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WITH HUNGER RISING, FOOD EMERGES AS KEY TO SECURITY, POVERTY AND CLIMATE



FAO/Alessandra Benedetti

An upward spike in the number of hungry people worldwide, and a realization that long-term challenges lie ahead in feeding the planet's growing population, are pushing food security into the centre of global policy concerns for the first time in decades.

What's more, policy-makers are finding that food security solutions are directly tied to other key objectives.

Under pressure from dwindling purchasing power since last year's economic crash, the number of malnourished people in the world has now surpassed a staggering one billion. Food prices – although down globally from mid-2008 levels – continue to remain high in many of the poorest countries, as drought and floods take a toll on livestock and farmlands.

Spurred by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's High-Level Task Force on the Global Food Security Crisis, donors pledged \$20 billion at the G-8 meeting in L'Aquila, Italy, in June this year, where 26 developed and developing nations endorsed a hard-hitting action plan.

The "L'Aquila principles" notably place agricultural productivity and support for poor farmers on a par with emergency food aid, usually the more dramatic and better-bankrolled activity.

Emergency aid, nevertheless, is now severely under-funded in relation to the impact of economic and weather-related shocks. The World Food Programme is urgently seeking to regain its level of 2008 support, when it led an \$8 billion emergency mobilization against hunger, the largest in history.

Philanthropist Bill Gates has announced that his multi-billion dollar foundation will now focus mainly on food security. Making poor farmers more productive, he said, will have a massive impact on tackling world hunger.

From 16-18 November 2009, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) will hold a summit on food security, following up on its June 2008 emergency meeting. The Rome summit, says FAO Director-General Jacques Diouf, aims to "forge a broad consensus on eradication of hunger in the world." Secretary-General Ban, who will attend, last week assigned inter-agency task force coordinator David Nabarro to serve as his Special Representative for Food Security and Nutrition.

The old saying that "all roads lead to Rome" is acquiring new meaning, as food issues that will be taken up at the November summit dovetail with a range of high-priority issues:

- **Support for smallholder farmers is now recognized as a pre-eminent anti-poverty strategy.**

It is estimated that some one billion people, making up 75 per cent of the world's poorest population, live in rural areas with economies that are dependent on farm-related activities.

- **Support for farmers and farming lies at the heart of the Millennium Development Goals.**

Goal 1 refers to the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger. Access to food has a direct bearing on these joint aims and their achievement. (The World Bank estimates that an additional 100 million people fell below the extreme-poverty line in 2008 due to rising food prices.) Other MDGs relate to health and education, for which adequate nourishment is essential. With women comprising 75 per cent of smallholder farmers, agricultural reform also has an impact on Goal 3, gender equality and empowering women.

- **Agricultural reforms can help on tough trade issues.**

Differences over agricultural subsidies to rich-country farmers, on the one hand, and the opening of developing country markets to global food trade, on the other, continue to block progress on the Doha trade talks. Fairer and more

open trading arrangements could have helped in 2008, when trade in agricultural commodities seized up as countries guarded their own food stocks, in turn pushing prices even higher on global markets.

- **Investment in farming follows a direct line to environmental sustainability.**

Although agriculture is generally thought of as a “green” activity, it accounts for 14 per cent of greenhouse gas emissions, and deforestation to claim new farmland accounts for a similar level of emissions. Agriculture also soaks up more water than any other human activity. Modern irrigation, organic farming techniques and efficient food distribution chains all take pressure off the environment.

- **Conversely, poor farmers are among the primary victims of volatile weather events and rising average temperatures.**

The Global Humanitarian Forum estimates that up to 25 per cent of global agricultural capacity will be lost unless climate change is deterred or mitigated.

- **Food security is a security issue.**

As a new economic cycle takes hold, increased demand for food, metals, oil and bio-fuels could bring on another upward spiral in commodity prices. Popular discontent that boiled over in riots in 22 countries in 2007-2008 might resurface if basic food items are priced out of the reach of poor or even middle-income families, including consumers in developed countries.

INVESTMENT STRATEGIES FOR THE FUTURE

Indeed, over the long-term, upward pressure on food supplies and food prices is predicted. The FAO estimates that food production will need to grow by 70 per cent by 2050 to meet the demands of population growth and improved diets. This will require investment at a rate of \$83 billion per year, according to a recent FAO paper.

Most investment will need to come from the private sector. But public funds are required for roads, ports, power and other large-scale infrastructure; agricultural institutions and extension services; research and development; and social services such as education (particularly for women), sanitation, clean water supply and health.

The 2008 breakdown in the global food system followed a decades-long drop in public investment, as the share of aid devoted to agriculture sank from 20 per cent in 1979 to 4 per cent in 2006. Private investment has become more problematic recently, due to the high volatility in food prices and the drying up of credit since the financial crisis.

The High-Level Task Force of UN agency heads, formed by the Secretary-General in April 2008, is responding to the twin challenge of private and public funding with a partnership



FAO/WFP Food Supply Assessment Mission

structure that brings together businesses, finance institutions, development NGOs, foundations and activists lobbying to establish food access as a human right.

The World Bank, a Task Force member, has stepped up funding for agricultural and rural development by 76 per cent, from an average of \$4.1 billion a year in 2006 through 2008, to \$7.2 billion in fiscal year 2009.

FARMERS IN FRONT ON PLANNING

Another key partnership component – all too easy to overlook – is the farmers themselves. Experience on all continents indicates that successful investment in smallholder-based agriculture requires the full involvement of farming households in design and implementation, including planning at the government level.

An agricultural and anti-poverty strategy centered on smallholder farmers in poor countries is one that has history on its side, the UN’s International Fund for Agricultural Development points out. Vietnam, for example, has used this strategy to move from net food deficit to successful food exporter. Farm yields in Malawi multiplied when farmers were assisted with agricultural inputs, especially fertilizer.

Pledges toward the LAquila initiative now total \$22 billion over three years, which would entail a doubling of annual aid to agriculture. Acting with urgency, appropriate scale and in a sustained fashion is one of the LAquila principles.

But how resources are used is as important as how much is raised. The G8 initiative is not just another donor programme. It is endorsed by developing nations and, like the UN Task Force, it enlists the vulnerable countries themselves in committing resources and strategic leadership. It also sets out a comprehensive approach to food security through interlocking measures for farm productivity, environmental renewal, open trade, policy reform, social services for farmers and broader rural development.