



Mandate of the Special Rapporteur on the right to food

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Statement of the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food,
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The Human Right to food and the Challenges
facing an African 'Green Revolution'

A consensus has emerged over the past couple of years that the African continent must improve its ability to feed its population, and that in order to do so, the efforts to support the agricultural sector must be further strengthened. Yet the vital questions are what efforts are needed, what directions they should take, who they should target, and who should decide. It is with these questions in mind that on 15-16 December 2008, I organized a Multistakeholder Consultation on the challenges facing the 'Green Revolution' in Africa with the support of the Ministry of Development Cooperation of the Grand-Duchy of Luxembourg. Much of the discussion revolved around the projects of the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA), currently the most significant private initiative launched in this area on the continent, whether measured by the resources mobilized or by the stakeholders involved. This multi-stakeholder consultation included high-level representatives from AGRA, African farmers' organizations, international agencies, civil society and independent experts.

The discussion I convened made it abundantly clear that the question confronting the African continent is not of a merely technical nature. Instead, what is behind these debates is the necessary choice between several agricultural development paradigms, or models. The consultation held in December highlighted that three main paradigms (models) could be applied: the 'Green Revolution' model, the agro-ecological farming approaches (ecologically-friendly farming systems), and a possible model based on genetic engineering. Based on this consultation and on a wide range of other exchanges with both governments and farmers, I would like to offer the following considerations with a view to assisting governments in taking into account the human right to adequate food in the policy choices they are currently making.

1. The 'Green Revolution': one model among others

Many initiatives are now referred to as 'Green revolution'. This expression has the benefit to enhance the visibility of the food issue. But it has become increasingly vague, and it means different things to different stakeholders. Other concepts have also emerged ('Double green revolution', 'Sustainable green revolution', 'Rainbow revolution'). In this context, the label 'Green Revolution' risks obfuscating the nature of the choices to be made by governments. It is my firm belief that the right to food provides a framework which governments could use to guide them in the choices they make.

The first Green Revolution – as developed in Latin America after 1943 and as launched in the 1960s in South Asia – was very successful in improving yields. This sometimes came at a high social and environmental cost; and the productivity gains themselves were not always sustainable in the longer term. I am encouraged that much care is being taken to avoid repeating the mistakes of the first Green revolution. At the same time, less attention has been paid until very recently to the comparison between Green revolution concepts and alternative models of agricultural development. Failing to consider the diversity of models that can be supported could lead to miss great opportunities.

The Windhoek High-level Meeting “African agriculture in the 21st Century: Meeting Challenges, Making a Sustainable Green Revolution” (Namibia, 9-10 February 2009) confirmed the renewed interest for a comparison of the best models of agricultural development. It was confirmed there that the Green Revolution model needed to be clarified and that it was one model amongst others, with advantages and drawbacks that should be carefully considered. It was also affirmed that the potential of other models had been clearly established, such as conservation agriculture or agro-ecological approaches, and other food systems options. Similar discussions were held during the Multistakeholder Consultation convened under the auspices of my mandate. Going further in this debate is urgent, and it is needed. We are still in a transition period, and it is necessary and normal that the orientations are still debated at this relatively early stage of a new set of efforts to relaunch agriculture in Africa.

Eighteen African governments have approved the conclusions of the International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD) during an Intergovernmental Plenary that was held in Johannesburg in April 2008¹. The IAASTD, a four years process initiated by the World Bank and the FAO, involved 400 experts from all regions. It calls for a fundamental paradigm shift in agricultural development, noting that *‘successfully meeting development and sustainability goals and responding to new priorities and changing circumstances would require a fundamental shift in [agricultural knowledge, science and technology], including science, technology, policies, institutions, capacity development and investment.’* The IAASTD conclusions insist on the need to take into account the full range of policy options available, stating that *‘innovative and integrated applications of existing knowledge, science and technology (formal, traditional and community-based), as well as new approaches for agricultural and natural resource management will be needed’* (Key finding 10).²

The nature of the choice to be made between different models of agricultural development must be correctly understood. These different approaches can, under certain conditions, be complementary at the crop field level: a very careful combination of fertilizers and agro-forestry, for instance, is successfully promoted in some regions. At the level of public policy however, it is a pre-requisite for a balanced approach that we start by acknowledging the very existence of several models. The fact that these models lead to different development paths should also be discussed. Indeed, they may have very different impacts on the right to food by affecting different groups differently. In a context of fierce competition for scarce resources such as land, water, investment, human resources, the implications of supporting one paradigm over the others must be taken seriously. The Windhoek High-Level Ministerial Declaration expresses this clearly: *‘Governments, in cooperation with the research community and with support from the international donor community, should undertake rigorous comparative assessments of alternative agricultural models and cropping systems’*.³ This should be seen as complementing the 2003 Maputo Declaration target of raising the share of national budgets devoted to agriculture and rural development to at least 10%. Indeed, the progressive realization of the right to food is not merely an issue of raising the budgetary allocation for agricultural development. It also requires that Governments opt for the orientations more conducive to the realization of the right to food, by carefully balancing the existing options against one another.

2. Agro-ecological approaches

I have observed that there is a degree of misunderstanding surrounding approaches which are referred to as ‘agro-ecological’ in expert circles. Agroecological approaches follow the principles of agroecology, which is the application of the ecological science to the study, design and management of sustainable agroecosystems. Organic farming, conservation agriculture, agroforestry, biological control, intercropping, mixed crop and livestock management are frequently associated with agroecology. Agroecology includes the observation of traditional systems, the use of local knowledge of agroecosystems management, but also modern science. It is not opposed to technology. Fertility of the agroecosystem and pest management is mainly sought from well-thought ecosystem interactions rather than on the use of external inputs such as pesticides and chemical fertilizers.

The IAASTD strongly advocates in favour of the increase and strengthening of Agriculture Knowledge Science and Technology towards agroecological sciences (Key finding 7). This is an important message addressed to policy-makers. Agro-ecological farming approaches have recently proved their potential to improve access to food in an African context, especially in complex environments. The IAASTD is not alone in arriving at this conclusion. It is also one made by the Nairobi-based World Agroforestry Centre in its 2006 annual report, by the 2009 Fourth World Congress on Conservation Agriculture in New Delhi, or by the

¹ IAASTD (2008) Executive Summary of the Synthesis Report and Summary for Decision Makers of the Global Report, approved in detail by Governments attending the IAASTD Intergovernmental Plenary in Johannesburg, April 2008. <http://www.iaastd.com/>

² All “Key findings” referred to in this document are from the IAASTD Summary for Decision Makers of the Global report.

³ http://www.un.org/esa/dsd/susdevtopics/sdt_pdfs/meetings/hml0209/Windhoek_final_declaration.pdf

recent 2008 FAO-UNEP report on Organic Agriculture and Food Security in Africa. And it is one in support of which there is now a rapidly growing scientific literature⁴. There appears to be a high potential in these approaches, and consequently an opportunity to scale-up these initiatives for rapid progress.

I am struck by the fact that those who led the first Green revolution have sometimes been advocating, more recently, for such agro-ecological approaches. M. S. Swaminathan, the father of the Indian Green revolution, has indeed acknowledged the problems of the Green Revolution and now promotes conservation agriculture and organic farming. He wrote recently: *'We should achieve a paradigm shift from green to an ever-green revolution (enhancement of productivity in perpetuity without associated ecological harm). We must reduce the ecological debt we are now incurring particularly in the heartland of the GR, Punjab (...). The ecological debt can be overcome by promoting conservation agriculture, and organic farming'*.⁵ It is indeed vital to ensure that the mistakes of the past are not repeated, considering the crucial importance in particular for Africa of designing agricultural systems that are resilient to climate change, a challenge past generations of agricultural developers and policy-makers did not have to cope with.

3. Current efforts towards supporting agricultural development

Some major efforts aiming at improving the productivity of agriculture in Sub-Saharan Africa have been launched over the past few months. The renewed interest in agricultural development, guided by the conviction of many governments that Africa needs to develop the means to feed itself, is welcome. Many of these initiatives focus on the subsidization of high-yielding seeds and fertilizers, and they are supported by key international organisations, governments and stakeholders. It is however important to ensure that these efforts are truly focused on the most vulnerable, and that they are sustainable both socially and environmentally: improving productivity will not serve to combat hunger if it does not result in the incomes of the poorest, particularly smallholders, being raised, or if it accelerates climate change, itself already one of the major threats to food security in Africa. The IAASTD recommends in this respect a cautious attitude on the role of agricultural technology. It notes that *'Technologies such as high-yielding crop varieties, agrochemicals and mechanization have primarily benefited the better resourced groups in society and transnational corporations, rather than the most vulnerable ones. To ensure that technology supports development and sustainability goals strong policy and institutional arrangements are needed (...).'*⁶

The need to integrate the question of the social impacts of choices of agricultural development is particularly vital given the importance of the issue of access to land and water resources, in the context of climate change. Guideline 8.10 of the FAO Voluntary Guidelines to Support the Progressive Realization of the Right to Adequate Food in the Context of National Food Security emphasizes the need to *'promote and protect the security of land tenure, especially with respect to women, poor and disadvantaged segments of society, through legislation that protects the full and equal right to own land and other property, including the right to inherit'*; and it recommends advancing land reform to enhance access for the poor and women. Building on this guideline, the 2006 FAO International Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (ICARRD) further emphasized the 'essential role' of agrarian reform in the realization of basic human rights and food security. These guidelines need to be taken into account in the current context, since efforts to accelerate agricultural development may result in increased pressure on land users and in more competition for access to productive resources.

4. The right to food framework

At the High-Level Meeting on Food Security for All convened in Madrid on 26-27 January 2009, the UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon clearly expressed the emerging consensus 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'*.

I am equally convinced that the right to food framework constitutes not only an obligation for all States, but also an important tool governments can rely on in order to meet the considerable challenge they are currently facing. The implications of this framework is described in detail in the Voluntary Guidelines to Support the Progressive Realization of the Right to Adequate Food in the Context of National Food Security, adopted by 187 governments within the FAO General Council in 2004. It encourages Governments to decide through participatory mechanisms which agricultural policies they should pursue, on the basis of mapping

⁴ See, e.g., Pretty, J. (2006) Resource-Conserving Agriculture Increases Yields in Developing Countries, *Environmental science and technology* 40(4), or Uphoff, N. (2001), *Agroecological innovations. Increasing Food production with participatory development*, Earthscan.

⁵ Quoted in in Ad Hoc Advisory Group top the Madrid Conference on Food Security (2009) *Smallholder Food Production and Poverty reduction. Report*, January 26, 2009.

⁶ IAASTD (2008) *Summary for Decision Makers of the Global Report*.

vulnerability; developing national strategies including accountability mechanisms; and providing spaces for participation of, and communication among, all stakeholders. Guideline 3 of the FAO Voluntary Guidelines in particular provides useful indications about how States can adopt a national human rights-based strategy for the realization of the right to adequate food. Such a national strategy should comprise the establishment of appropriate institutional mechanisms, particularly in order to : (i) identify, at the earliest stage possible, emerging threats to the right to adequate food, by adequate monitoring systems ; (ii) improve coordination between the different relevant ministries and between the national and sub-national levels of government ; (iii) improve accountability, with a clear allocation of responsibilities, and the setting of precise timeframes for the realization of the dimensions of the right to food which require progressive implementation ; (iv) ensure the adequate participation, particularly, of the most food-insecure segments of the population ; finally, they should (v) pay specific attention to the need to improve the situation of the most vulnerable segments of society.

I am comforted to see that, in recent years, a growing number of African Governments have adopted national strategies to realize the right to food as well as mechanisms to monitor the implementation of such strategies. In October 2007, Mozambique approved its revised food security and nutrition strategy which calls for administrative and legal recourse mechanisms and suggests elaborating a right to food law. The Food and Nutrition Policy in Uganda – the first Ugandan socio-economic policy integrating a rights-based approach– illustrates how the involvement of African farmers’ organizations representing smallholders in the strategic choices may not only improve the legitimacy of the choices made in favour of agricultural development, but also contribute significantly to its success. Giving a voice to the most vulnerable contributes to guarantee that they will benefit from future policies.

In my view, such national strategies for the realization of the right to food are important because they explicitly aim at improving accessibility of, and access to, food for the poor and the marginalized, and not solely at increasing food production. Agricultural policies are no substitute for the adoption of such national strategies. Producing more food, while necessary, is not sufficient. For the other challenge we are facing is one of accessibility of food for the poor and the marginalized. Food insecurity exists even in countries where there is food in abundance, due to the lack of purchasing power of certain segments of the population. Improving access to food for the poor will not only require agronomical and socio-economical efforts, but also public policies which explicitly target the needs of the most vulnerable. It is in that respect that the right to food is a relevant perspective. The adoption of national strategies for the realization of the right to food as described above could consequently bring the coherence needed for success, and possibly help achieve a consensus on the development path each State should follow according to its specific national context.

5. The role of international assistance and cooperation

In accordance with the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness, and particularly with the principles of ownership and alignment they affirm, investments in agriculture – including any aid received whether from public or from private sources - should be aligned to national strategies for the realization of the right to food. This presupposes that such strategies are adopted. Governments should not be led to make development choices based on the support they receive. Instead, they define their priorities according to their own national context. The adoption of strategies aimed at the realization of the right to food should ensure that all the programmes and policies guiding the production, processing and marketing of food be aligned with objectives and priorities established at the local or national level, and are not driven by the interests of donors.

The Agenda for Action adopted at the Accra Summit on Aid Effectiveness of 2-4 September 2008 provides that developing countries and donors will ‘ensure that their respective development policies and programmes are designed and implemented in ways consistent with their agreed international commitments on gender equality, human rights, disability and environmental sustainability’ (para. 13, d). Grounding our efforts on the human right to food would contribute to this agenda. Since the public and private support programmes aimed at strengthening agriculture in Africa would fit into national strategies for the realization of the right to food defined at national level, recipient Governments would improve their bargaining position in aid negotiations. Since these national strategies would involve national parliaments and civil society organizations, development policies would be democratized. And since they would set benchmarks and allocate responsibilities, it would increase accountability in their implementation.

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I am fully aware of the difficulty of the challenge African governments are facing in the wake of the global food crisis. In my daily work and based on my country missions, I can witness first hand the complexity of the issues these countries are confronted with in their efforts to improve the ability of Africa to feed itself. But it is because this is a complex task, not despite of this complexity, that adopting a framework grounded on the human right to adequate food is justified – and indeed, vital. A number of examples have demonstrated that the adoption of such a framework can help us work through these complexities, and ensure that we are not diverted from the ultimate aim, which is to ensure that the most vulnerable are protected from hunger and malnutrition, and can feed themselves in dignity.