

# The Right to Food – A Human Right

## 10 minute speech

(To be used together with the PowerPoint presentation)

1. Welcoming and greeting remarks.

The right to food is a human right. This fact has profound implications, which I will explore in this short presentation.

2. The body of human rights constitutes the codification of the value of human dignity and of the human person. Access to food is essential for human survival, development and dignity.

3. Every human being has the right to food. That includes everyone in this room. Our main concern, however, should be those whose right to food is not realized. These include the 854 million people in the world who suffer from hunger as well as the over 2 billion people who suffer from micronutrient deficiencies. Even those who suffer from obesity, increasingly a symptom of poverty, often do not have access to healthy and nutritious, or “adequate” food.

4. The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights contains the main provision of international law on the right to food. It recognizes both the right to adequate food and the fundamental right to be free from hunger. The Covenant today has 156 States Parties and is legally binding for those countries. Other international human rights treaties recognize the right to life, which includes the right to food, the right of the child to nutrition, the right of pregnant women and breastfeeding mothers to adequate nutrition and the rights of rural women to access land, water, credit and services.

5. Food security, as defined by FAO, exists when everyone has physical and economic access to enough food for an active and healthy life. The right to food has similar definitions. Every human being everywhere should have the ability to produce or to purchase safe, sufficient and nutritious food that is culturally acceptable, for an active and healthy life.

6. The right to food goes beyond the concept of food security, as it is not simply a technical definition, but a human right that every person should enjoy. All human rights entail obligations for the state and moral responsibilities for all members of society. This empowers individuals as rights holders to hold their government accountable for its acts and omissions. It also brings in principles of process that are drawn from the whole body of human rights.

7. One way of looking at the relationship between food security and the right to food is to picture a temple. The pillars of food security, availability, access, stability of supply and utilization, are underpinned by the human rights principles of participation, accountability, non-discrimination, transparency, human dignity, empowerment and the rule of law.

8. The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights obliges states parties to take continuous legal, administrative, financial and policy steps for the progressive realization of the right to adequate food for all. Let's take a better look at these state obligations by breaking them down. The obligation to respect the right to food means that all organs of the state must refrain from any measure that could impede existing access to food. The obligation to protect the right to food means that legislation and other measures must be in place to protect individuals from the actions of third parties that could deprive them of the right to food. The obligation to fulfil has two dimensions; the obligation to facilitate means that the state must have proactive measures to improve the possibilities of people to feed themselves. The obligation to provide food or means to buy food is then the obligation of last resort. It recognizes that there will always be individuals who cannot feed themselves, for instance the sick, the elderly, the unemployed, and that situations of emergency can arise that require direct provision.

9. The obligations of the state are complex and manifold and touch different areas. 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 for short – provide practical recommendations for turning the general human rights obligations into concrete and practical recommendations. The Right to Food Guidelines have been accepted by all 187 FAO members. The Guidelines address in a comprehensive and holistic way the measures that should be taken to build an enabling environment where people can feed themselves, a system of assistance to those who are unable to feed themselves, and measures to enhance accountability of all state actors.

10. The right to food is at the heart of FAO's mandate. The Constitution of the Organization contains an explicit reference to the fundamental right to be free from hunger, making it the *raison d'être* of FAO. The heads of state and governments at the World Food Summit reaffirmed the right to adequate food and the fundamental right to be free from hunger. The World Food Summit: five years later decided that the Right to Food Guidelines should be elaborated within FAO and provisions were made to ensure follow up to their adoption.

11. Now let me return to the practical value of the Right to Food Guidelines. They contain agreed definitions of the meaning of the right to food. They translate principles into practical recommendations for polices, institutions and legislation. They are a useful tool for coordination, clarifying the different roles that different public institutions and stakeholders play in realizing the right to food. They can be used in advocacy for improved policies and programmes. In short, they contain recommendations for sound food security policies, strategies and processes.

12. The Right to Food Unit was established by FAO to follow up on the World Food Summit and Right to Food Guidelines commitments. It is researching deeper into concrete aspects of implementing the right to food. It publishes material to disseminate accessible information about the right to food. It seeks to raise awareness among different sectors of society about the right to food and the corresponding responsibilities. The Unit conducts a variety of activities to strengthen the capacity of different stakeholders to work with the right to food, and it is involved in supporting a number of countries in taking steps to implement the right to food.

13. In order to meaningfully implement the right to food, the Right to Food Unit recommends seven practical steps that governments should take.

First, the hungry and food insecure must be identified.

Second, existing policies, institutions and laws must be assessed, especially with regard to the food insecure.

Third, a sound food security strategy should be elaborated.

Fourth, the roles and responsibilities of different institutions and their coordination should be assigned.

Fifth, the right to food should be incorporated into the legal framework.

Sixth, systems to monitor the progress should be established, including monitoring by independent national human rights institutions.

Finally, number seven, adequate recourse must be ensured, to deal with cases when the rights of individuals or groups are not respected, protected or fulfilled.

14. Let me summarize the main points we've discussed.

First, the right to food is a human right.

Second, the Right to Food Guidelines exist to help bring the principles into practice.

Third and final, the right to food can be implemented; we can reach the goal of everyone enjoying the right to food in a world without hunger.

15. Ladies and gentlemen. Let me leave you with this summary: the human right to feed oneself in dignity. That's not too much for anyone to demand.

I thank you for your attention.