

Introduction

Establishment and terms of reference

This is the report of the fourth session of the Panel of Eminent Experts on Ethics in Food and Agriculture, established by the Director-General in accordance with Article VI.4 of the FAO Constitution and Rule XXXV of the General Rules of the Organization, initially for a period of four years as of 1 January 2000. It met twice in its first four years of existence. The term of the Panel was extended by a further period of four years beginning on 1 January 2004. The panel met in 2005 and held its final session on 26–28 November 2007. For reasons related both to Panel reporting and to internal processes within FAO, the final report was completed only in August 2009. Information and events after November 2007 have been taken into account through consultation among the members of the Panel.

The Terms of Reference of the Panel, to raise public awareness and advise the Director-General on ethical issues in food and agriculture, are provided in Annex 1.

Membership

The Director-General appointed eight eminent experts of recognized competence in ethics, philosophy, humanities or a relevant economic, legal or scientific discipline with experience of ethics, and of high moral authority and international or regional standing, to serve as of 1 January 2004 on the Panel in their personal capacity for four years. The members of the Panel appointed for 2004–07 are Mr Francisco J. Ayala from the United States of America, Ms Ruth Chadwick from the United Kingdom, Ms Chee Yoke Ling from Malaysia, Mr Carlos María Correa from Argentina, Mr Souleymane Bachir Diagne from Senegal, Mr Asbjørn Eide from Norway, Ms Cecilia A. Florencio from the Philippines and Mr Tewolde Berhan Gebre Egziabher from Ethiopia. Mr Eide was appointed chair of the Panel. Mr Ayala and Mr Eide were also members of the first Panel; the others were new appointees. A summary biography for each Panel member is presented in Annex 2.

Unfortunately, Mr Diagne and Ms Florencio were not able to attend the fourth session.

Summary of previous Panel considerations

In its Terms of Reference, the Panel was requested both to reflect on, and to promote reflection on, ethical issues arising from food production and consumption practices and on agricultural development, including forestry and fisheries. This was to be done in the context of food security, sustainable use of natural resources, the safeguarding of biodiversity and a balanced mix of traditional and modern technologies to increase food security and sustainable agriculture.

The Panel has taken as a basis that the fundamental ethical commitment of FAO is to promote policies and measures that can ensure humanity's freedom from hunger and the access of everyone to adequate food and nutrition, as stated in the Organization's Constitution and subsequent commitments. A necessary component of that commitment is

to promote conservation and sustainable management of natural resources for present and future generations.

The ethical concerns related to food and agriculture are thus essentially twofold. One is to promote conditions in which sufficient food is produced and distributed in ways that ensure that everyone has access to adequate food; the other is to promote policies and measures ensuring ecological sustainability of food production, including in fisheries, and similar sustainability in the practice of forestry.

Ethics require that people go beyond self-interest to care for others. The Panel has agreed in its earlier sessions that the major avenue to this is through contractarian ethics, which combines duty-based and utilitarian approaches. Ethics may be approached through the agreement of rationally self-interested and socially responsible individuals on guidelines for social interaction and governance.

The most elaborate and globally relevant ethical guidelines are found in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, founded on a careful balance between deontological and utilitarian principles. It constitutes the agreed global value framework that spans cultures, religions and ideologies, and is therefore the most widely recognized contractarian reference for global ethical assessment.

The world has the ability to produce sufficient food, but has not found ways to ensure its adequate distribution and consumption. The Panel considers it an ethical imperative to remedy the unacceptable gaps in access shown by the fact that hundreds of millions suffer from hunger and malnutrition in a world of plenty, and to ensure sustainable production. For the gap to be closed, measures have to be taken in many fields, all of which can give rise to their own ethical issues.

In its first session, the Panel opened up the general discussion of ethical issues in food and agriculture. It has since explored specific aspects in greater detail. A major focus of attention has been the ethical issues arising in food and agriculture from economic globalization and the intensification of agriculture. A second and related issue has been the exploration of ethical aspects of the global emergency of hunger.

A third focus has been on the ethical requirement to avoid the risks of, while sharing the benefits of, biotechnologies as part of the advancement of science, which also involves an examination of the ethical issues related to intellectual property rights including the Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS Agreement) and the International Union for the Protection of New Varieties of Plants (UPOV) and their relations to farmers' rights.

Ethical considerations of decision-making in relation to genetically modified organisms from the perspective of the consumer, food safety and the environment are closely related to this issue.

The Panel has examined a wide range of specific topics including: ethical issues in fisheries; the ethics of food safety; ethical issues in food aid; ethical perspectives on animal welfare and the intensification of animal production; the issues surrounding global goods, global services and privatization; and intellectual property rights. Details about the considerations and recommendations can be found in the three preceding reports of the Panel. ●