

# Hungry World

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Ten years ago, in 1996, governments from 180 nations made a commitment at the World Food Summit (WFS) to halve the number of undernourished people by 2015; today, according to the United Nations (UN) Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) report “The State of Food Insecurity in the World 2006”, almost no progress has been made to reduce the number of hungry people.

The figures on world hunger are striking. According to the report, 854 million people, or one in seven persons, lack access to sufficient food. The proportion in developing countries is higher, i.e. one out of six people face hunger and malnutrition. In Sub-Saharan Africa, the figure is one out of three people.

In many areas, the number of hungry people has actually increased, sometimes by more than 50%. The global figure also indicates an increase in the absolute number of hungry people, by about 23 million in 2001-2003.

There may be confusion about this figure when compared with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The MDG goal to halve the proportion of hungry people by 2015 may be achieved, but the absolute number of hungry people would not be halved.

Based on current population projections, if developing countries as a group can achieve the MDG goal of halving the number of hungry people, there would still be 585 million undernourished people. This would be about 173 million more undernourished people than the target of 412 million set by the WFS. This occurs in a world where, according to the FAO, there is enough food supply to feed the world.

Thus, as stated by FAO chief Jacques Diouf in his opening statement at the Special Forum on Food Security, “Hunger in a world of rich resources and immense technological capacity is a scandal”.

The Special Forum on Food Security held on 30-31 October preceded the 32nd session of the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) of the FAO. Despite the dire situation with regards to world hunger, the CFS session concluded without substantial commitment from its member states to analyse why there is persistent hunger and how to deal with the lack of progress to solve hunger.

The fact that World Food Summit +10 was downgraded to a mere Special Forum is indicative of the lack of commitment among governments to deal with malnourishment and hunger. The Special Forum convened three panels,

on Aid and Investment, Agrarian Reform and Rural Development, and Trade and Globalisation.

The results of the Special Forum were summarised by the chair Professor Michel Thibier from France, who also chaired the 32nd CFS session. The summary contained statements and views that enjoyed consensus, such as the need to promote pro-poor policies and strategies and to strengthen institutions for promotion of food security. Significant differences in opinions were expressed on the issue of making trade work for the poor, and creating an environment for private investment.

The summary also pointed out that concerns remained over the impacts of trade liberalisation, development of bio-fuels and genetically modified organisms on poor farmers. Wide differences of view also occurred on the influence of greater openness to trade and on achieving poverty reduction and enhancing food security through agriculture-led growth.

The summary also said that there will be winners and losers from further openness to trade - with the losers generally identified to be small farmers, particularly women, and the winners identified as those with capital to invest.

Furthermore, international organisations such as the FAO were urged to play a role in assisting governments to obtain information and analysis on globalisation trends, assessing the potential impacts of trade agreements and in developing trade policies that would be consistent with the objectives of agriculture development.

At the end of the Special Forum, Thibier read out the Chairperson's summary and said a written form would be appended to the CFS Report and that "it would be reasonable not to question the summary but merely to discuss the differences in opinions".

Delegates from several countries such as Canada made it clear that they could only agree to the summary as an appendix so long as it remains a Chairperson's summary, and is not legally binding.

During the discussion of the Chairperson's summary on November 1, some countries such as Denmark and the US said they would like to distance themselves from the report, as they could not agree to some of the negative views on trade liberalisation, and from certain concepts such as food sovereignty.

Civil society groups were also unhappy with the Chairperson's summary, which they felt did not adequately reflect the full spectrum of the debate, particularly the concerns over issues like trade liberalisation, agrarian reform and lack of access to resources. The NGOs provided their own summary of the Special Forum and asked for it to be annexed to the Chairperson's summary, but this request was turned down.

In effect, the report of the 32nd CFS said that the Chairperson's summary "was neither negotiated nor agreed upon by the participants of the Special

Forum. It is therefore non-binding to the Committee, its members or to the civil society or other organisations who participated in the Special Forum”.

The CFS report also reflected the debate about public goods and food sovereignty. Some countries (Brazil, Cuba and the Latin American and Caribbean group) objected to the use of the term “global public goods” which to be contrary to the principles of the Rio Declaration and other environmental agreements, especially with regard to national sovereignty over natural resources.

On the term “food sovereignty”, the report only mentioned that FAO noted that it has no recognised definition but it made reference to the capacity of nations to manage food supply in order to develop their own agricultural production and facilitate access of producers to local, national and international markets.

The final report of the 32nd CFS contains no substantial recommendations. The committee merely called for “urgent action to tackle the root causes of food insecurity” and outlines general recommendations for governments and FAO.

It also calls for mainstreaming the Voluntary Guidelines on the Right to Food, developed in 2004, into FAO’s work. On the other hand, NGOs called for governments to implement the Voluntary Guidelines, assess and amend it as necessary and then use it as a tool to achieve food security.

In the final analysis, the 32nd CFS was an extremely low profile event, not only in terms of attendance by heads of states and ministers, but also in terms of substantive commitment and progress in addressing food insecurity. It was a sad reflection of the lack of priority or confidence that governments have in the FAO’s role in solving world hunger and malnutrition. *≡≡≡*

*—Third World Network Features*