



Questions and Answers

1) What is the human right to food?

The right to food is first of all a human right. It is the right to feed oneself in dignity. It is the right to have continuous access to the resources that will enable you to produce, earn or purchase enough food to not only prevent hunger, but also to ensure health and well-being. The right to food only rarely means that a person has the right to free handouts.

2) Is the right to food a right to food aid?

The right to food is primarily the right to feed oneself and one's family in dignity, but of course there can be situations when people cannot do that. There are emergency situations – wars, natural disasters – and there are persons – disabled, sick or orphaned – who cannot feed themselves and need assistance. People in those circumstances must receive assistance, whether food aid, cash or any other form.

3) Is the right to food a legally binding right?

For the 160 countries that have ratified the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, the right to food is a legally binding right, on equal footing as the human rights prohibiting torture and protecting free speech and the press. In addition, many countries have included the right to food in constitutions and legislation. Countries that have not ratified the Covenant should at least recognize their moral responsibility to realize this right.

4) Who is responsible for implementing the right to food?

States are the primary duty bearers for implementing human rights, including the right to food. That means that a parliament, executive, judiciary and all other institutions, have roles to play. In addition, there are moral responsibilities that all of us, individuals and stakeholders everywhere should recognize and accept.

5) States already have many obligations. How can they afford to realize the right to food?

Human rights may require spending, but many steps toward realizing the right to food cost little or nothing. Ending discrimination in access to food and resources is one such step. Under international law, states are obligated to progressively realize the right to food, which recognizes resource constraints. A human rights-based approach to food security can even save money by promoting transparency in government spending. It also empowers people to hold their governments accountable for how they budget money.

6) Is hunger a human rights violation?

Hunger is often a human rights violation. If a public institution, either deliberately or through negligence, is causing hunger then that would be a human rights violation. Discrimination in access to food and resources is also a violation of the right to food. A state that does not deal with hunger and fails to request international assistance when necessary is also violating the right to food. A state that is doing its best within its financial and institutional capacity to end hunger, malnutrition and inequality, could not be considered in violation of human rights law.

7) What can people do if their right to food is violated?

People can complain to the official responsible for the action that affects the right to food. Then, they can complain to the next higher level. Ombudspersons, human rights commissions, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the right to food and other institutions can also receive complaints. The right to food can be enforced by courts. People can also organize and work with the media to put pressure on the government.

8) Can human rights really help fighting hunger and malnutrition?

There is international consensus that hunger and malnutrition are often caused or heavily influenced by structural factors. Poorly defined roles and responsibilities, social exclusion of the poor, or non-responsive public bodies can all contribute to hunger. The rights-based approach to food security addresses these structural obstacles by emphasizing individual entitlements, redress mechanisms, transparency and accountability. Furthermore, linking development issues with human rights brings new stakeholders into the fight for food security, broadens its support base and increases the political pressure.

9) Why is FAO involved in the right to food?

Freedom from hunger is among fundamental goals in FAO's constitution. At the 1996 World Food Summit (WFS), Heads of State and Government issued the Rome Declaration reaffirming, "the right of everyone to have access to safe and nutritious food, consistent with the right to adequate food and the fundamental right of everyone to be free from hunger." The WFS Action Plan reaffirmed FAO members' commitment to, "implementation and full and progressive realization of this right as a means of achieving food security for all."

10) What are the Right to Food Guidelines?

The Right to Food Guidelines, also known as the voluntary guidelines to support the progressive realization of the right to adequate food in the context of national food security, have been accepted by all of FAO's members. The Guidelines give governments specific recommendations on how to incorporate right to food principles in legislation and policies. They contain recommendations on a range of relevant issues, including access to natural resources, education, legislation, markets, safety nets and human rights institutions.

11) What does a right to food project typically look like?

Essential to any right to food project is participation of all stakeholders, especially those seriously affected – the hungry and the poor. Projects typically aim to strengthen the capacity of state institutions, to fulfil their obligations and the capacity of rights-holders to hold their governments accountable. This involves training, advocacy and working to create fair, enforceable laws. Projects can also help reinforce redress mechanisms, whether legal or social, and ensure they're available to those who believe their rights are not being realized. Considering the requirement to progressively realize this right, projects target first those most vulnerable, especially those discriminated against in terms of access to resources.

12) Are there concrete examples of successful right to food actions?

Many countries have taken successful actions toward realizing the right to food. When grain silos overflowed in one Indian region while another region's drought-struck residents went hungry, a court decision forced the government to distribute reserves to remedy the situation. In Brazil, a mobilized civil society and a determined government are working together to reconcile centuries of discrimination that have kept millions from the resources they need to feed for themselves and their families.

13) How does the right to food differ from food sovereignty?

The right to food is a recognized human right with international treaties according it full legal protection. The right does not prescribe specific economic policies and is flexible about the method countries use to achieve food security. It focuses on accountability and participation of the individual in the political process and redress mechanisms.

Food sovereignty is a political concept promoted mainly by civil society and academia. It emphasizes self-reliance, protection of domestic markets, ecological production and the idea that people should define their own type of food and agriculture.

14) Would you like to add anything in conclusion?

The planet produces enough food, of adequate quality, to feed the world's entire population. Yet, for the 854 million women, men and children suffering from chronic hunger, the fundamental right to food is not realized. This is unacceptable. Legal instruments have been elaborated, political commitments made and practical guidelines - the Right to Food Guidelines - elaborated. What we need now is a shift from charity to human rights, from rhetoric to action and results. It is time to make hunger history and the right to food a reality for all.