

HIGH LEVEL CONFERENCE ON WORLD FOOD SECURITY: THE CHALLENGES OF CLIMATE CHANGE AND BIOENERGY

Committee of the Whole: Agenda Item 5.1

Roundtable 1: High Food Prices: Causes, Consequences and Possible Solutions

Wednesday, 4 June 2008

Co-Chairs Report

The Roundtable was opened by the Chair of the Committee of the Whole, His Excellency Henri Djombo, Minister of Forest Economy, Republic of Congo. The co-chairs were His Excellency Ed Schafer, Secretary of Agriculture of the United States of America and His Excellency Moussa Mahaman, Minister of Agricultural Development of the Republic of Niger.

The panellists were Mrs Barbara Stocking, Executive Chief, Oxfam, Mr Willem-Jan Laan, Director, Global External Affairs, Unilever and Mr Joachim von Braun, Director General, International Food Policy Research Institute. Mr Hafez Ghanem, Assistant Director-General of the FAO Economic and Social Development Department, acted as Secretary.

Panellists and discussions from the floor reflected on the following questions:

1. What policies should governments take in the short run to protect vulnerable populations from the negative effects of food prices?
2. What are the best ways to enhance short-term supply response by farmers to high food prices?
3. How consistent are trade and other policy measures taken to increase food supplies and/or keep prices low in domestic markets with international commitments in the World Trade Organization?
4. What would be a strategy to re-launch agriculture and keep agriculture on top of the development agenda even when prices start levelling off?
5. What role do you think biofuels have played in increasing food prices--in the recent past? And in the future?
6. What form can a coordinated international response to high food prices take?

Mrs Stocking highlighted the importance of both safety nets and increased agricultural productivity, including the need for more research to improve crops grown by the poor, with an emphasis on small farmers. Mr Laan noted the importance of partnerships with the private sector in working with farmers at all levels. Mr von Braun noted that government policies are also needed to protect the vulnerable and that global food trade also considers regulation/monitoring of speculation and pooling of national food stocks at the global level.

The Roundtable generally agreed that the current food crisis results from many causes, as described in the FAO background paper on Soaring Food Prices (HLC/08/INF/1). These include weather-related production shortfalls, declining stocks, increasing fuel costs, increased demand for both food and biofuels, and export restrictions in some countries.

It was also agreed that the current food crisis is one that requires concerted and coordinated action with both short-term and long-term solutions.

In the short term, immediate actions are needed to protect the welfare of the most poor and hungry by providing direct support on an emergency basis, including via safety nets and social protection for the most vulnerable people, particularly women and children, in both rural and urban areas. Also needed are measures to enhance short-term supply response by smallholder farmers, including increased access to seeds and fertilizer, while ensuring that production is efficient and sustainable.

In the medium to longer term, it was agreed that increased investment in agriculture is essential. Priorities include improved access to inputs, credit, markets, extension services and information about best practices and market conditions, as well as investment in infrastructure, water management, technology and research. It was also noted that increased investment is necessary but not sufficient; special attention needs to be paid to the needs of small farmers, and social protection measures targeted at the most vulnerable people and the right to food need to be set up, or expanded and strengthened.

Appreciation was expressed for the commitments of increased support that have been made at the High-Level Conference, but it was emphasized that these measures should be well coordinated in order to enhance implementation, effectiveness and accountability. It was also suggested that national policies should be developed in partnership with the private sector and civil society, including farmers' organizations.

There was shared recognition of the importance of trade policies and negotiations. The way in which the Doha Round is concluded will have important implications for agriculture and commodity markets, as well as for food security, especially in poor countries.

Finally, participants agreed on the need not just for commitments, but for coordinated planning and immediate action.