

Opening address by Mr. Jim Butler, Deputy Director General of FAO  
On the occasion of the  
Right to Food Forum, 1 to 3 October 2008, Rome

Excellencies,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of the Director-General of FAO, Jacques Diouf, I welcome you warmly to Rome, to FAO and to the Right to Food Forum. The presence of so many participants from all over the world reflects your commitment towards the right to food and the importance of this issue especially in the context of the present food security crisis.

**Message 1: FAO is committed to the Right to Food**

Eleanor Roosevelt, when elaborating the human rights catalogue that subsequently shaped the UN Human Rights Declaration adopted by world leaders almost 60 years ago, said: “Human rights is not something that somebody gives to you, it is something that nobody can take from you.”

The right to food is a human right. It is the right of every man, woman and child to be able to produce or procure safe, nutritious and culturally acceptable food not only to be free from hunger, but also to ensure health and well-being. It is not charity, nor is it the right to free hand-outs.

Freedom from hunger is one of the fundamental goals set out in FAO’s Constitution. At the World Food Summit in 1996, Heads of State and Government reaffirmed “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”. They also committed to the full implementation and progressive realization of this right in order to ensure food security for all.

It was in the follow-up to this commitment that, in 2004, the FAO Council unanimously adopted the Voluntary Guidelines to Support the Progressive Realization of the Right to Adequate Food in the Context of National Food Security (Right to Food Guidelines).

**Message 2: Right to Food Approach Emphasizes Good Governance**

The Guidelines are a practical tool that reflects international consensus about what needs to be done in some nineteen different policy areas to progressively realize the right to food. They provide a coherent set of recommendations that aim at creating an enabling environment so that everyone can feed himself or herself in dignity. They

also define modalities for providing food to those who are unable, for reasons beyond their control, to feed themselves. By looking at rights, institutions and human rights principles, the Guidelines attempt to tackle the root causes of hunger.

The effectiveness and sustainability of food security work requires that governance issues be addressed. The right to food offers a coherent framework to address these critical governance dimensions in the fight against hunger and malnutrition. It provides a voice to the marginalized and to a wide array of relevant stakeholders. It establishes the principles that govern decision-making and implementation processes, such as participation, non-discrimination, transparency and empowerment. Finally, it provides a legal framework, the concepts of rights and obligations, as well as mechanisms for increased accountability and the rule of law.

FAO activities in this area have focused on information and capacity development, the development of methodologies and implementation tools, policy advice and expertise, as well as mainstreaming the right to food into FAO's work. As this work progressed, initial experience was gained in a number of countries, through the implementation of concrete measures to implement the right to food. The objective of the present Forum is to exchange these experiences and lessons learned and discuss ways to strengthen future implementation of the right to food. The Forum shall demonstrate, with practical examples, how the right to food can contribute to promoting food security for all.

The right to food underpins food security work. It adds value to food security interventions by focusing on issues of voice, participation and accountability in the process of policy formulation and implementation. As reflected in the Guidelines, it builds on the four pillars of food security – availability, access, stability of supply and utilization – with human rights perspectives.

Regarding the process, the approach contributes to strengthen relevant public institutions, integrates partners such as civil society organizations, human rights commissions, parliamentarians and government sectors not dealing with agriculture, and provides further justification for investment in hunger reduction. It contributes to create and maintain political will. Promoting the right to food means to enhance governmental action by introducing administrative, quasi-judicial and judicial mechanisms to provide effective remedies, by clarifying the rights and obligations of rights holders and duty bearers, and by strengthening the mandate of the relevant institutions. Furthermore, it means to strengthen the coordination of food security initiatives and increased policy coherence.

Implementation of the right to food requires a solid partnership between governments, civil society organisations, the private sector, and other relevant stakeholders. This is reflected in the participation, at this Forum, of representatives from the different sectors involved in right to food work.

### **Message 3: Applying Right to Food Guidelines Will Improve Response to Present Crisis**

The debate that you will be holding is particularly important in the present climate of high food prices and increasing food insecurity in the world.

The rise in world food prices has, in recent months, pushed the issues of hunger and food insecurity to the top of the international agenda. Soaring food prices have led to a global food crisis with strong negative social and economic impacts, especially in low income and least developed countries. Poor people typically spend between 50 and 80 percent of their income on purchasing food and will be disproportionately affected by the increase in food prices. A recent study prepared by FAO shows that women are particularly affected.

The Right to Food Guidelines provide recommendations for countries to both understand the food insecurity situation and to shape the response to the present crisis. Through right to food assessments and monitoring, governments can identify who the populations at risk are. Appropriate policies, strategies and legislation can be formulated to focus on food insecurity and strengthen the governance of food systems. Institutional capacities and coordination mechanisms, combined with participation and empowerment, make it possible to obtain large buy-in by all relevant stakeholders, policy coherence and timely and efficient government action.

The High-Level Conference on World Food Security organized by FAO in June 2008 recognized the link between the right to food and the food security challenges that the planet is facing at present. It also recognized the importance of urgent international response and cooperation to help developing countries deal with the impact of high food prices. In the outcome document of this Summit the Right to Food Guidelines are reaffirmed as a framework for the policy response and for measures taken to meet these challenges.

FAO estimates that rising prices have plunged an additional 75 million men, women and children below the hunger threshold, bringing the estimated number of undernourished people worldwide to 923 million in 2007. An enormous and resolute global effort and concrete actions to tackle the root causes of hunger will be needed to reduce the number of hungry people and achieve the Millennium Development Goals.