

Second Expert Consultation on the Right to Adequate Food as a Human Right

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Opening comments by the Deputy Director-General

Ms. Klein Bidmon;
Experts and Participants;
Colleagues from U.N. Organizations;
Distinguished Representatives of Governments;
Ladies and Gentlemen;
good morning.

It is my particular pleasure to welcome you to FAO Headquarters for this Second Expert Consultation of the High Commissioner for Human Rights on the Right to Adequate Food as a Human Right.

We in FAO are particularly pleased to co-host this meeting with the Office of the High Commissioner in this year of the 50th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Declaration remains to this day one of the most important documents of the international community. It aims high, bearing testimony to the far-sighted vision of its authors. If the goals of the Declaration were achieved, we would indeed live in the best of all possible worlds.

The Universal Declaration proclaims that everyone has the right to an adequate standard of living, including food, clothing, housing and medical care. You are here to focus on the human right to adequate food, which is the main concern of FAO and the other Rome based agencies, IFAD and WFP.

Your agenda for the next two days is ambitious and comprehensive; this is as it should be, as the subject is broad and complicated. I am pleased to note, however, that the agenda also has a welcome focus. You will consider first a better definition of the rights related to food and, then, the specific role of international organizations in the implementation of those rights. It is this second role which I think should interest us most here in Rome this week.

The World Food Summit, which met here two years ago, asked the High Commissioner to better define the rights related to food in Article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and to propose ways to implement and realize these rights. The Rome based food agencies have the task of helping countries to feed the hungry and to achieve the ambitious goal of eradicating hunger, with the immediate view to reducing the number of undernourished people to half their present level, still more than 800 million persons, no later than 2015. An obvious and very key question then is how to join the work being done by the High Commissioner for Human Rights with that of the food agencies to reinforce each other's efforts and to achieve concrete results in realizing the right to food and the fundamental right to be free from hunger.

In this regard, we should remember that Article 11 of the International Covenant specifically mentions the importance of international cooperation for the realization of the right to

adequate food. Although the Covenant is primarily binding on the State Parties that have ratified it, there are two main issues regarding the role of international organizations that you may wish to consider. The first is the extent and content of any direct obligations of such organizations, i.e. do international organizations themselves have human rights obligations and what might those be? The second is the role the international organizations could play in assisting Member Nations, who are Parties to the Covenant, in implementing their obligations.

The integration of human rights into operational approaches for development and emergency relief is already high on the agenda of the United Nations. FAO is an active participant in the United Nations Development Assistance Framework, which incorporates the consideration of human rights into its work. Many aspects of FAO's activities also implicitly take into account human rights principles, by focussing on the individual and by trying to use participatory methods. UNDP and UNICEF have already adopted an explicit policy to take a "rights approach" to their overall work. It would be interesting to explore how that experience could be of guidance to the food agencies for the rights specifically related to food.

Another important item to discuss will be the relationship between the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the various fora of international agencies. For instance, FAO Member Nations report to the FAO Committee on World Food Security on the implementation of the World Food Summit Plan of Action, and many of them also report to the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights on the implementation of their obligations under the Covenant. FAO itself, along with other agencies, is also routinely invited to participate in the meetings of the Committee. Is there a need for strengthening this cooperation or a need to ensure that these processes better complement each other?

I hope that you will have a fruitful dialogue, resulting not only in concrete recommendations to the High Commissioner for Human Rights, but also providing inspiration for further thought about these issues. This consultation is part of an ongoing process; it is not an isolated event. One further step in this process will be the Symposium of the ACC Sub-Committee on Nutrition next April on "the Substance and Politics of a Human Rights Approach to Food and Nutrition Policies".

Before closing, I am pleased to announce that as part of FAO's activities to commemorate the 50th Anniversary, we have released a new book entitled "The Right to Food in Theory and Practice", accompanied by a flyer called "What is the Right to Food". These are available in this room. They can also be viewed soon on the FAO Homepage. A legal study containing extracts from the various international instruments on the right to food is also forthcoming.

Again, let me assure you that we in FAO believe that this is a very important meeting, falling as it does in the year of the 50th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. I most warmly welcome you; I wish you all success in your deliberations; I hope you are able to produce a most useful outcome; and I also hope that you will find some time after the meeting to enjoy this beautiful city of Rome.