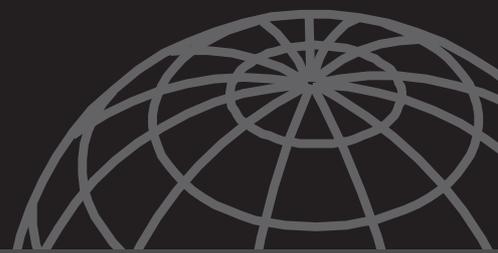




# The right to food



## KEY FACTS

### Rome Declaration on World Food Security, 1996

"We, the Heads of State and Government ... reaffirm 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."

### International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 1966

"The States Parties to the present Covenant recognize the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living ... including adequate food ..." and agree to take appropriate steps to realize this right.

Article 11(1)

### Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948

"Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food ..."

Article 25 (1)

## The right to food, not free food

**A common misunderstanding is that the right to food requires the State to feed its people. This is not necessarily the case. Rather, the State must respect and protect the rights of individuals to feed themselves. Direct food assistance is mainly called for in emergencies, such as natural disasters or war. When a country cannot meet this need through its own resources, the State must request international assistance.**

***Hunger is both a violation of human dignity and an obstacle to social, political and economic progress. International law recognizes that everyone has the fundamental right to be free from hunger, and 22 countries have enshrined food rights in their constitutions. National governments must do everything possible to ensure that people have the physical and economic access to enough safe, nutritious food to lead healthy and active lives.***

## A RIGHTS-BASED APPROACH TO DEVELOPMENT

Historically, development activities have often been based on practical grounds – to raise gross domestic product or defuse civil conflict. But a new approach has emerged stressing the importance of basic human rights, referred to as rights-based development.

A rights-based approach to food security holds that people have a fundamental right to be free from hunger. It considers the beneficiaries of development not merely as passive recipients, but as active stakeholders. It also puts the primary responsibility on the State, requiring it to do everything possible to ensure people have physical and economic access at all times to enough nutritious, safe food to lead healthy and active lives.

Violations of the right to food include blocking access on the grounds of race, sex, language, age, religion or political belief. In addition, food should not be used to exact political or economic pressure, for instance, through food embargoes or blocking humanitarian convoys.

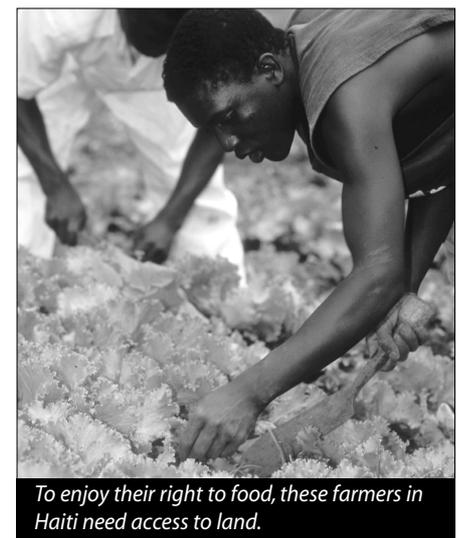
Paying attention to human rights is not just a lofty ideal, it is also an effective development approach. Research shows a link between civil and political freedom and economic growth. And protecting human rights can also prevent one of the most damaging obstacles to the right to food: famine. Amartya Sen, a Nobel laureate in economics, argues that famines are much less likely to occur when basic civil and political rights are respected.

## TOP ROLE: NATIONAL GOVERNMENTS

Ensuring the right to food involves many factors, from access to land to sufficient opportunities for earning income. The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which came into force in 1976, gave national governments the primary responsibility. States' human rights obligations operate on three levels:

**Obligations to respect** put limits on the exercise of State power. The State must not interfere with individuals' livelihoods. If national legislation is found to have such an effect, then immediate action must be taken to correct it.

**Obligations to protect** require regulations against poor conduct by non-State actors that would hinder people from acquiring adequate, safe food. These regulations cover food hygiene, quality and labelling standards, labour conditions and land tenure. Regulations must also protect against unfair market practices, such as



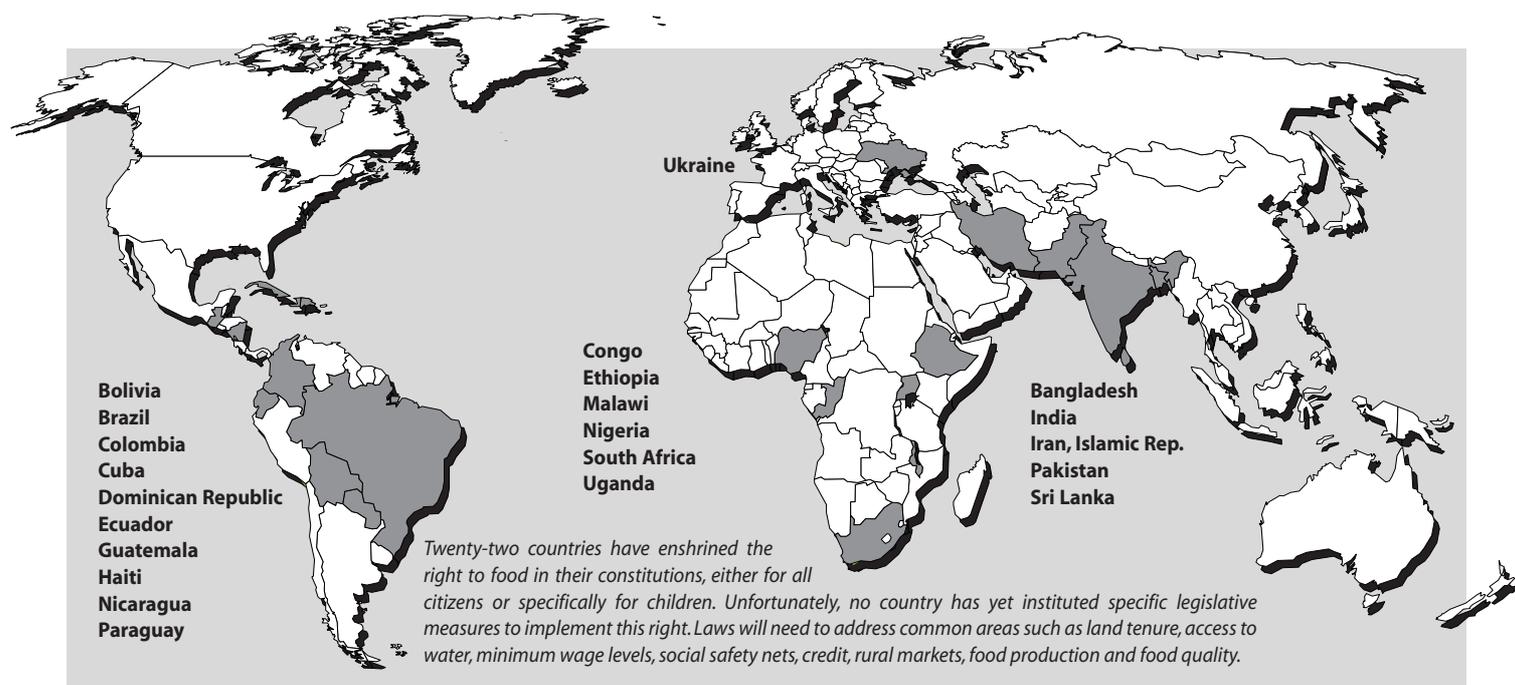
*To enjoy their right to food, these farmers in Haiti need access to land.*

FAO/18679/G. Bizzari

withholding price information or creating monopolies.

**Obligations to fulfil** require action by the State to identify vulnerable groups and to design policies that improve their access to food-producing resources or income. As a last resort, direct assistance may be needed, to ensure that, at a minimum, people do not starve.

## GIVING RIGHTS A CONSTITUTIONAL PUNCH



## FREE MARKETS: A CHALLENGE

Trade liberalization both benefits and challenges realization of the right to food. If rich countries curtailed subsidies to their farmers, poor countries' farm products would become more competitive. These countries could then produce a greater share of their own food and earn more from exports. But until markets adjust to the new policy environment, countries that rely on cheap food imports may actually fare worse.

A Ministerial Decision formulated during the Uruguay Round of trade negotiations

in 1994 outlined provisions for countries unable to cope with sudden hikes in food import prices. Least-developed and net-food-importing developing countries would receive additional food aid, technical and financial assistance, export credit and short-term financing.

Unfortunately, a spike in worldwide cereal prices in 1995-1996 suggested that the Decision was not effective. During that period, import bills for these countries rose by 35 percent. But because of a lack of clarity about how to implement the Decision and a lack of political will, these countries received less assistance, not more. The Decision must be strengthened and fully implemented.

Many developing countries will also need help in putting policies into effect and creating the structures necessary to make their agriculture sectors competitive in an open trade environment.

A basic tenet of the right to food is to ensure equitable access. A freer market should eventually level the playing field between developed and developing nations. But until then, national and international policies will need to ensure that gains are shared equitably and vulnerable populations are protected.

## FROM THEORY TO REALITY: WORKING TOGETHER TO FIGHT HUNGER

The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights is charged with monitoring the realization – and violation – of the right to adequate food, while development agencies and financing institutions provide technical, financial and food assistance. These include:

- Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
- International Fund for Agricultural Development
- International Labour Organization
- Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
- United Nations Children's Fund
- United Nations Development Programme
- World Bank
- World Food Programme
- World Health Organization

Of equal importance are non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which are extremely effective at bringing rights issues to the forefront of the global conscience. Indeed, a network of NGOs is already lobbying for a Code of Conduct on the Human Right to Adequate Food.

## WAR: A VIOLATION

Armed conflict violates the right to food by destroying crops, food stocks, livestock and farm equipment. FAO has calculated that over the last three decades war has cost US\$4 300 million a year – enough to pull 330 million people from the ranks of the undernourished.

- In **Rwanda** in 1995, war displaced three out of four farmers and cut the harvest in half.
- In **Afghanistan** about 700 square kilometres of the country contain landmines, drastically restricting cultivation and killing or injuring 300 people each month.

## CONTACTS

For further information, contact:

**Legal Office**  
Tel. +39 06 570 43478  
Fax +39 06 570 54408  
margret.vidar@fao.org

**Media inquiries**  
Tel. +39 06 570 53625  
Fax +39 06 570 53729  
media-relations@fao.org

**Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations**  
Viale delle Terme di Caracalla  
00100 Rome, Italy  
[www.fao.org](http://www.fao.org)