ago between 23 donor countries with the aim of using grain surpluses to combat hunger in developing countries. Within the framework of the Convention, Germany has agreed to provide 56.24 million euros in food aid annually. Commitments made by the donor countries are only one component in the realm of food assistance; there are additional bi- and multi-lateral instruments. But the FAC is the only legally binding international treaty committed to assistance for developing countries.

Despite periodic efforts at reform, the framework of the current Convention (1999) is not adjusted to meet today's challenges; food aid practices in a number of member states and some donors' policies have actually outpaced the Convention.

The most important point of criticism is that the Convention is not primarily oriented toward the needs of those most severely impacted by hunger. Only a limited list of items is accepted as food aid in the terms of the Convention. This creates an incentive for member states to favour exactly those measures to fulfil their duty vis-à-vis the Convention – even if other means would have been more appropriate.

### ■ Fewer resources, greater needs

In recent years, a country suffered no consequences for failing to meet its commitments; a promised contribution could even be postponed to the following year. The Convention mechanism thus proved unfit to respond to crises: In 2007, e.g., when food prices shot upwards globally, triggering the first hunger revolts, food aid deliveries dropped to their lowest level since 1961 – the year in which the agreement was concluded.

Current trends in world-wide agro-production and agro-markets are having a major impact on the availability of

surpluses: Production increasingly fails to match demand, and even small shocks trigger significant price fluctuations. In February 2011, the FAO food price index broke a new record. At the same time, the number of natural disasters is globally on the rise, increasing the number of people in need for humanitarian assistance.

### ■ Reform requires orientation to the Right to Food

If the new Convention is to deliver an effective contribution in fighting hunger, member states need to tackle four key challenges:

- First: Even if the new Convention will clearly provide for instruments beyond in-kind food aid, the extent of the **“toolbox” of a future Food Assistance Convention** still has to be defined. The aim of discouraging the development of dependency and reducing vulnerability to future food crises calls for a broad toolbox. The scope of the 2010 European Community (EC) Humanitarian Food Assistance Communication may set a trend here.
- Second: The **nature of donor commitments** is crucial if the Convention wishes to live up to its mandate to provide reliable aid during crises: It is true that the calculation of commitments in “wheat equivalent tons” is outdated. But simple in cash-commitments are not sufficient in times of fluctuating and steadily increasing food prices. Hence, the new Convention should either require donors to commit to satisfy a quantifiable minimum of food assistance needs; or the Convention must provide for inflation adjustment by indexing the commitments to global food prices.
- Third: The current Convention does not guarantee recipient countries, international organisations or civil society the **rights to information and participation**. During the ongoing reform negotiations there has been a clear lack of transparency as member states are not willing to share the “Zero Draft” with civil society. In order for the new Convention to be more receptive to evolving best practices and policies, it must provide for stakeholder consultation.
- Fourth: The new Convention must be **linked to international co-ordination mechanisms** such as the *Global Food Security Cluster* and to knowledge sharing and policy setting bodies within the realm of food security (*Committee on World Food Security*). For it is only in this way that the treaty can effectively fulfil its role as one tool in the fight against world-wide hunger.



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