



HUNGER

The nightmare of millions

March 2011

Introduction

In 2000, world leaders committed themselves to halve the proportion of people who suffer from hunger within the framework of Millennium Development Goals (concretely MDG1). It was an unprecedented collective effort ever made to eradicate world hunger and poverty; however, progress made so far is behind the schedule and it is beyond the reach of keeping the deadline of 2015. Even though the number of hungry people in the world declined again in 2010 (after it had exceeded 1 billion for the first time in history), it still remains unacceptably high.

The reasons of hunger are manifold and the situation of the millions of hungry people was worsened in 2007 when the price of many staple crops (maize, wheat and rice) reached their highest level in 30 years. Unfortunately, poor countries were hit hard by the economic and food crisis they them-

selves did not cause. The following economic slowdown reduced incomes and employment opportunities of the poor and significantly lowered their ability to buy food. However, nowadays we are witnessing another wave of soaring prices of staple food. It seems that no country is protected from external shocks in this interconnected world which makes eradicating hunger even more difficult.

The goal of this policy paper is to present the topic of hunger in the global context as it seems to be a vicious circle. It starts with a definition on what hunger really is and raises the questions of who are the hungry, and in which part of the world they live. We will also focus on the explanation of why hunger, which is perhaps one of the most shameful "achievements" of recent history, exists in the modern time of the 21st century.

Hunger in international law and policy

The international community had to tackle the problem of hunger somehow as it is not just a local issue, but a worldwide one. That is why the right to adequate food was explicitly recognized in international law and the concept of food security was introduced in order to provide a tool for measuring the state of hunger.

Right to food

For eradicating hunger, the right to food approach has an important role to play. ***“The right to adequate food is realized when every man, woman and child, alone or in community with others, have physical and economic access at all times to adequate food or means for its procurement.”*** The core content of this right implies that food must be **available** in quality and quantity and **accessible** in the sense of physical and economic accessibility.¹

It is not a new concept at all – this right was first recognized in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in Article 25 that *„Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services...”*²

Nearly two decades later, the right to food became a binding international law with the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in Article 11 where states acknowledged *“the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living for himself and his family, including adequate food, clothing and housing, and to the continuous improvement of living conditions...”* and that *“the fundamental right of everyone to be free from hunger, shall take, individually and through international cooperation, the measures which are needed...”*³

But it has been only recently that the human rights dimension has attracted the attention of the international community. Despite this, there is still a huge gap between the standards written on paper and the situation prevailing in many parts of the world.

Food security

A widely accepted definition of food security was agreed upon at the 1996 World Food Summit: *“Food security is guaranteed when, at all times, all people benefit from economic, social and physical access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their nutrition needs and food preferences, so that they can lead an active and healthy life.”*

This definition emphasizes the four dimensions of food security: *food availability* (sufficient quantity of food of appropriate quality), *food access* (to adequate resources), *food utilization* (through adequate diet, clean water and sanitation) and *stability of access* (no risk of losing this access as a consequence of sudden or seasonal shocks).⁴

The state of hunger today

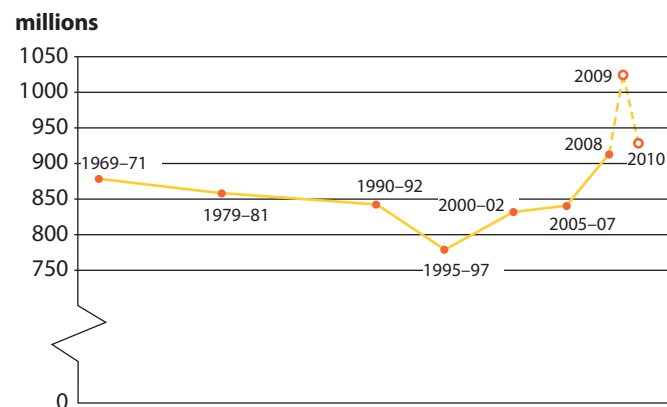
What is hunger?

“Hunger is a situation when people lack secure access to a sufficient amount of safe and nutritious food for normal growth and a healthy life.”⁵

The World Food Programme⁶ defines 3 hunger manifestations:

- **undernourishment** / chronic hunger when the food consumed does not include enough energy to meet minimal physiological needs;
- **malnutrition** / hidden hunger is characterized by inadequate intake of protein, energy and micronutrients and by frequent infections and diseases; deficiency of iron, iodine, zinc and vitamin A;
- **starvation** / acute hunger reflects a recent and severe process that leads to substantial weight loss.

Number of undernourished people in the world, 1969–71 to 2010



Note: Figures for 2009 and 2010 are estimated by FAO with input from the United States Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service.

Source: FAO

¹ General Comment 12 concerning The right to adequate food. E/C.12/1999/5, Para 6.

² Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948.

³ International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 1966.

⁴ FAO Policy Brief on Food Security, 2006. Available at: ftp://ftp.fao.org/es/ESA/policybriefs/pb_02.pdf

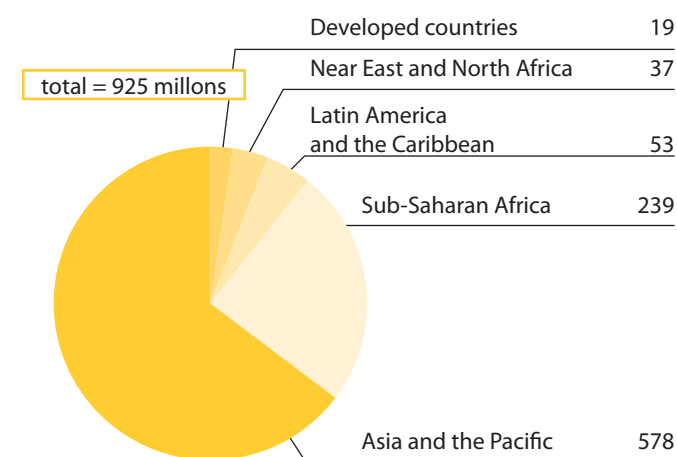
⁵ FAO definition available at: <http://www.fao.org/hunger/faqs-on-hunger/en/>

⁶ World Food Programme at: <http://www.wfp.org/hunger/what-is>

Hunger in numbers

According to Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) statistics⁷, the number of hungry people in the world reached 925 million in 2010. Although there is a decrease from the 2009 levels (due to slight economic recovery) where there were over one billion hungry people in the world this does not imply that the means to eradicate hunger is being carried out well.

Undernourishment, by region:



Note: All figures are rounded

Zdroj: FAO

Who are the hungry?

The numbers show that most of the hungry live in developing countries. The region with the most undernourished people continues to be Asia and the Pacific but the proportion of them remains highest in Sub-Saharan Africa. Two-thirds live in just seven countries (Bangladesh, China, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, India, Indonesia and Pakistan) and over 40 percent live in China and India alone.

To understand the root causes of hunger we have to look at who the hungry are. Hungry people are the poor and the vulnerable. Their low incomes are insufficient to buy food which they do not produce themselves. **Fifty percent of the hungry are small-scale farmers, 20 percent are landless laborers, and 10 percent are fisher folks, pastoralists and forest dwellers. The remaining 20 percent are the urban poor.**⁸ But these numbers highlight the hunger paradox: the world's most food-insecure and hungry people are often directly involved in producing food.

⁷ FAO Graphics at: http://www.fao.org/hunger/hunger_graphics/en/

⁸ O. De Schutter on his mission to the WTO, March 2009. Available at: <http://www.srfood.org/images/stories/pdf/otherdocuments/9-srrtreportmissionwto-1-09.pdf>

In the Least Developed Countries (LDCs), more than 70 percent of the population is engaged in agricultural activities. **50 percent of hungry people are composed by small scale farmers with less than 2 hectares of cropland (in numbers this means, between 1.9 and 2.2 billion people who are involved in small scale farming).**

These poor rural communities are dependent on farming but the work is often seasonal and insecure due to environmental or climatic shocks. Moreover, many small farmers are forced to sell their crop for a low price after harvest because of urgent need for cash or poor grain storage. But later they have to buy grain in the market at a higher price to feed their families until the next harvest.

Most of small scale farmers in the world are women (in some countries up to 70% of all farmers)⁹. Smallholder women do not have as much access as men to land, loans or training. They produce most of the food consumed locally and their contribution could be much greater, if they had equal access to essential services and resources, such as land, water, credit, information, and agricultural technology, and if their rights and land entitlements would be strengthened.

The urban poor constitute another group that is at risk of hunger. They produce little or no food and frequently lack the means to buy food. As the cities expand, and as more people migrate from rural to urban areas, the number of urban poor will rise.

Why is there hunger?

The common understanding of hunger puts forward problems related to the lack of food, natural disasters, crop failures, and the world's growing population. But some of these are not precise. Let us review these common assumptions before exploring the root causes of hunger in more detail.

⁹ O. Ong'wen, S. Wright: EcoFair Trade Dialogue Policy Paper No.7, Small Farmers and the Future of Sustainable Agriculture, 2007.

Prevailing myths about hunger

Myth n.1: Hunger is caused by a global lack of food

People go hungry despite an abundant world food supply. However, food supplies are very unevenly distributed across the globe. While wealthy countries produce large surpluses, many people in developing countries do not have enough food needed for a healthy life. The problem is that these people have no possibility to buy food at an affordable price, mainly because they do not have the needed capacities to earn money. Another issue concerns the use of agricultural production. In fact, only half of the world's cereal production is currently used directly for human consumption. Agricultural production increasingly goes into animal feed production in order to satisfy growing meat consumption, or it serves for non-food purposes, such as the production of biofuels.

Myth n.2: The population is growing faster than food production

The world population is growing and according to the United Nations' assessment, the world population will reach 9 billion people in 2050.¹⁰ There is an 80 million people growth every year in the world but the growing population is rising in the developing countries, in contrast with the developed world where the projections are expected to change only minimally. Of course, a growing population implicates a growing demand for food. However, there is enough food in the world now – the problem is that the needs of the poor and vulnerable are not given priority which in the future will not be maintainable.

Myth n.3 Natural disaster causes hunger

Drought and natural disasters, such as storms or floods will be more and more frequent because of the climate change. This will result in poor crop harvests or no harvests at all. However, the core problem is usually somewhere else. Paradoxically, hunger and famines occur often in countries where agricultural resources are vast (Sudan, Ethiopia) and where other parts of the country have enough crops, but where neither market nor transport infrastructure works, thus food supplies cannot be delivered. If there were appropriate early warning systems, prompt responses, good road and communication infrastructure, food reserves, working market channels and special food policy programs, the authorities would be able to respond to these threats. People would not go hungry in a state where infrastructure is functioning, hunger vulnerability is well mapped, and a stable political environment for food security is present.

Myth n.4: Biotechnology is the most appropriate cure to hunger

The assumption that low performance of agriculture is the cause of food insecurity and slow economic growth made engineers come with the idea of biotechnology (use of biological systems for manufacturing organic products) and genetically modified organisms (GMOs) as the key solution to hunger. On one hand, it has potential to raise crop yields and to increase the nutrient value in food. On the other hand, these technologies are generally funded and controlled by large corporations selling them at a high price and making them inaccessible for poor farmers.¹¹ There are also concerns about the potential risks posed by increased use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides, such as the negative effects it may have on human and animal health, and its environmental consequences.

What causes hunger?

Inequalities and instability

Far from the global lack of food, the primary cause of hunger is **poverty**. Although the relative importance of rural poverty varies substantially from one country to another and even among regions within these countries, in developing countries as a whole more than 70 percent of total poverty is found in rural areas. Following major declines in East Asia in recent decades, poverty is today concentrated primarily in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, where it has been growing at an alarming rate.¹²

For many, hunger is first a problem of poverty and powerlessness. There are several causes of poverty, such as **uneven distribution and access** to resources (mainly to land and water), **market and agricultural infrastructure, or education**. An important part of powerlessness is also the social exclusion or marginalization of women, elderly people, different tribes and minorities, who have little possibility to influence their own lives. This phenomenon is connected to the increasing inequalities between the poor and rich world populations, genders and races.¹³

¹⁰ UN News Centre at: <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=30159&Cr=family+planning&Cr1=5>

¹¹ FoodFirst: Is Biotechnology Really the Only Way to Solve Hunger? Available at: <http://www.foodfirst.org/en/node/2659>

¹² FAO, World Bank: Farming Systems and Poverty, Improving Farmer's Livelihoods in a Changing World, 2001.

¹³ UNDP: Achieving Millennium Development Goals: Partnership and Participation, 2003.

As most of the hungry are people dependent on agriculture for their subsistence, the primary tools for eradicating hunger are **agricultural and food security policies**. Unfortunately, the role of agriculture has been overlooked and underestimated in the last decades, even though this sector engages almost three quarters of the people living in developing countries. But this trend is changing slowly, for example African governments have committed themselves to allocate 10 percent of the budget to agricultural development in the Maputo Declaration in 2004.¹⁴

Conflicts are not direct causes of hunger but they always worsen the food security situation. People go hungry in conflicts because of state structural factors. Populations in fragile and failed states or in protracted crisis are facing food insecurity because of non-existent or weak public institutions and infrastructure, a functionless justice system, and a lack of resources, services and safety nets. In such situations, people are forced to displace, they have no access to affordable food and services, their human rights are breached and very often, they are dependent only on international humanitarian aid. A very serious example of this is the situation in Sudan, which continues to have the largest internally displaced population in the world (about 4.9 out of 42.3 million).¹⁵

Global food system

Today's international trade does not help to improve the hunger situation in the world. Since the 1980s, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB) have been insisting on liberalization policy as part of the Structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) as a price for their assistance. Nevertheless, **liberalization** has shown to be inefficient for developing countries because these programmes required slashing public spending, cutting subsidies and sweeping away controls on trade - making these countries more vulnerable to external shocks. Free trade and the World Trade Organisation (WTO) agreements have also widened income inequality as it benefited well-paid, skilled workers rather than poor, unskilled laborers who have no access to education, resources, information, equipment or markets. Only the rich countries benefit while the majority of the poor is condemned to food insecurity.¹⁶

At the national level, the **market-first approach** is pushed forward (mainly by OECD countries) without realizing the needs of developing countries, ecological burdens or social problems of poor people. In order to trigger economic development, preference has been given to cash crops for export (production of coffee, tea, tobacco, cotton, flowers...) rather than production for local consumption. This export orientation of the Least Developed Countries (LDC) led, paradoxically, to dependency on staple food imports as many African countries were net food-exporting countries until the 1970s. They have become for the most part net food-importing countries since the 1980s, due also partly to the lack of investment in agriculture and partly to the agricultural subsidies in developed countries.¹⁷

Agricultural policies of rich countries and especially **export subsidies** are the most harmful for developing countries. Those help farmers in the North to sell their surpluses on world markets below the cost of production but at the same time they make farmers in the South unable of competition and thus destroy local markets. Rich countries also push for bilateral trade agreements to make developing countries open up their markets and put aside all mechanisms which can protect from import surges of cheap food from the developed world.

Neither do current **food supply chains** (relation among commodity buyers, food processors and retailers) help the poor. In general, few powerful and dominant agribusiness companies occupy strategic positions in the middle of the chain where there are many farmers and consumers at either ends. For example, just three companies control over 80 percent of the world's tea market. It gives them tremendous power to set the prices for agricultural products and the possibility to force small producers to lower prices; however, lower incomes may have an impact on the ability of the producer to invest in the future. This way small scale farmers are being cut off the global food supply chains, often leading to increased rural poverty and hunger.¹⁸

¹⁴ EuropAfrica Campaign: Food Sovereignty: a common challenge in Africa and in Europe, 2010. Available at: <http://www.europafrika.info/en/pubblicazioni/>

¹⁵ Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre: [http://www.internal-displacement.org/8025708F004BE3B1/\(httpInfoFiles\)/44E780D6D9A64175C12577250064CC51/\\$file/GO2009_Sudan.pdf](http://www.internal-displacement.org/8025708F004BE3B1/(httpInfoFiles)/44E780D6D9A64175C12577250064CC51/$file/GO2009_Sudan.pdf)

¹⁶ J. Madeley: Trade and Hunger, GRAIN 2000.

¹⁷ UN: Mandate of the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, 2009.

¹⁸ O. De Shutter: Addressing Concentration in Food Supply Chains, 2010.

Extreme **price volatility** in global agricultural markets threatens poor and hungry people, too. Normally, commodity prices rise when a commodity becomes scarce. However, between 2005 and 2008 maize prices almost tripled, wheat prices increased by 127 percent and rice prices rose by 170 percent.¹⁹ A significant portion of the increase in price and volatility of cash crop commodities can only be explained by the emergence of a speculative bubble when large and powerful investors such as hedge funds, pension funds and investment banks speculate with agricultural commodities to make a profit. Generally, they are not concerned with the consequences of such behavior and it is possible for it to happen thanks to deregulation in important commodity derivative markets.²⁰

Over the past five years, the large land-based investment often called "**land grabbing**" has risen systematically. The International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) estimates that 15 to 20 million hectares of farmland have been allocated to foreign investors since 2006 till 2009. Foreign investments, especially in agriculture, could be good news, if the objectives of the land investors share the benefits and respect the needs of local populations, existing land rights, transparency in negotiation or environmental sustainability. But current land deals directly interfere with the right to feed oneself when land is taken from land-scarce communities whose access to land and natural resources represents in most cases the only means of subsistence.²¹

The policy of **biofuels** have under special circumstances the potential to generate income in rural areas of some countries, but currently they are often fostering land use competition, driving food prices higher and affecting what and how much people eat in developing countries. "The local impacts range from the displacement of people, rising local food prices and food scarcity, broken promises by the companies about job opportunities and lack of consultation and compensation."²² Beyond that, according to many sources biofuels production as a major driver of food price – it has been held responsible for the 70-75 percent increase in food price in 2008.²³ Moreover, let the numbers speak for themselves: in the US, one fourth of grain production was used for biofuel production (about 119 million tons) which would be enough to feed 350 million people for a year.²⁴

Destruction of the nature

The strategy "business as usual" also leads to the **over-exploitation of the environment**. Natural resources are essential for food production, rural development and sustainable livelihoods but they are limited and quite often used in an unsustainable way. This unsustainable use of natural resources (such as deforestation, bad water management, soil conversion and contamination, intensive livestock production or use of fertilizers) leads to water pollution, loss of diversity and soil degradation. For example, in recent years 25 percent of the already fragile African dry lands have been degraded to the extent of desertification.²⁵ Unfortunately, as natural resources are not inexhaustible, conflicts over access to these resources are likely to increase in many regions because of the rising demand on food and energy in the future.

Climate change also increases the severity and frequency of weather-related impacts on food crop production. Yield prediction is more and more difficult. Africa will severely experience the impact of climate change, such as sea level rises, desertification, temperature rises and drought because of its heavy reliance on rain-fed agriculture. However, increased exposure to storms, cyclones, droughts, floods, changing ecological patterns and loss of biodiversity is already slowing MDG (Millennium Development Goals) progress in other countries with less predictable climates. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) predicts that if temperatures rise by more than 2°C, the food production and yields of major crops may fall globally. For instance, in Africa, Asia and Latin America yields could drop by 20 – 40 percent.²⁶ There is an urgent need to find mechanisms to adapt production to these changes.

¹⁹ A. Mittal: The 2008 Food Price Crisis: Rethinking Food Security Policies, 2009.

²⁰ O. De Schutter: Food Commodities Speculation and Food Price Crises, 2010.

²¹ A. Graham, S. Aubry, R. Kunnemann, S. Monsalve Suárez: Land grab study, FIAN 2010.

²² T. Rice, Meals per gallon, Action Aid 2010.

²³ UNCTAD: The 2008 Food Price Crisis: Rethinking Food Security Policies, 2009.

²⁴ L. Brown: The Great Food Crisis of 2001. Available at: http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/01/10/the_great_food_crisis_of_2011?page=0,3

²⁵ CGIAR: Climate, Agriculture and Food Security: A strategy for Change, 2009.

²⁶ IPCC: Climate Change, Synthesis Report, 2007.

Case study

Ethiopia – the African starving symbol

Ethiopia is one of the world's poorest countries. Unfortunately, it is well known for recurrent waves of famine (1972 - 1975, 1983 - 1985, 1989 - 1990 and 2002 - 2003) primarily triggered by drought. According to FAO, 44 percent of the population lives now under the poverty line, more than 12 million people are chronically or periodically food insecure.²⁷

More than eight out of ten Ethiopians depend on agriculture as their main livelihood. The largest group of poor people in Ethiopia is composed of small-scale farmers whose households live on a daily per capita income of less than \$0.50. About a third of rural households cultivate less than 0.5 hectare, which is not enough land to produce an adequate amount of food for the average household.

Another problem is the fact that agricultural production is extremely vulnerable to climatic conditions. The persistent lack of rainfall causing crop failure deepens subsistence problems of Ethiopian people. In addition, the Horn of Africa has been identified as one of the world's most vulnerable regions to climate change and coping with its consequences will remain a major task for the future.

The agricultural sector accounts for 47 percent of GDP but budget allocation for this sector is only about 15 percent (the number has grown since 2004; before it was not even 10 percent).²⁸ The dependency on agriculture is also critical because of weak market structures and transport infrastructure, inadequate land policy and investment in agriculture in general or farmers' limited access to resources (land, credit, modern technologies, information, coping mechanisms, etc.). This causes the paradoxical situation while some agricultural areas of the country have good surplus production potential the food is not transported to the deficit areas.²⁹

Problems of hunger and poverty in Ethiopia are more complex and do not only have an agricultural character, of course. Other restraints can be identified as inappropriate government policies (bad governance, economic mismanagement), war and conflict occurrences, population growth, but also external factors, such as the world trade system. But national food supply management continues to be a major policy concern.

Arima (65) testimony, Ethiopia

"A long time ago we had rain continuously. There was no drought. The cattle were fat. We also got large amounts of milk and butter. We didn't migrate long distances to get to pasture because we had enough in this village; there were also some flowers in the pasture. We did not even move long distances to get water because we had ample supplies in our own village; the cattle drunk from these...

But these days we get rain only for two consecutive months. When we hope for good yields our farm dries up and we don't get anything. There is a very serious shortage of rain. Besides which, it does not rain in the normal seasons. I believe the main reasons are people's bad words and insults. Some people insult [others] and wish [them] bad luck and things happen according to their words. The other reason for drought is that it is a punishment from God.

I don't have either milk or butter. When you look around, it seems it is raining as in hagaya (short rainy season) but the cows have no milk. We get no more than a cup of milk from one cow. We give the milk with sugar and tea to our babies; there is not enough milk to shake it and make butter...

A long time ago we did not know diseases. I walked naked and barefoot in the rain and washed my body in the cold; but I was not sick. We drank milk every day; we had an excess of butter; at that time we did not know illness. Disease and ill health started after we changed to cereal production and stopped drinking milk and eating butter and began taking tea...³⁰

²⁷ FAO Country Profile: Food Security Indicators, Ethiopia: http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/templates/ess/documents/food_security_statistics/country_profiles/eng/Ethiopia_E.pdf

²⁸ CAADP: Ethiopia Study, 2009. Available at: <http://www.nepad-caadp.net/pdf/Ethiopia%20-%20Stocktaking.pdf>

²⁹ S. Devereux, Food Insecurity in Ethiopia, 2000. Available at: <http://www.ids.ac.uk/index.cfm?objectid=FA0B8D4C-5056-8171-7B655288AA5C3893>

³⁰ Panos London at: <http://www.panos.org.uk/?lid=468>

Conclusion: No solution to hunger without small-scale farmers

The chronic nature of hunger is contributed to its lack of visibility; only when there is a major world crisis is it seen on our television screens. However, hunger remains a world major long-term challenge. Governments and stakeholders must rethink existing policies influencing present food system because they are neither socially nor environmentally sustainable. The new rules must prioritize the needs of the most vulnerable and the right to food of the hungry.

It will require concerted effort from governments, civil society and the co-sponsoring agencies to move the paradigm of the right to food to policies that invigorate the agricultural sector, particularly in developing countries, consider them in a broader development framework and link them to variables such as food trade, energy security, and climate change.

There is no chance of success unless the rich countries, governments and stakeholders admit that food is more than a commodity. It should not be in any case regarded as a clas-

sical commodity serving for increasing one's wealth. There are almost one billion hungry whose right to food is being violated and who cannot help themselves because the present economic system does not allow them to do so.

The priorities should be the following:

- *PUT SMALL-SCALE FARMERS AT THE CENTER OF FOOD SECURITY STRATEGIES AND PROMOTE SUSTAINABLE SMALL-SCALE FARMING.*
- *MAKE THE RIGHT TO FOOD ENFORCEABLE THROUGH NATIONAL JUSTICE SYSTEMS.*
- *SUPPORT ADAPTATION AND MITIGATION MEASURES TO TACKLE CLIMATE CHANGE.*
- *STOP HARMFUL TRADE AND AGRICULTURAL POLICIES OF INDUSTRIALIZED COUNTRIES.*

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