



Mandate of the Special Rapporteur on the right to food



The right to food and the financial and economic crisis
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This note analyzes the impact that the combined effects of multiple crises in the past two years may have on the right to food of the most disadvantaged individuals worldwide. It also calls for the adoption of a human rights framework and more specifically a right to food framework as a compass to guide possible responses at the national and international levels. The remarks therein are necessarily preliminary as these effects may not be fully evident yet but may appear gradually with time.

1. Human rights as a framework for analysis, action and accountability

Through the human rights lens, links between four global crises that have affected countries worldwide and the livelihood of their inhabitants are easily identifiable. The global food prices crisis peaked by June 2008 and its effects were still being felt fully when the financial system went into turmoil by September of the same year. Just as speculation and volatility on international food commodity markets became under scrutiny for their disproportionate impact on low income countries and their populations the first signals that the financial crisis, followed by the economic crisis, would engender the same disproportionately negative outcomes emerged. In December 2009 the world's attention will turn to climate change as governments will gather in Copenhagen to discuss ways and means to avoid a climate and environmental crisis. It is now evident that the effects of these global phenomena – food prices, financial and economic turmoil, and climate change - are already felt disproportionately by poor, hungry and vulnerable populations. Food insecure countries that have to bear the brunt of the increase in food prices are all the more vulnerable now because they are unable to finance their economies. The chain of crises has shown that global systems producing in large amount but in manners that are neither socially nor environmentally sustainable cannot be maintained

In response, the rights-based approach needs to be connected to financial reforms, to economic recovery measures and to sustainable development, all of which are at the centre of discussions today, and all of which are interrelated. Governments should be guided in their policy choices by the framework offered by the right to food and the right to an adequate standard of living. The right to food framework, more specifically can serve as a tool for governments to ensure that their policies are geared towards alleviating hunger and malnutrition and towards building the resilience of the most vulnerable groups against risks, shocks and policy changes.

At the High-Level Meeting on Food Security for All in January 2009, the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon clearly expressed that the right to food should guide reactions of the international community to the global food crisis and serve as a basis for analysis, action and accountability. Today, the human rights approach ought to be an essential component of the global reforms that are being discussed: the global food system reform, the global financial and economic system reform, and the reforms of the climate change regimes.

2. Impacts of interrelated crises on the right to food: food insecurity, hunger and malnutrition

Instead of receding, effects of the global food price crisis on the enjoyment of the right to food have continued or spread. An estimated 40 million people were pushed into hunger in 2008 bringing to 963 millions the number of hungry people worldwide at the end of that year; today it is estimated that 1.02 billion are hungry. It is already acquired that loss of jobs – ILO forecasts an additional 38 million job losses by the end of 2009 – and reduced remittance flows combined with weak or inexistent social protection systems will trigger dramatic income losses in 2009. The World Bank estimates that in 2009 the current economic crisis could trap 46 million more people in to a living with less than US\$1.25 a day and an extra 53 million with less than US\$2 a day. For them, food will be less and lower nutritional quality as they will cut important items like fruits and vegetables and revert to staple food. In Cambodia, acute malnutrition amongst poor urban children increased from 9.6% to 15.9% between 2005 and 2008; in some districts of Indonesia about 50% of infants are underweight and in Kenya it is reported that women and young children often have to walk as far as 15 km for food and water. Remittance flows towards low income countries have started to decline, for example in Bangladesh remittances in February 2009 had decreased by 7.8% from the previous month. Women and children, the primary recipients of remittances, are likely to be the first affected by this loss.

Strategies used to cope in times of crisis, even if short periods, which consist of reducing the quantity but also the quality and variety of meals, have dramatic longer term effects particularly for women and children. Maternal malnutrition causes well known irreversible damage throughout the course of life: increased maternal and child mortality, lower attained schooling and reduced adult income are amongst them. Pregnant women and girls have specific nutritional needs related to pregnancies, yet experience from previous crises is that women are first to sacrifice and girls experience higher nutritional deprivation than boys.

The World Food Program recalled that not only have the numbers of people suffering from hunger and malnutrition increased due to the combined effects of the multiple crises but the effects on those who were already hungry and malnourished have been devastating. In many countries, particularly developing net-food-importing countries, the increase in prices in 2007 and the first half of 2008 has left severe marks on the poorest families. These families already a year ago reduced the quantity of the food they consumed; switched to poorer diets, often lacking the necessary micronutrients children require for their development. They also cut back on schooling and on health care,

leading to irreparable damage to the health and education of millions of children and sold productive assets – land or tools – which will take time to restore. Moreover, it is highly probable that food prices will remain high and food price inflation is still ongoing in a number of countries. In Zambia, food inflation rose from 10.1% in April 2008 to 15.9% a year later. In Guatemala inflation reached 9.2% in November 2008 thus considerably increasing the cost of the food basket (*canasta basica de alimentos and canasta basica vital*). Although in December 2008 minimum wages for rural and urban workers also increased, they have do not meet the cost of the food basket, nor are they expected to do so in 2009 when inflation is estimated at 5.5%.¹ With additional crises hitting families, what food or means to access food are they left with?

3. The challenges facing reinvestment in agriculture: the impacts of the economic and environmental crises

As a result of the global food crisis, governments made improvement of the global agricultural and food systems a priority on the international agenda, and international agencies followed suit with financial support. It is a danger that with everyone's attention turned to the global financial system, agriculture will soon return to the state of neglect it had been left in until prior to the crisis. The temptation to return to business as usual concerning responses to the food crisis is very strong today as Governments and the international community tend to give priority to responses to the other crisis. This temptation must be resisted; responses to the multiple crises must be holistic and integrated to prevent their re-occurrence; these responses must also be based on the human rights approach.

Reinvestment in agriculture is more than ever necessary, and at the very same time agricultural models and the political economy of food systems must be thought through if we want to reduce hunger and malnutrition, reduce rural and urban poverty, and produce and consume in more equitable and more sustainable ways. Smallholder farmers are the most food insecure, therefore reinvestment in agriculture must prioritize them, notably by ensuring that they have secure access to land, can increase their productivity, improve their access to food and markets, and strengthen their livelihoods.

For example, the 2009 Africa Economic Report suggests that the global crises have hit Africa hard, and that for 2009 a negative economic growth of 5% was expected across the region, compared to a positive economic growth of 5% in 2008. As the economic crisis has swept away firms, jobs, revenues and livelihoods, African finance ministers have called it “a full blown development crisis” and the World Bank has declared it “nothing less than an emergency for development”. There are indications that the collapse in exports following the financial and economic crises has left foreign reserves dangerously low and net food importing countries may struggle to import basic foods.² Against this

¹ Procurador de los Derechos Humanos, Seguridad Alimentaria y Nutricional en Tiempos de Crisis. Segundo informe de seguimiento a la política nacional de seguridad alimentaria y nutricional del Gobierno de Guatemala, Resumen ejecutivo, 26 de marzo de 2009.

² ICSTD, Africa and the Economic Crisis: the case for greater flexibility in EPAs, by Emily Jones, Trade Negotiations Insights, Vol. 8, No. 5, June 2009.

forecast, agriculture that has been traditionally a neglected sector in African countries, could suffer from continued neglect despite pledges to increase investments in this sector.

Another challenge facing reinvestment in agriculture is to ensure that agricultural production will not further accelerate climate change. At its 17th session held in May 2009, the UN Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD-17) adopted a Declaration recognizing that ‘sustainable agricultural practices as well as sustainable forest management can contribute to meeting climate change concerns’, and that ‘sustainable soil, land, livestock, forest, biodiversity and water management practices, and resilient crops are essential’; and it called for the creation of an enabling environment for sustainable agriculture.³ The development of more sustainable farming approaches is directly linked to the right to food, notably because of the strong link between the state of the environment and food production. Crops are dependent on soil nutrient availability, on water (ground and surface water for irrigation), on climate and on weather (rainfall and growth season), on the availability of insects for pollination, and on the abundance and effects of certain pests, such as pathogens, insects and weeds, which have major impact on crops worldwide, particularly in Africa.⁴

Agricultural productivity thus depends on the services rendered by ecosystems. Unless it turns from being one of the major causes of climate change and soil degradation to a net contributor to the maintenance of the environment, agricultural production will undergo significant declines in the future. It is therefore vital that, as agriculture intensifies in order to meet the growing demand for food without expanding cropland further at the risk of diminishing biodiversity and threatening the rights of current land users, it does so in ways which are environmentally sustainable.⁵

4. Designing responses that benefit all

Governments should seize on opportunities and place poor, vulnerable, food insecure populations not only at the centre of analyses of the effects of crises, but also at the centre of policy responses. This should be firstly implemented through the adoption of social protection measures that are vital to address vulnerability and inequality and to enable vulnerable populations to overcome shocks. Social protection measures play a crucial role of economic stabilizer in times of crisis, and maintaining spending in all areas of social services (health, education, employment programmes and social protection) is essential for states to protect income insecure households.

Experience from previous crises shows that modest income support guarantees such as cash transfers have varied beneficial effects: for example they can protect children from impacts of crises, they can help small-holder farmers produce more thereby keeping prices

³ In the Declaration adopted at their meeting of Cison di Valmarino (Italy), 18-20 April 2009, the Ministers of Agriculture of the G8 Countries also emphasized ‘the importance of increasing public and private investment in sustainable agriculture, rural development and environmental protection in cooperation with international organisations’, and on the need to ‘tackle climate change impacts and ensure sustainable management of water, forests and other natural resources, while considering demographic growth’.

⁴ Pedro A. Sanchez, « Soil Fertility and Hunger in Africa », *Science*, vol. 205 (5562) (2002): 2019-2020.

⁵ William R. Cline, *Global Warming and Agriculture: Impact Estimates by Country*. Center for Global Development and Peterson Institute for International Economics, Washington, D.C., 2007.

low during hungry periods and limit food shortages or they can help poor urban population to keep up with increasing food prices. In this context, non contributory measures, such as for example universal or targeted old age pensions, can play the role of stabilizers against economic shocks notably for persons living and working in the informal economy.

Implementing such programmes by using human rights principles can significantly enhance their effectiveness. First, with respect to programmes which are targeted towards the most vulnerable rather than universal in scope, the definition of the beneficiaries on the basis of a prior mapping of food insecurity can significantly improve targeting, and thus the contribution of social assistance schemes to improving food security and poverty reduction. Second, the clear definition of beneficiaries in legislation – making access to social assistance a right for the beneficiaries – may limit the risk of resources being diverted as a result of corruption or clientelism, and it can improve accountability of the administration responsible for implementation, particularly if courts are empowered to monitor this implementation. Third, the definition of the program benefit as deriving from a right possessed by all citizens (even where the program is targeted) can reduce the element of stigma attaching to participating in a program, which can otherwise significantly reduce participation of eligible persons. Fourth, the participation of the beneficiaries in the design and implementation of the programmes can improve its efficacy.

An approach guided by the need to realize the right to food should also guide our responses to the global food prices crisis. Producing more food is not enough. The current food system managed huge increases in productivity, but it also produced massive exclusion and marginalization, with disastrous consequences for food security ; it contributed to destroying the environment; and it has serious, and negative, public health consequences. The central question is not how to produce more, but how to produce in ways that raise the incomes of the poorest farmers, and that preserve the environment. By focusing too much on solutions that promote the supply of more food, we may forget to pay sufficient attention to the question of who produces, at what price and for whom. I believe that this question remains central in designing responses to any type of crises.

5. Conclusion

We are warned that the global economic downturn is now turning into a social recession worldwide, with a job and social protection crises looming. Emergency measures to cope against these impacts must lead to reform and innovative long term responses rather than short-term fixes.

Responses at the international and national levels should therefore include:

- Placing vulnerable populations at the centre of attention by using the human rights framework in decision-making, most particularly the right to an adequate standard of living and the right to food.
- Placing agriculture at the centre of development by adopting agricultural models that will focus on reducing food insecurity, hunger and malnutrition through

sustainable practices, rather than simply increasing food production with on short term basis.

- Reinforcing social protection systems on a long term perspective so that they can play the role of reducing inequalities even in times of prosperity and of protecting vulnerable populations when crises arise.