

What They Said at the FAO World Food Summit

The following short summaries provide a sampling of the official presentations in Rome at the June 3-5 High-Level Conference on World Food Security: The Challenges of Climate Change and BioEnergy, of the UN Food and Agriculture Organization. The excerpts are grouped by theme.

Food: A Human Right

Egypt: President Hosni Mubarak spoke of “the inalienable human right to food and life,” and decried the biofuels craze, saying that “agricultural crops [should be used] as food for human beings, not as fuel for engines.”

China: Minister of Agriculture Sun Zhengcai identified the causes of the current global food crisis as, “the continuous sharp rise of international oil prices, the general increase of production costs, the rapid growth of bio-energy, the rising demand for food, reduced production caused by national disasters, and the manipulation of speculative capitals.”

Sun added, “Food security for all is a fundamental human right in modern societies. The continuous growth of global demand for food is an irreversible trend for a pretty long time to come. Eradication of hunger and malnutrition, proper increase of food consumption levels, and steady improvement of living standards is not only a common wish and justified right of the people in the developing world, but also a main indicator of the world’s development and progress.... There are still 820 million undernourished people in the developing world. The surge of food prices has caused them great suffering and could lead to further social riots and political unrest, putting the permanent peace and common prosperity at risk.

“The basic function of agriculture is to satisfy food demand for human survival and development. The production of grain-based biofuels has driven up grain utilization, exacerbated the already tight food supply and demand balance, with potential to trigger off more and far-reaching problems.... We will adhere to the principle of ‘no competition for grains with people and no competition for land with grains,’ putting stringent control over the production of biofuels using feedstock such as maize and oilseeds, while at the same time promoting biofuel production using crop straws and stalks, or by way of proper expansion of energy crops.

“China is committed to contributing to the development of world food and agriculture.... China is taking advantage of its agricultural expertise such as hybrid rice to assist other



FAO/Giulio Napolitano

FAO Director-General Jacques Diouf presided over the High-Level Conference on World Food Security, where, despite numerous positive interventions for expanded production and against free trade, there was no decisive action plan put together to stave off the onrushing famine crisis.

developing countries to increase agricultural and food production. China has established, or is establishing, over 20 demonstration centers of agricultural technology in some countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. We have dispatched nearly 1,000 agricultural experts and technicians to other developing countries.”

UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food: Olivier de Schutter said: “At its Special Session of 22 May on the global food crisis, the Human Rights Council invited the FAO to provide the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Ms. Louise Arbour, and myself, an opportunity to convey a message to this Summit. This Special Session was the first one ever to focus on a thematic issue. Calling the worsening of the world food crisis a serious threat to the realization of the right to food for all, the 47 member governments of the Human Rights Council adopted, by consensus, a resolution affirming the importance of taking into account the right to adequate food, as recognized in international law, in the current answers to the crisis.

“International law firmly defines the right to adequate food as one which States must not only respect, protect and fulfill on their territory, but also as one which imposes extra-territorial obligations, incurred vis-à-vis populations outside the national territory. Indeed, this is why the States party to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, recognizing the fundamental right of everyone to be free from hunger, have committed themselves to ‘take, individually and through international co-operation, the measures, including specific programmes, which are needed, ... taking into account the problems of both food-importing

and food-exporting countries, to ensure an equitable distribution of world food supplies in relation to need’ (Article 11[2]).

“In addition, it follows from Article 56 of the Charter of the United Nations as well as from the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, that States cooperate in the identification and elimination of the obstacles to the full realization of the right to food. This is directly relevant, of course, in situations of crisis, such as that following a natural disaster: as a correlative to the obligation imposed on all States in need of assistance to request such assistance, States in a position to assist are under an obligation to provide such assistance. But the obligation of international assistance and cooperation also has a broader significance, which goes

far beyond such emergency situations resulting from natural disasters: it requires that States cooperate in establishing an international environment which is conducive to the full realization of the right to adequate food at national levels....

“This, in my view, has three implications. States should set up an appropriate institutional framework based on the right to food, as one means to better protect their population from the impact of the volatility of prices on the international food markets. It should guide us in our search for solutions, a ‘new deal’ in agriculture which is called for. And it requires that we move along the causality chain from the situation of the hungry and the malnourished, to the actions and omissions which result in such violations of the right to food, without neglecting any of the factors which we can act upon....

“One specific concern, also related to the role of the private sector, is the potential obstacle strong patent rights may represent for the availability of quality seed. Many developing countries are facing a critical shortage of quality seed. Wherever necessary, consistent with Article 15 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights ... a balance may have to be struck between the intellectual property rights of corporations holding patents on seeds, and the need to ensure that agricultural inputs remain affordable for smallhold farmers and that they receive a fair remuneration from their work.

“Finally, one factor which needs to be addressed is the role of speculation on the markets of primary commodities, particularly food commodities, in the current increase in prices....”

Expand Food; Stop Biofuels, Cartels, IMF

Argentina: President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner blasted the grain cartels and the IMF (International Monetary Fund) for contributing to the food crisis. The IMF told Haiti, she said, “to abandon rice production. Today, Haiti can’t even be treated as an emerging country. It is barely a country that survives.” If the global crisis isn’t dealt with, she said, “we are going to see scenes like those from the Middle Ages where, perhaps at the door of a bakery in Magreb, or in some faraway place in Africa, people will beat each other and die searching for a plate of food.”

India: Agriculture Minister Sharad Pawar said the impact of diversion of land which grows cereal for human consumption, into production for biofuels, is likely to be self-defeating. What is needed is increasing investments in rural infrastructure, and agricultural research and development, and transferring new technology to farmers to enable them to grow more and better. He made the point that there need be no production crisis; India uses 3% of world water and 5% of arable land to feed 17% of the world’s population.

Sri Lanka: President Mahinda Rajapakse reported: “We opened our doors so wide to the global market forces, that ... we failed at the same time to protect several of our national interests.” Rajapakse pointed out that the lack of infrastructure and adequate investment for decades in agricultural research, and the insane diversion of food grains into making high-price ethanol, have brought at least 100 million people to the verge of starvation today.

Senegal: President Abdoulaye Wade described an ambitious project which the Sahel-Sahara nations have launched in Africa to prevent the spread of desertification. The project, called the “Great Green Wall” is a continental effort coordinated by Senegal in connection with the Commission of the African Union.

As Wade put it: “This project consists in planting trees over a distance of 7,000 km from Dakar to Djibouti to constitute a 5 km-wide green strip across the desert to stop any further progress of desertification process. With the regeneration of biodiversity, we plan to give our planet a new ‘green lung’ and contribute thus to the fight against climatic changes.... We have already identified the course of the Great Green Wall and selected the tree species to be planted according to climatic zones, each country crossed by the Great Wall being responsible for its edification within its borders.

“Alongside the Great Green Wall, we are planning to build water capture basins. The process consists in collecting rainwater during the rainy season at the lowest point of each village, by compacting the ground as a basin. Every year during the rainy season we lose important quantities of water by evaporation, infiltration underground, or running off to the ocean. With water capture basins, these resources are valorized to enable farmers in rural areas to

grow food all year long, develop fish farming and satisfy their nutritional needs and even export market garden produce.”

Wade noted that, “the investment for a water retention basin is around \$140,000. We have built more than 200 in Senegal and the life of beneficiary populations has improved qualitatively.”

Zimbabwe: President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe challenged the former British colonial masters of his country: “My country’s primary agriculture policy objective remains that of ensuring national and household food security through our own production. In this regard, Zimbabwe has recognized the importance and centrality of land in agricultural production and food security. Thus, over the past decade, Zimbabwe has democratized the land ownership patterns in the country, with over 300,000 previously landless families, now proud landowners.

“Previously, this land was owned by a mere 4,000 farmers, mainly of British stock. While this land reform program has been warmly welcomed by the vast majority of our people, it has, however, and regrettably so, elicited wrath from our former colonial masters. In retaliation for the measures we took to empower the black majority, the United Kingdom has mobilized her friends and allies in Europe, North America, Australia, and New Zealand to impose illegal economic sanctions against Zimbabwe. They have cut off all development assistance, disabled lines of credit, prevented the Bretton Woods institutions from providing financial assistance, and ordered private companies in the United States not to do business with Zimbabwe. All this has been done to cripple Zimbabwe’s economy and thereby effect illegal regime change in our country.

“Funds are being channelled through non-governmental organizations to Opposition political parties, which are a creation of the West. Further, these Western funded NGOs also use food as a political weapon with which to campaign against the Government, especially in the rural areas.”

Russia: Agriculture Minister Alexei Gordeyev stressed the need for new technologies, rejected food-based biofuels, and stated Russia’s commitment to increasing food exports. He said the magnitude of the current food crisis had caught the world, “including many international organizations,” unprepared. The FAO, said Gordeyev, is, and must remain, the chief venue for addressing the crisis, though other organizations, such as the WTO (World Trade Organization), may “discuss it within their mandates”; but he said that the world food price surge is more complex than the WTO’s “international trade liberalization” agenda can handle.

Backing for WTO/IMF, Biofuels

United States: Agriculture Secretary Ed Schafer railed against protection and food self-sufficiency, while demand-

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ing that “all countries should abide by global trading rules agreed to through the WTO.” He insisted that all nations must also “lift trade-restrictive policy measures, such as export restrictions.” On biofuels, Schafer said: “Let there be no mistake, the U.S. is firmly committed to the sustainable production and use of biofuels, both domestically and globally.”

Brazil: President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva continued his defense of biofuels, denouncing protectionism as the primary cause of hunger. He blamed climate change, speculation, and people eating more, as secondary causes, but “above all, the maintenance of absurdly protectionist farm policies in rich countries” is to blame.

World Bank: President Robert Zoellick targetted protectionism, and called for completing the Doha Round, suggesting that derivatives on weather forecasts for poor countries would help. He had the chutzpah to call this, “a New Deal for agriculture.”

International Monetary Fund (IMF): Managing Director Dominique Strauss-Kahn began his speech by denying reality: “There is one important fact about the global food crisis that stands out: it is not a global food shortage. In fact, there is enough food to feed the world.”

Japan: Despite Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda’s plan for doubling rice production in Africa, announced at the historic Japan/Africa conference May 28, and repeated in his FAO speech, he opened his speech with praise for the genocidal Club of Rome: “In 1968, a think-tank was formed here in Rome gathering the wisdom of wise men from all over the world who accepted the call of Dr. Aurelio Peccei, an Italian. This think-tank was to be known as the Club of Rome. Four years later, in 1972, the Club of Rome released a report titled “The Limits to Growth,” which gave a warning on exhaustion of resources and destruction of environment. . . . [But] we continued our dependence on fossil fuels without reflecting upon our lifestyle of mass production, mass consumption, and mass waste, thereby steadily increasing the emission of greenhouse gases. Thirty years have passed since the Club of Rome issued the report. We are finally hearing the scream of the Earth.”

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