



World Food Day/TeleFood 2007 Information Note

The Right to Food

The right to food is the inherent human right of every woman, man, girl and boy, wherever they live on this planet.

The choice of **The Right to Food** as the theme for 2007 World Food Day and TeleFood demonstrates increasing recognition by the international community of the important role of human rights in eradicating hunger and poverty, and hastening and deepening the sustainable development process.

Background

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 first recognized the right to food as a human right. It was then incorporated in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (Article 11) adopted in 1966 and ratified by 156 states, which are today legally bound by its provisions. The expert interpretation and more refined definition of this right are contained in General Comment 12 of the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1999). The Voluntary Guidelines to Support the Progressive Realization of the Right to Adequate Food in the Context of National Food Security – the Right to Food Guidelines – were adopted by the FAO Council in 2004 and provide practical recommendations on concrete steps for the implementation of the right to food.

The right to food is a universal right. It means that every person – woman, man and child – must have access at all times to food, or to means for the procurement of food, that is sufficient in quality, quantity and variety to meet their needs, is free from harmful substances and is acceptable to their culture. Only when individuals do not have the capacity to meet their food needs by their own means for reasons beyond their control, such as age, handicap, economic downturn, famine, disaster, or discrimination, will they be entitled to receive food directly from the state, according to General Comment 12.

This definition is based on the assumption that hunger and malnutrition are caused not just by a lack of available food, but also by poverty, income disparities, and lack of access to health care, education, clean water, and sanitary living conditions. The principle that all human rights are interrelated and interdependent is also acknowledged. This means that the right to food cannot be implemented in isolation from other human rights, i.e. right to education, right to work, right to health, freedom of assembly and association.

The right to food is increasingly being integrated into national constitutions and legislation, and there are several cases in the courts around the world where this right, or some aspects of it, have been upheld and enforced. However, despite progress in some areas, 59 years after the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the right to food remains to be realized for 854 million human beings.

Human rights and development

Increasingly, it is recognized that human rights and sustainable development are mutually reinforcing. Human rights are based on the inherent worth of every human being. Achieving human rights for all is an overriding objective in itself. Development is not an end in itself per se – it also aims at expanding rights and freedoms. Human rights can help to promote growth and ensure the long-term sustainability of development. People whose right to food is realized are more productive and invest more in their longer-term livelihood strategies. Human rights add a qualitative dimension to development strategies, empowering the poorest to participate actively in society, seek redress for violations of their rights and hold government accountable for the use of available public resources.

The right to food and food security

A right to food approach complements food security considerations of availability, access, stability and utilization with concerns for human dignity and cultural acceptability, and for empowerment by means of participation, non-discrimination, transparency and accountability. This enables individuals, particularly the hungry and marginalized, to actively look for means of realization of their right to food and to hold government accountable for food security commitments it has taken. They become *subjects* of legal rights instead of being *objects* of assistance.

The right to food: make it happen

States have the primary duty for the realization of the right to food. They must take steps, to the maximum of their available resources, to realize progressively the full enjoyment of the right of every person to adequate food, without discrimination of any kind. The three-fold set of obligations applies: states must *respect* existing access to food of their population and abstain from taking measures that prevent such access. They must *protect* the right to food from infringements by third parties through measures ensuring that enterprises or individuals do not deprive others of the access to adequate food. States must also *fulfil* the right to food through facilitating individuals' ability to access food by their own means and through providing for those who cannot feed themselves.

For example, states should follow a "twin-track approach", which on the one hand seeks to strengthen productivity and livelihoods, and on the other to build social safety nets for those unable to provide for themselves. This approach should be complemented by measures aiming at strengthening the ability of individuals to participate in the development processes and decision-making through appropriate education, training, promoting tolerance, as well as developing and strengthening institutional structures.

While only states have the legal obligation to give effect to human rights, all members of society – individuals, civil society organizations, NGOs and the private sector – have responsibilities with regard to the right to food, when their activities could have an impact on the free exercise of the right to food of others. In particular, civil society organizations and NGOs are important factors for the implementation of state policies and programmes. They assist populations in realizing their right to food through, among other things, dissemination of information, legal advice and training.

The 1996 World Food Summit produced a global commitment to cut the number of hungry and malnourished by half by 2015. The Millennium Declaration also sets a human rights based agenda for hunger reduction. Today, many international organizations and development agencies, with FAO and other UN agencies at the forefront, assess impact of their activities on human rights, promote policies and projects that have a positive impact on the realization of the right to food and avoid those that could have a negative impact on it. They also actively support the realization of the right to food at national level. The Right to Food Guidelines provide the agreed principles and practical guidance needed for concrete steps to be taken by states for the realization of the right to food. They demonstrate how the different agencies dealing with food security can work in a coordinated manner with the full participation of all stakeholders.

Ensuring that every girl, boy, woman and man enjoys adequate food on a permanent basis is not only a moral imperative and an investment with high economic returns: it is the realization of a fundamental human right.

For further information on World Food Day and TeleFood, please contact:

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