

ADDRESS BY MR. BRENDAN SMITH, T.D. MINISTER FOR
AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD IRELAND ON THE OCCASION
OF THE HIGH LEVEL FAO CONFERENCE ON WORLD FOOD
SECURITY: THE CHALLENGES AND CLIMATE CHANGE AND
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[Director General], distinguished colleagues, ladies and gentlemen, I am honoured to be here today, to represent Ireland on this important occasion.

We have come together here in Rome to focus on the pressing needs of the most vulnerable. Rising food prices have had a dramatic effect on the food security of individuals and communities throughout the developing world. A desperate situation, in which 850 million people suffer from malnutrition, has been dramatically exacerbated. At a time when the Millennium Development goals call for a halving of those suffering from hunger, the pendulum has swung decisively in the opposite direction.

The current crisis in food prices serves one very important purpose. It reminds us of the need never to take food security for granted. It highlights how quickly, in today's world, that markets can change. Nevertheless, this crisis is not really a new situation for the millions of hungry poor. It is their persistent poverty that leaves them unable to cope when a crisis occurs. Food emergencies happen in communities that suffer the constant stress of chronic food insecurity and poverty.

There are many factors contributing to this situation. Such complicated problems require considered solutions, with the input of all nations, combined with the abilities of the UN multilateral system.

When a crisis occurs there is a demand for immediate action and a focus on short-term solutions. Indeed we must respond to the immediate food needs, and the world is coming together to do that. However, in order to help nations deal with rapidly changing situations and economic shocks, it is the long-term sustained response that also matters.

As part of our long-term response, Ireland is expanding its official development assistance programme, which will amount to some €914 million in 2008, and we will reach the target of 0.7% of gross national income in 2012, ahead of the EU target date of 2015. Our aid programme focuses on poverty reduction, and our own history gives us a particular understanding of, and sensitivity to, the scourge of hunger.

Ireland has set up a Hunger Task Force, which has representation from the UN system, NGOs, distinguished academics and the political world. This Task Force, which is expected to report shortly, is examining how the Irish Government can best contribute to tackling the problem of hunger. We believe it is time to recognise that hunger is the greatest single source of human suffering in the world today. National governments and donors alike need to focus their effort and resources on this problem to a far greater extent than is currently the case. My Government will decide shortly how Ireland can make its contribution to doing this, based on the Task Force report.

Ireland believes that a central part of the international response has to be support for sustainable agricultural production in Africa, and other food deficit regions. In our view, the issues of agricultural production and nutrition should become major priorities for development aid programmes, and Ireland welcomes the greater attention these issue are beginning to receive. We believe however that much more needs to be done. This will require that we radically reappraise our priorities, and that we fulfil the many commitments that have already been entered into at the two World Food Summits, in the Millennium Development Goals, in the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme, and elsewhere.

The recent rise in agricultural commodity prices has partly reversed many years of decline. Although they are causing enormous hardship for many, they also offer the possibility of improved income for poor farmers and increased food supply, if the agricultural sectors in the most affected countries are able to respond. We must give them the help they need to do so, and we must do so quickly. Partner governments must in turn ensure that they pursue supportive agricultural policies which promote sustainable pro-poor growth.

It is important that we recognise food security as an absolute imperative in our national and international policy framework. We must do this in a coherent way, extending not only to our national agricultural policies and aid programmes but also to international trade agreements. We should give ourselves the time and space to consider the potential interactions between the Doha Development Round and the current world food market situation.

Climate change is another major challenge facing our world today and it too calls for concerted action worldwide. We need to produce food sustainably to meet growing population needs. But climate change threatens our ability to do that by affecting production and ecosystems. Environmental issues must be integrated into agriculture systems to ensure sustainability and the multifunctional role of agriculture should be recognized and rewarded. Within the European Union, a range of agri-environment measures target better soil and water management, the preservation of biodiversity and landscapes and address climate change.

We face a great challenge in reconciling necessary action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions with the pressing need to increase agricultural production and ensure food security. We must also continue to find ways to help agriculture systems worldwide adapt to climate change and a vital part of this process is agricultural research. Resources must be targeted at this area to ensure that we can best meet the challenges ahead.

One of the central parts of the long-term response of the international community to situations of hunger and poverty is the contribution of the UN multilateral system. FAO is a vital part of that response. We can see clearly in the current situation, how FAO's expertise in data collection and statistics has provided the information necessary for donors to begin to prepare an appropriate response. FAO's normative role as a centre for international agricultural policy discussion is potentially crucial for framing a coherent international response to the twin challenges of food security and climate change.

It is therefore vital that FAO is fully fit for purpose. At present a plan for the effective implementation of the FAO reform programme is being drawn up, and FAO members have been participating in this vital task for some time now. It is essential for us all, and more importantly for those who depend on us to remove the scourge of hunger from their lives, that this task proceeds speedily. This would enable FAO to take an effective, leading role within a coherent multilateral effort to fight hunger.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I hope that our deliberations here in Rome, where governments, civil society and the entire UN system have come together, will generate the political will and effective action that is required to ensure a lasting improvement in food security for all. I assure you that Ireland is willing to play its part.

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