

The right to food and access to forest resources

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, proclaimed by the United Nations almost 60 years ago (1948), recognizes every human being's fundamental right to food: "Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food..." With the entry into force of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) in 1976, the realization of the right to food became a legal obligation for the 156 ratifying countries. Yet more than 850 million people are still deprived of enough food.

On 16 October 2007, FAO celebrates World Food Day with the theme "The Right to Food". FAO works with governments and communities worldwide to ensure this basic human right. In order to achieve the World Food Summit objective and the first Millennium Development Goal of reducing hunger by half by 2015, efforts are needed to give a voice to the hungry and to strengthen governments' capacity to meet their obligations to respect, protect and fulfil this right.

The Council of FAO adopted the Right to Food Guidelines in 2004, outlining specific actions to help member countries realize the right to food. Through its Right to Food Unit, FAO informs, trains and builds capacity to help member countries incorporate the Right to Food Guidelines into policies and legislation and to adopt rights-based food security strategies. The Right to Food Guidelines focus on the needs of the most vulnerable, without discrimination based on tribe, caste, gender, disability or disease.

The right to food is the right of access to the resources necessary to feed oneself with dignity. States are legally obliged to enable their populations to feed themselves. Rather than implying regular handouts, this means that States must allow every person access to resources for producing food, or enable them to engage in income generation activities so they can purchase food. For forest communities, this may entail regularizing forest access with legally binding tenure.

States can empower forest-dwelling communities to realize their right to food by improving skills of local communities to harvest wood and non-wood forest products (including forest foods) sustainably and to process and conserve them efficiently. Improving roads to regional and urban markets increases marketability and value of forest products.

The right to maintain one's traditional diet must not be discounted. Where forest dwellers are deprived of forest access, in right to food terms they must be compensated to be able to feed themselves and their families. A rights-based participatory approach to forest management leads every stakeholder to monitor resource use not only to claim his or her rightful share, but also to ensure the future of the resource.

World Food Day activities promoting the Right to Food theme include the twenty-seventh World Food Day ceremony at FAO headquarters on 16 October and a Run-for-Food race on 21 October in Rome, a TeleConference in Washington, DC and a special ceremony on 18 October at United Nations headquarters in New York, United States, and country-level activities including musical and sports events.

For more information, see www.fao.org/righttofood or write to: righttofood@fao.org

