

Interview for the FAO with former Federal President Johannes Rau

Question 1:

The seed for the International Alliance Against Hunger came from a speech you made in October 2001. How does it make you feel to see the Alliance becoming a viable international organization within the more than 80 countries that have expressed interest and 30 countries with their own National Alliances organized to fight hunger? Is this what you had in mind when you shared your idea with the World Food Day audience?

Answer:

I am very pleased that so many states have now joined the International Alliance Against Hunger, and I hope that even more will do so. It is an encouraging sign at a time when the number of starving people is once again on the increase.

Adequate and healthy food is an important prerequisite for effective economic and social development. In my October 2001 speech my intention was to pool and strengthen national and international capabilities in the fight against hunger. The aim was to reanchor in the minds of the public the awareness that renewed efforts to fight hunger are necessary at both national and international level. That has succeeded to some extent. With the Guidelines on the Right to Food passed by the FAO, the international community has identified and gathered together the legal obligations. I hope that the FAO in its role as initiator and protector of the right to food will manage to establish the necessary institutional conditions, anchor this approach in its programmes and introduce it into the United Nations system. Now we are called upon to honour the right of every individual to adequate food. The Alliances Against Hunger could be a powerful means to this end. Non-governmental organizations, the media, human rights groups and affected individuals in particular will be able to invoke this text in future.

Question 2:

The Alliance is moving forward now but it is still in the start-up stage. Is there any advice – or warning – you would have for those in the secretariat of the International Alliance or for those working at national level to set up the National Alliances?

Answer:

The fight against hunger calls for patience, endurance, great commitment and persuasiveness. We need patience and endurance because the fight against hunger is long and hard. We should

not allow ourselves to become disheartened if progress is sometimes less than we had hoped, or if we suffer set-backs in some areas, and must keep our eyes firmly fixed on our goal: a world without hunger.

The individual states bear the prime responsibility for gradually realizing their people's right to adequate food. The National Alliances must strive to ensure that countries fully exploit all the opportunities at their disposal. The potential and the commitment of their own citizens must be mobilized, e.g. through publicity campaigns. Securing food in the long term must become a central goal of government policy. States' tax revenue must be increased and/or invested more efficiently and effectively. Local, regional and national institutions must be exhorted not to tolerate hunger within their sphere of responsibility but to fight it and take preventive action against crises. The poorer countries offer a wide field of activity for the National Alliances.

In the richer countries, the National Alliances must strongly urge governments, civil society and private business to actively assume responsibility for the poor countries. Furthermore, they must ensure that risk groups in their own populations have guaranteed access to minimum food levels. The international community must above all establish a conducive environment, e.g. fair competition in global trade, the necessary financing instruments and aid priorities oriented to the actual needs of the hungry. The international secretariat has the task of cooperating closely with the international institutions responsible for these areas.

Question 3:

The real heart – and communication power – of the International Alliance is the Internet. When the Alliance's website is activated, it will allow the National Alliances, as well as interested individuals anywhere in the world, to tap into a wealth of information about the global fight against hunger. What do you think is the eventual potential of the Internet for organizations such as the International Alliance? Would you predict or suggest any new directions for enhancing the synergy between the Internet and international development? Is this globalization of information a positive force for development, or will the digital divide only serve to maintain the status quo?

Answer:

The Internet no doubt has great potential for the International Alliance Against Hunger. Rapid exchange and availability of information help improve decision-making. The swift development of the Internet means that in principle even people in isolated regions can access

the data and technical information they need to adapt their production to a changing environment. Moreover, the Internet offers people the unprecedented opportunity to be heard, defend their interests and fight for their rights. Open information systems are an important basis for democratic dialogue.

The globalization of information, however, only has a positive impact on the living conditions of the poor if equal access is assured and the target groups can themselves become active participants. Innovative organizational and financial approaches are necessary to overcome the difficulties preventing the poor from participating in global information exchange. The development of open communication structures would strengthen the International Alliance Against Hunger and offer everyone the opportunity to share their individual potential and ideas.

Question 4:

The first Millennium Development Goal sets 2015 as the year when global hunger and poverty should be reduced by half. At this point we are not on target to meet this goal by this date. There have been positive developments such as the recent response to the Asian tsunami and the debt relief being offered to developing countries. But is the international community somehow failing to speed up its efforts? What needs to change in the donor community – and the beneficiary community – if the MDGs are to be met?

Answer:

The impact of the tsunami and the tremendous willingness to help demonstrated throughout the world that people feel great solidarity with their fellow human beings. The tsunami engulfed the people on the coast of South-East Asia like a primeval force, and its consequences have triggered an overwhelming desire to give in Germany and in many other countries.

The United Nations Millennium Declaration is a pledge by governments which is nonetheless still too abstract for the majority of people in industrialized countries, in spite of intensive information and PR work. It is not generating the public activity that is necessary for it to have an impact beyond government assurances. We now have to draw the attention of people in our countries to other regions suffering from crises and poverty. Intensifying partnership initiatives between groups in richer and poorer countries would be a valuable approach.

I believe there are many good ideas and convincing projects to fight global hunger. However, it appears to me that it is important to apply the available resources as part of a longer-term economic and social development strategy. Implementing this successfully depends in turn on stable and effective framework conditions: on the realization of fundamental human rights, the distribution and recognition of rights to access production resources, the opportunity to invoke these rights and to protest against their infringement, investment security, the fight against corruption and tax evasion as well as other institutional factors, such as an adequate education system. This mutual interdependence poses major, but surmountable, challenges to both donors and recipients.