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27 April 2009
Rome
Coordinating, Learning, Monitoring:
A New Role for the Committee on World Food Security

SUMMARY
This note proposes a new role for the Committee on World Food Security. It is based on a diagnosis of the reasons for our failure to eradicate hunger and severe malnutrition. It lists five reasons for this failure: an almost exclusive focus on increasing agricultural production, instead of the adoption of a more holistic view about the causes of food insecurity; a failure of global governance to overcome existing fragmentation of efforts; a still incomplete understanding of how to work in certain areas which have an impact on our ability to achieve food security for all; a failure to follow upon commitments, itself a result of a lack of accountability; and the insufficiency of national strategies for the realization of the right to food at domestic level.

It follows from this diagnosis that the revised CFS should combine the three core functions of coordination, learning, and monitoring progress. This, it is argued, could be achieved by transforming the CFS into a platform in which governments, international agencies, and civil society organizations could jointly improve their understanding of what needs to be done, and improve the accountability of both the international community and national governments. This note proposes the adoption by the CFS of time-bound targets and guidelines, to be revised at regular intervals, setting clear benchmarks for action, and allowing for a monitoring of progress made at national and international levels.

We know where hunger and malnutrition come from. They have their source in a deeply unequal distribution of incomes; in the absence or the insufficiency of social protection schemes; in the weak protection of agricultural workers; in an increasingly dualistic farming system in which smallholders hardly manage to live off farming, due to their poor connection to markets, to the high prices of inputs, to the insecurity of land tenure, and to our failure to adequately regulate the food chain; in an inequitable system of international trade and unregulated markets which do not guarantee remunerative prices; in insufficient or inadequately targeted investments in agriculture; in speculation on the futures markets of agricultural commodities by non-commercial investors; and in the absence of a recognition of the right to food and appropriate mechanisms to ensure that it is complied with.

This is a long list, and the task ahead of us seems considerable. Yet, there is hope in the fact that these different causes are now better understood, and that we know, for the most part, how to address these obstacles to the realization of the right to food. We have failed, however, to make significant progress in overcoming most of these obstacles. This is a collective failure for which we are all responsible. Rather than allocating blame, we must seek to understand what went wrong, and what can be done to change this.

1. Current obstacles for decisive action

Our failure to take decisive action to eradicate hunger and extreme malnutrition is due to a combination of five factors. First, while hunger stems from a wide number of causes – the most important of them are listed above, but the list is by no means exhaustive –, it has generally been seen only from the point of view of agricultural production; while much efforts have been put successfully into improving our ability to produce enough food to feed the world, too little attention has been paid to the political economy of hunger, especially to questions of accessibility and equity. We are now in a position to understand hunger and malnutrition in a much more holistic way – and we see the fight against them as requiring collective action in a number of areas beyond agriculture, rural development and food aid.
Second, global governance is fragmented. A large number of UN agencies, as well as the ILO, the World Bank and the IMF are involved in providing guidance to countries on the various issues listed above. It has not been unusual in the past for these organizations to give conflicting advice to the States. Each of them has tended to concentrate its efforts on furthering its own area of specialisation without developing the partnership required to address the issues in a comprehensive way. It is urgent that coordination among these agencies be improved. And it is equally important that the legitimacy and ownership of their recommendations be enhanced by the establishment of a strong partnership with governments and with civil society organizations. Indeed, while the coordination between agencies has been insufficient, governments too have all too often acted with their own interest in mind, and without paying the required attention to the impact of their actions on other countries’ ability to realize the right to food. We need to have international agencies, governments, and civil society organizations act together, in order to improve consistency in our efforts to combat hunger and in order to put a higher price tag on non-cooperative behaviour.

Third, while our understanding of a number of the structural causes of hunger has significantly improved, there is still no consensus on a relatively wide range of issues. We know, for instance, that our neglect of agriculture in public policies and in development cooperation during the period 1980-2007 has been a mistake. We know that our modes of agricultural development have too often favored large-scale plantations, while insufficiently benefiting smallholders. We know that social safety nets must be improved and greatly expanded. We now understand much better how to manage food aid, in order to maximize its contribution to food security while avoiding its potentially negative impacts. We also have come to recognize the contribution improved accountability could make to food and nutrition security, through the recognition of the right to food and the adoption of national strategies for the realization of the right to food. In all these areas, we have learned from our past mistakes. Misguided policies have, for the most part, been remedied or are being abandoned. But, in contrast, other potential causes of hunger and malnutrition remain contested or are not being addressed at all. For instance, the relationship of the production of agrofuel to food security remains controversial: while it is clear that, in principle, agrofuel production could contribute to raise incomes in rural areas, which are most affected by poverty and where most hunger is located, it is equally evident that, in practice, this production generally benefited large-scale producers, and has increased the tension between supply and demand on certain markets of agricultural commodities. The impact on the right to food of different modes of agricultural development also remains the subject of intense debate. How international trade and global stock levels should be managed, and whether or not food security should be achieved by facilitating trade in agricultural commodities, is equally contentious. At the international level, no systematic effort has yet been made to consider what needs to be done now to ensure the sustainability of food supplies in the long-term and to prevent the degradation of natural resources on which future food production will have to depend. On these and other issues, we must improve our ability to learn, and to learn at a greater pace.

Fourth, beyond solemn declarations in various fora, the political will has been insufficient to remove the structural causes underlying hunger. Commitments are made, but these commitments remain vague: they remain at the level of declarations of intent, without any government or institution being held to account for any specific action. Summits take place, but no follow-up is organized at international level, other than to report on the number of hungry. The resulting lack of accountability is made worse by an often imperfect coordination within governments between different departments – for instance, between the departments of trade, development cooperation, agriculture, and foreign affairs –: in the absence of strong leadership from the highest level of government, each department acts according to its own priorities, without necessarily ranking the full realization of the right to food in other countries among its top objectives. Accountability must be improved, by the setting of clear time-bound objectives for governments, and regular monitoring of the progress made.

Fifth, the strategies developed at national level in order to realize the right to food remain largely insufficient. Only a handful of governments have set up accountability mechanisms in order to protect...
the right to food. Even where agriculture has not been neglected entirely, smallholders have all too often been marginalized from public policies, partly as a result of their political disempowerment, partly because of the mistaken assumption of policy-makers that small-scale agriculture is less productive than large-scale plantations. Rather than to strengthen their agricultural sector and the local food chains, many governments have preferred to achieve food security by importing low-priced foods from international markets, paid for by revenues gained by exporting raw commodities abroad. In addition, agricultural workers are insufficiently protected, particularly as regards their right to a living wage, their right to collective bargaining, and their right to health and safety at work. Finally, only a minority of governments have established well-functioning social protection schemes, shielding the most vulnerable from increases in food prices. More incentives must be created in order to ensure that strategies are established at national level which ensure swift progress towards the realization of the right to food, by focusing the efforts on the most vulnerable (small-scale farmers, landless laborers, and the urban poor).

2. The Renewed Committee on World Food Security (CFS)

If it is to put global governance in the service of combating hunger, the renewed Committee on World Food Security (CFS) should be fundamentally rethought in order to contribute to overcoming these obstacles. This could be achieved by combining three functions within the CFS – coordinating, learning, and monitoring:

1. A platform for coordination. The CFS should constitute a platform in which all relevant UN agencies with activities relevant to food and nutrition security, as well as the ILO, the World Bank and the IMF, and the WTO – all of which have an important contribution to make to the realization of the right to food – would be obliged to coordinate their actions, and improve the consistency of their policy recommendations, in the light of the overall objective of combating hunger and other forms of severe malnutrition. States should be represented at ministerial level, according to a principle of equitable geographic representation; ideally, each State should be represented by a Minister coordinating an inter-departmental taskforce on the eradication of hunger and severe malnutrition, in order to ensure consistency across departments. The legitimacy of the CFS as well as its ability to act effectively would further be improved by ensuring an adequate representation of civil society. It is particularly vital in this respect to ensure adequate representation within the CFS of farmers’ organisations and of agricultural workers, through their representative unions. In order to ensure for a full representation of these different constituencies, the CFS should develop into a tripartite structure (governments / international agencies / civil society and farmers’ organisations).

2. Setting goals and offering guidelines to stimulate action. The main task of the CFS should be to reach an agreement on time-bound goals for the eradication of hunger and other severe forms of malnutrition and to adopt on a regular basis (for instance every 3 years) a set of guidelines based on a shared diagnosis of its members about what needs to be done by both the international community and by national governments in order to make faster progress towards this objective. The Comprehensive Framework for Action adopted by the High-Level Task Force on the Global Food Crisis is a first interesting attempt in this direction. However, the guidelines adopted by the CFS should set clear timeframes and benchmarks for the international community, with associated indicators, in order to ensure adequate accountability. Rather than a “menu of policy options”, it should set clearly defined, quantified and time-bound objectives for States, in order to encourage the mobilization of action and resources. The guidelines adopted by the CFS would also address the international community, both the community of donors and the international agencies, in order to prescribe that they, too, adopt certain measures within specific timeframes. The guidelines could also identify areas in which international cooperation is required in order to support national efforts to eradicate hunger and malnutrition.

3. Regularly revised guidelines as a source of learning. These guidelines would be revised regularly on the basis of the successes and failures of policies pursued at international and
national level, which should be evaluated according to a number of outcome indicators. Thus, the CFS would fulfil an essential collective learning function, a function which appears particularly important in the light of emerging threats (such as climate change, or increased speculation on land and on agricultural commodities).

4. Reporting by States on the implementation of the guidelines. In order to encourage governments to follow upon the guidelines adopted, and regularly updated, by the CFS, each government would be asked to report back on its implementation of the guidelines, for instance at least once every six years, beginning with the member governments of the CFS. This reporting should not develop into a burdensome bureaucratic exercise, and great care should be taken to strictly limit the volume of information processed for it to be manageable. However, reports submitted by States would be reviewed by the CFS on the basis of the existing guidelines: the CFS should be allowed to comment on these reports in order to assist States in their efforts and to identify the need for international cooperation, and the CFS should recommend to States that they make progress in certain selected areas, for which the States concerned should develop indicators and set benchmarks. Although this reporting process should primarily serve as a source of accountability—since governments will have to justify and explain their choices in key areas such as agricultural investment, social protection schemes, or trade policies—it also should provide the CFS with basic information related to the key areas identified in the guidelines, thus allowing it to refine its understanding of issues on which its recommendations are still vague or on which no recommendation could be agreed to.

Hence, the reporting would develop into an iterative process: while the States would report on their implementation of the guidelines (themselves the expression of the consensus, at one point in time, of the international community), the information they provide the High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition (see below) and the CFS at the same time would lead these instances to reexamine the guidelines, in the light of the obstacles faced in their implementation. In other terms, the monitoring here would be of a diagnostic kind: it should be seen primarily as a searching device, in order to identify obstacles to the full realization of the right to food, and the means to overcome such obstacles, in the light of the experience of other States.

5. The High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition. The High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition should have as its primary task to assist the CFS in fulfilling its role. It would provide the scientific expertise needed to analyze the reports submitted by States, and to develop the guidelines on a regular basis. It could therefore a) examine the States’ reports and make comments on these reports to assist the CFS members; b) respond to requests of the CFS on specific issues, in order to help in the drafting of the guidelines on the basis of the best available scientific expertise; c) adopt opinions addressed to the CFS where new issues arise which, in the view of the High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition, deserve the attention of the CFS. Since the guidelines to be adopted by the CFS would touch not only upon agricultural production, but also upon issues such as nutrition, education, trade and investment, and social protection, the composition of the Panel should reflect this interdisciplinarity.

6. The role of the right to adequate food. The right to adequate food should have an important role to play in this renewed CFS. First, in the adoption of the guidelines by the CFS, the ultimate objective should be (rather than solely the increase of agricultural production) the full realization of the right to food, considered in its different dimensions. Second, since there is now a large consensus about the need to rely on the right to food as a basis for accountability, it seems clear that, as part of this reporting process, the States would have to report on the implementation of the FAO Voluntary Guidelines for the progressive realization of the right to food, adopted in 2004. This in turn should guide the composition both of the CFS and of the High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition. The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights could usefully contribute to the CFS, and should be part of it.
especially if other UN agencies are members. As to the High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition, in addition to agronomists, agricultural and development economists, and nutritionists, this group should comprise specialists in human rights. A link with the existing human rights monitoring bodies (UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and Special Rapporteur on the right to food) could be achieved by a form of representation of these bodies in the Panel.

These proposals are made in a constructive spirit, with a view to launching the debate within the Contact group – and not to preempt it. But they are also guided by the conviction that we cannot afford to miss this opportunity to rebuild the global governance of the food system. If nothing decisive is done, the number of hungry will continue to grow. We can change this provided we make the right choices. If we fail, we will therefore share a responsibility in the continuation of a situation which is unacceptable.