



## Food security, food crisis and the right to food

*Comments by Dr. Manzoor Ahmad, Director, FAO Liaison Office/Geneva  
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On behalf of the FAO, I would like to thank you for inviting us to this important panel discussion.

In my presentation, I will focus on the food crisis with a particular emphasis on its relation to poverty and its linkage with globalization. I would also like to say a few words as to what needs to be done to tackle this crisis in the short- as well as long-term.

Eradicating poverty and extreme hunger is top of the UN's Millennium Development Goals. The target is to halve the number of people living on less than a dollar a day and the number of people who suffer from hunger.

### **How are we doing in achieving these goals and what has been the impact of globalization on these two targets?**

While we seem to be on target for reducing the proportion of people living in extreme poverty, the number fell from a third of the global population to less than one fifth between 1990 and 2004. However, in the area of hunger reduction we seem to be making no progress. According to FAO estimates, the total number of chronically undernourished people in 1994-96 was 828 million. This number is currently estimated at 854 million and is expected to increase because of the current food crisis.

### **Why is poverty decreasing but hunger increasing globally? Why has globalization affected on these two related objectives differently?**

Globalization is credited with reducing the overall poverty levels. It is generally agreed that countries which integrated into the global economy were better able to exploit their comparative advantage and benefited from access to larger markets. An increase in FDI inflows and other factors contributed to these countries innovating and improving their competitiveness. Through various GATT Rounds, tariffs on industrial goods were reduced and subsidies were eliminated. The industrial countries had to give way to greater exports from developing countries. Thus developed countries, which accounted for 85% of world exports of manufactured goods in 1995, saw their share decline to about two-thirds in 2006. As a result, there was an improvement in the distribution of wealth between developed and developing countries accompanied by a reduction of global poverty.

**On the other hand, globalization acted in a perverse direction for agriculture.  
Why?**

There are several reasons. First, huge subsidies in developed countries meant that they had an unfair advantage. As a result, their share of exports of agricultural products of developed countries rose strongly from 40% in 1955 to about 60% in 2006. Second, whereas FDI for industrial goods increased at an average annual rate of 13%, investment for agriculture continued to decline. Aid for agricultural needs decreased by 58% from 1984 to 2004, and the share of agriculture in Official Development Assistance fell from 17% to 3%. Third, while dealing with any adverse affects of globalization for industrial workers, many countries had policies in place for those workers who found themselves temporarily out of work. On the other hand, if farmer lost their crops there were no policies for their adjustment.

This is all the more unfortunate as the right to adequate food is a fundamental human right recognized by international law in several dimensions, such as art. 25 of UDHR and 11 (2) of the ICESR.

The current crisis was not unforeseen. Over a year ago, FAO warned of the brewing crisis. In fact, it was in 1996 when the FAO convened the first food summit, the need to take concrete steps was emphasized to more than 100 leaders attending that summit. The leaders pledged to undertake measures to halve the number of hungry by 2015. Sadly, instead of rising, the resources channeled towards agriculture have kept declining. Another summit was convened in 2002 to help countries realize that they were not fulfilling their commitments.

What is the way forward? There is no time to be wasted and a coordinated approach is needed. The UN and Bretton Woods institutions have to work together for immediate as well as long term response. Already these organizations have set up a High Level Task Force for a coordinated response.

**For meeting the immediate needs, urgent action is required to:**

1. Improve access of the vulnerable to emergency food assistance, nutrition interventions and other social safety nets;
2. Boost smallholder farmer food production;
3. Adjust trade and taxation policies to support immediate food availability;
4. Manage macroeconomic implications to avoid broader impacts on economic opportunities; and
5. Improve assessments and monitoring systems.

**For the longer-term, the following actions are needed:**

6. Sustain growth in food availability through smallholder-led production;
7. Increase coverage and efficiency of social protection systems;

8. Strengthen food security risk management;
9. Improve international food markets; and
10. Develop international consensus on sustainable biofuels.
11. Joint Government-led assessments (if possible supported by joint missions) identifying key needs and specific areas of vulnerability;
12. Establishment of National Food Security Task Force bringing together the different stakeholders including the national authorities, private sector bodies, civil society and consumer organizations and well as (where relevant) international organizations, donor agencies and Bretton Woods institutions;
13. Development of National Food Security Strategic Program Framework (or updating the existing one), based on existing and planned assessments;
14. Holding of a National Food Security Financing Conference to ensure adequate resources for key elements of the food security strategy;
15. Public communications to ensure that the strategy and programme are understood both among the concerned entities and the wider public, not least to reassure all concerned of efforts being made to address the crisis; and
16. A harmonized monitoring process led by Government with participation of the UN system and Bretton Woods institutions, donors, NGOs and others directly involved in supporting the strategic program, through which progress is kept under regular review using agreed monitoring indicators (e.g. based around nutritional and health status, food prices and availability, stocks and production)

While the soaring food prices have created a crisis at present, we can help make this an opportunity for the long-term trade solution. If the WTO's Doha Round can be completed in the near future, it would greatly supplement FAO's efforts by reducing tariffs and trade distorting subsidies and create a predictable agricultural trade regime. This is a requisite for food security for all - producers, exporters and importers.

Although the relationship between trade rules and food security is a tenuous one, any effort to simplify an exceedingly complex international trade system is bound to have immediate and long-term consequences. High prices may attract more investment and therefore reduce distortions in agricultural trade as they have done to a large extent for manufactured goods.

Thank you.