

**Keynote Speech of H.E. Mrs. Suzanne Mubarak
On the Occasion of the World Food Day
Ceremony**

**“World Food Security: the Challenges of Climate
Change and Bio-energy”**

FAO, Rome, Thursday 16th October 2008

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a pleasure for me to be back in Rome, amongst such a distinguished group of experts and activists – all determined to address the enormous challenge posed by the global food crisis.

I would like to commend the United Nations for working closely with governments in tailoring sustainable solutions.

Over the years, Egypt has benefited immensely from the expertise and guidance of the UN in order to achieve the goal of ensuring quality “food for all”.

I therefore greatly welcome the nomination by Dr. Jacques Diouf to work even more closely with the UN family, as the “Illustrious Guide” of the FAO, in view of Egypt’s staunch commitment to the fight against world hunger and the strategic part it has played in supporting the organization’s important objectives.

In this regard, I would like to applaud the FAO, for its efforts in developing integrated responses to food insecurity, which take into consideration its close inter-linkages with other complex challenges – for there are many.

From North, South, East to West, we have been hit hard by crises, from the ravages of poverty to the destruction caused by armed conflicts, from the crashing waves of

social and economic insecurity to the silent devastation emanating from environmental degradation.

Each crisis has been superimposed on the other, diminishing the chances of finding viable solutions to the food situation.

The recent collapse of the financial market on both sides of the Atlantic has monopolized the world attention away from other pressing issues of equal importance.

And while ways and means of rescuing Wall Street and financial institutions are being pursued— For the majority of people, especially the most vulnerable, hunger remains their primary concern for both security and survival. It is these people who have to endure the cumulative consequences of various factors including food shortages, volatile oil prices, food price inflation, a massive trade deficit, and the increased production of biofuels.

I know all of you here are experts in your own right, but allow me to emphasize a few points, which I find to be of relevance to the topic we are discussing.

There is no doubt that as a result of the impact of climate change, our environment and ecosystems are under siege: The marine fisheries of the world are grossly over-exploited; soils are rapidly eroding; water is becoming scarcer and scarcer, while deforestation at the rate of some 25 million hectares per year is adding to the growing problems of desertification and loss of biodiversity.

With a population growth averaging 90 million persons a year the problem is becoming even more complex, as these populations rely heavily on agriculture for their survival.

In this context, Climate Change is not just an environmental problem, but also as a serious threat to sustainable development, with dire consequences on agriculture, energy, human health, food security, economic activity, natural resources as well as physical infrastructure. In short, climate change undermines hard-won gains against hunger and poverty by exacerbating existing vulnerabilities and creating new ones.

My Friends,

Today, the current situation is pushing millions of disadvantaged people into chronic malnourishment and hunger. The World Food Program warns of the advent of “a silent tsunami,” and the World Bank estimates that the current situation could set back the fight against poverty by seven years.

This is an unacceptable predicament, especially when we witness the suffering of those who are living under or close to the poverty line. What does seven years mean in terms of those susceptible to ill health, under-nutrition, to the vulnerable communities that are threatened by conflict, modern-day slavery, where food is so often used as a weapon of war.

What does this lost time signify to parents that are compelled to deprive their children of education and health care in order to put food on the table? To those who are forced to adopt harsh coping mechanisms –sometimes getting by with one meal a day if only that.

What does this mean to so many women who continue to be affected by gender bias's in food distribution, to the girl-child who continues to suffer from discriminatory practices,

We cannot afford to back-track on our promise to end extreme poverty, and watch it continue to violate the human dignity and burn out the hope of our people. We cannot afford to ignore the gender dimension – for women are an integral part of the solution. They are the custodians of the environment and its primary victims. They are the main producers of the world's staple crops, and they play a decisive part in poverty alleviation, economic growth, human development and of course human security.

Throughout my career, I have always made it a point to ensure that the perspectives and ideas of women constitute an important aspect of our debates and programs. The value of their participation has been unquestionable. They always bring to the fore the critical dimensions of peace, security and development goals. It is therefore essential that in today's consortium of global challenges women's voices are heard and the highest levels of decision-making processes..

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In Egypt, as a response to crises facing all, we are working with local, regional and international partners to re-visit existing systems and strategies, and at the same time ensure that community development programs are re-enforced to strengthen people's ability to fend for themselves.

Investing in Quality Education has been at the heart of these endeavors. Towards this goal, we have raised the standards of our education system - upgrading existing schools and building new ones; and bridging the gender gap through our Girls Education Initiative. Through our training programs and the use of Information Technology, we are also achieving a qualitative transformation in teachers' aptitudes, as well as learners' abilities.

One of the beneficial initiatives that were taken were the school feeding programs that contributed to the improvements in nutritional status of children and enhanced learning capacities. By 2004–2005, approximately 12 million students benefited from this program, comprising 71 percent of the total student enrolment, and it continues to yield very positive results. In view of this positive experience, I was gratified to learn from many of our partners that, in order to diffuse the effects of the global food crisis, numerous more school feeding programs are being implemented worldwide.

Let me now turn to our national strategy for poverty eradicating. Various short-term measures have had to be

introduced in order to enhance food availability, access and affordability to low income families, and at the same time significant resources and expertise have been directed to widen the scope and efficiency of our social security and social protection programs.

For example, our Building Safe and Secure Communities initiatives have taken on a more prominent role in the wake of the mounting crisis.

Poverty stricken communities have benefited from an upgraded infrastructure, an improved access to basic health and education services as well as income generating schemes.

Let me just tell you that as a social scientist, I can proudly and honestly say that this program is changing people's lives for it gives them a sense of security and inclusion, a sense of belonging and a platform for self-fulfillment.

Building on this experience, the National Democratic Party plans to expand efforts to rural areas through new initiatives that aim to improve the living conditions of 1,000 of the most impoverished villages across Egypt.

At this juncture, let me just also mention a few words on our actions to ease the agriculture- hunger- poverty nexus.

Through the conduct of vulnerability analysis and mapping we have been able to give more effective relief and sustainable support as well as disseminate better food-

based safety-net programs to marginalized groups, landless families, as well as farmers.

Some of you may question what were the elements that have fostered our positive outcomes. My answer is the genuine partnerships established between the government, the private sector and NGOs. It is a live example of the appreciation by each stakeholder of the positive role it can play in achieving stability and prosperity. It illustrates how our thinking has moved from charity to advocacy to proactive intervention and beyond. It highlights the positive effects that companies can have when they exercise their corporate- social responsibility.

And finally, most important of all is the paradigm shift that has occurred in people's perception of their roles and responsibilities in nation building. It has changed from that of being observers to becoming participants, from beneficiaries to stakeholders, and from spectators to architects of change.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The events of the past year serve as a chilling reminder of how quickly a crisis can escalate, how exposed we all are to global insecurity in all its forms.

With over 800 million people driven in a state of chronic hunger, the food crisis has been a harsh wake-up call to us all.

We must continue to adopt sustainable solutions rather than rely on quick fixes, as well as go beyond small partial analyses and start working on proposals that will reverse current trends.

While the food crisis is ongoing, there have been continuous attempts to curb this situation. I would like to specifically share with you both some of the persistent issues that we must keep insight and some the enlightening steps that have been taken, - such as the green revolution; the climate adaptation fund; the enhancement of food safety nets, the development of cash and voucher schemes ; as well as the investment in new energy sources on a wide scale, such as solar, thermal power. All these will take us a long way in our struggle for a better future.

Egypt, who has not been spared from the after-shock of crises, will continue to work at the forefront of international and regional action to solve the growing food crisis. We will persist to lead efforts to strengthen communication channels and encourage serious dialogue between exporters and importers of energy and food. We will seek to bolster the implementation of various instruments and frameworks for action, including the Strategy put forward by the United Nations Secretary-General, the declaration adopted last June in Rome, the Bali Plan of Action and Road Map and the Sharm El Sheikh declaration, adopted by the African Union. And we will certainly be promoting closer regional cooperation during the forthcoming Arab Heads of State meeting's agenda.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In today's globalized world, no efforts to address the interconnected challenges of our times can be achieved alone.

We have just witnessed how seven hundred billion dollars were raised in record time to salvage the financial markets. How similar injections were made to salvage financial banks. If anything these unprecedented measures have shown us that if a cause is considered serious enough, solutions are immediately found to rescue the situation.

I believe that the scale of the food crisis is of such magnitude that it warrants nothing less than the same swift and decisive measures to curb its lethal progression.

Let us all remember that it is the life of millions of people that are hanging on the balance.

Just think for a moment and you will all come to the same conclusion that all our forces, all our energy, all our astuteness, must be used to act collectively and act now!

Thank you