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Продовольственная и
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Объединенных
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Organización
de las
Naciones
Unidas
para la
Agricultura
y la
Alimentación

COMMITTEE ON WORLD FOOD SECURITY

Thirty-fourth Session

Rome, 14-17 October 2008

NEWS ITEM - SPECIAL EVENT

CFS Special Event Informal Multi-stakeholder Forum:

High Prices and Food Security: Issues and Policy Responses

17 October 2008

The Committee on World Food Security (CFS) recently held its 34th Session in Rome at the headquarters of the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO). It included a Special Event to consider the impacts of rising food prices on food security, particularly in developing countries, and to discuss the outcomes of responses being implemented at national, regional and international levels around the world. Attended by representatives from developed and developing countries, international organisations, non-governmental organisations and civil society, the special event covered a wide range of issues ranging from how to reverse declining agricultural production in some regions to how speculative market transactions can be better managed to the benefit of food security.

The event was moderated by Brian Perry (Honorary Professor, University of Edinburgh, based in Kenya) and the discussions were supported by three panellists: Luc Maene (Director General of the International Fertilizer Industry Association (IFA), Lindiwe Sibanda (Chief Executive Officer for southern African Food Agriculture Natural Resources Policy Network (FANRPAN), and Nicolas Bricas (Researcher and Food Socio-Economist at CIRAD (Centre de Coopération Internationale en Recherche Agronomique pour le Développement)).

In a lively three-hour debate, Brian Perry steered the assembled experts through issues, such as the need for regional capacity in food reserves, the impacts of rising fuel and fertilizer costs, and the global complications caused by countries introducing export restrictions on foodstuffs to protect their national consumers from rising prices. One of the key points to emerge was the need for greater investment in agriculture, particularly in research and extension. Luc Maene emphasised that, while agriculture is knowledge intensive, such investment towards

increased productivity should also be associated with appropriate infrastructure development leading to market creation. Lindiwe Sibanda emphasised the importance of strong political leadership to ensure food security, coupled with intersectoral dialogues, and cited an impressive example of a turnaround in agricultural production from southern Africa.

The issue of partnerships and sound policies based on reliable information- not just technologies – to secure agricultural productivity, including by small holder farmers, was echoed from several quarters and especially by representatives of rural producers' organisations. When it comes to alleviating impacts of high food prices on the nutritional status of the most vulnerable, representatives of the Standing Committee on Nutrition emphasised the need to consider carefully how diverse diets can be best promoted and sustained, to minimise morbidity (particularly in children and women), improve cognitive capacity of children and reduce micro-nutrient deficiencies.

Discussion also touched on the controversial issue of bio fuels, driven by the global demand for alternative sources of fuel and the search for an informed position on this with regard to developing country agriculture. It was advanced that the use of food crops in Africa for bio fuels is unethical and, even where developed using non food crops, should be considered very carefully when it draws on scarce water and nutrient reserves essential for food crop production.

Speculative transactions in futures markets and certain commodities have been cited as one of the causes of rising food prices. Nicolas Bricas emphasised that dynamic prices on the market, to which speculation may contribute, do have a logic, and the dropping of prices, when it happens, is a good signal to producers, but sadly this dynamic is susceptible to abuses. Participants highlighted the need for mechanisms to provide better signals to market operators which would allow sound, while discouraging unhealthy or excessive, speculation.

The final report of the CFS and a summary of the Special Event and the Side Events is available at: http://www.fao.org/UNFAO/Bodies/cfs/cfs34/index_en.htm .