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THE VOLUNTARY GUIDELINES TO SUPPORT THE PROGRESSIVE REALIZATION OF THE RIGHT TO ADEQUATE FOOD IN THE CONTEXT OF NATIONAL FOOD SECURITY

I. INTRODUCTION

1. At its 127th Session in 2004, Council adopted the Voluntary Guidelines to Support the Progressive Realisation of the Right to Adequate Food in the Context of National Food Security, and decided to bring the guidelines to the attention of Conference. This information paper serves to inform Conference of the published version of the voluntary guidelines¹ released during a Special Event dealing with “The Implementation of Voluntary Guidelines on the Right to Adequate Food” held during FAO Council in June 2005. It also provides a brief overview of the voluntary guidelines, their relevance and of plans to implement them.

2. Following attention devoted to the right to adequate food during the World Food Summit and the World Food Summit: *five years later*, the 123rd session of Council formally established the Intergovernmental Working Group (IGWG) as a subsidiary body of the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) to elaborate a set of Voluntary Guidelines to Support the Progressive Realization of the Right to Adequate Food in the Context of National Food Security.²

3. According to its mandate, the IGWG completed its work in a period of two years. The guidelines were adopted by the IGWG on a consensus basis, endorsed by CFS in September and unanimously approved by Council in November 2004.

¹ Available from <http://www.fao.org/righttofood>

² Council Document CL/123/22 and Report of the 123rd Session of the Council

II. PROCESS

4. The elaboration of the Voluntary Guidelines was conducted in a highly participatory manner. Approximately 200 delegates from some 90 Member Nations were involved at IGWG meetings. This, on average, included approximately 160 country delegates, 11 stakeholder and 30 NGO representatives. Regional Chairs played an active role in consolidating regional positions to facilitate negotiations. The IGWG-Bureau made a significant contribution to shaping the draft voluntary guidelines and consolidating the many proposals received. Its members were also closely involved in steering inter-sessional activities in close collaboration with the Right to Food Secretariat.

III. RELEVANCE

5. The establishment and work of the IGWG was a major new development in the field of socio-economic rights. The voluntary guidelines represent the first attempt by governments to interpret an economic, social and cultural right, and to recommend actions to be undertaken for its realization thereby providing an additional instrument to combat hunger and poverty and to accelerate attainment of the Millennium Development Goals. Moreover, they represent a step towards integrating human rights into the work of agencies dealing with food and agriculture.

6. The voluntary guidelines envisage growing responsibility of both governments and citizens and may lead to better prioritization of government action and resource use in favour of the poor and vulnerable. This should help to focus on best practices to achieve food security.

7. The value of the voluntary guidelines is that they have moved beyond the normative content of the right to food to a more practical interpretation of the concept. The guidelines provide a framework within which to address food security and to start operationalizing the right to food. This has the important advantages of defining goals, accountabilities and obligations, of protecting the consistency of efforts to improve food security over time, and of ensuring effective monitoring of progress.

8. The voluntary guidelines can be used to strengthen and improve current development frameworks particularly with regard to social and human dimensions, putting the human being at the centre of development. They can serve to empower the poor and hungry to claim their rights. They represent an additional instrument to accelerate attainment of the World Food Summit and Millennium Development Goals.

IV. IMPLEMENTATION

9. The challenge for Member Nations and FAO is to implement the voluntary guidelines. With this in mind the Government of Germany assisted by FAO organised an International Workshop on "Policies Against Hunger-Implementing the Voluntary Guidelines" in June 2005. The objective of the workshop was to elaborate recommendations on how to apply a rights based approach to the problems of hunger and malnutrition³. These recommendations were presented at a Special Event on the Right to Food opened by the Director General and held during FAO Council the following week. At the same event, practical experience gained by pursuing the right to food was provided by the Minister of Agriculture and Food Security of Sierra Leone and by the Ambassador of Brazil.

10. While the guidelines are relatively comprehensive, more work is needed on how to apply them in practice, including their implication for a range of policies, institutions and legislation. FAO has created a new unit which will promote the right to food widely. With donor support the capacity of this unit has been considerably strengthened with a view to create the "critical mass"

³ See <http://www.policies-against-hunger.de>

of understanding, expertise and associated supporting materials required to assist willing Member Nations realize the right to food.

11. Realizing the right to food is an international legal obligation for most countries, in particular the 151 States that have ratified the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. FAO stands ready to cooperate with governments and other key actors that wish to pursue rights-based approaches to poverty reduction and are interested in realizing the right to adequate food in the context of national food security by implementing the voluntary guidelines.