

UN abandons hunger reduction target

By Barry Mason
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The Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) of the United Nations abandoned its hunger reduction targets in advance of the World Food Summit on Food Security that opened in Rome on November 16. Instead, it has substituted a vague phrase. From now on, it will aim “to take action towards sustainably eradicating hunger at the earliest possible date.”

“The idea of setting a timetable for the eradication of hunger was presented by the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organisation and supported by Latin American, Middle Eastern and African nations. It was strongly rejected by the US, the European Union, Canada, Japan, New Zealand and Australia, said diplomats,” according to the *Financial Times*.

The FAO called the 2009 World Food Summit on Food Security as this year marked a 100 million increase in those affected by hunger worldwide, taking the figure to the 1 billion level. The summit has been heralded by public statements from a range of agencies expressing pessimism that the assembly in Rome will change anything.

ActionAid’s food rights coordinator, Francisco Sarmento, called the draft declaration preceding the summit, “just a rehash of old platitudes. . . It says hunger will be halved by 2015 but fails to commit any new resources to achieve this.” He said, “ActionAid appreciates Pope Benedict XVI’s attendance at the summit, but frankly he needs to pray for a miracle.”

Oxfam joined ActionAid in saying that the conference may be just “a waste of time and money.”

In his opening remarks to the summit, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon pointed out that even though the planet has enough food for all, a child dies of hunger every five seconds. He called on world leaders to act now to feed the earth’s one billion hungry and secure the lives of millions of others who are at risk of going hungry.

The previous official World Food Summit was held in 2002. In 2008, the rise in food prices due to the effects of the global economic crisis saw food riots in countries such as Haiti, Bangladesh and Egypt. In response, the FAO organised a special summit in June 2008, in which high-level representatives of the G8 participated.

The 2008 spike in food prices was a direct result in the speculative activity of the investors in the commodities markets, seeking to offset losses in the equities and mortgage sector. (See “United Nations conference offers derisory level of aid for millions hit by food prices”) Even though there was significant attendance from G8 government leaders, the commitment of funds fell far short of what was required. Only \$20 billion was pledged over a three-year period.

The UN Millennium Development targets were agreed by the leading economies. They include halving the number in hunger by 2015. This goal remains, in theory, on the agenda. However, as a joint statement put out by the development charities, Oxfam and ActionAid points out, a pledge of \$20 billion made by the G8 leading economies a few months ago only represents \$3 billion of new money. It amounts to \$3 per head of the estimated billion people going hungry.

The figure promised is less than the \$3.2 billion announced in profits by Goldman Sachs just prior to this year’s World Food Day. Figures produced by the UN itself estimate a commitment of \$25 billion to \$40 billion a year by the G8 countries is necessary to achieve the millennium goals. But no representative of the G8 leading industrialized countries attended the summit, with the exception of Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, who took advantage of the opportunity to miss the first day of his trial on corruption and tax fraud charges in Milan. Ironically, he was elected to preside as chairman over the event.

In calling the World Food Summit, at which 60 heads of state were expected to attend, FAO Director-General Jacques Diouf noted that hunger is affecting one sixth of the world’s population and “poses a serious risk for world peace and security.”

Diouf bemoaned the lack of interest in this year’s summit as a sign that the issue of food security has a low priority on the world’s agenda. “Unfortunately, such interest seems to be waning as other issues are coming to the forefront of the international agenda, although all the heavy clouds which led to the previous crisis are again accumulating in the skies,” he said. “The absence of key heads of state today is a clear indication of what I just said.”

In recognition of its increasing impotence to address the hunger affecting one sixth of the planet, Diouf called on people to join a hunger strike on the eve of the conference and to sign up to a proposed billion-name petition against hunger. This political stunt offers no perspective to the world's starving and malnourished.

Although prices have stabilized following the sharp increases of many staple foods last year, they are still high for many millions of people. The UN's World Food Programme (WFP) deputy executive director, Sheila Sisulu, speaking in August this year, said, "Our view is that they won't go back to the prices before 2008."

She added that Africa was particularly badly affected as the prices there were still relatively higher than in other parts of the world. Food prices in Africa are adversely affected by poor infrastructure and the lack of development in agriculture.

It is even possible that there will be another hike in food prices if the world economy resumes growth. As the Food Summit opened, Diouf warned, "When the recovery picks up, we will be back to square one."

"We have all the elements of the crisis," he continued.

He pointed to the continuing pressure on food prices from the lack of investment, growing demand from Asia, the increased use of agricultural land for bio-fuels and the falling dollar.

The proportion of undernourished people in the world fell from 25 percent in 1979 to 16 percent in 2003. But it has now risen to almost 20 percent.

The transnational food companies who were present at the summit recognize in this crisis an opportunity to make massive profits and to join the banks in the queue for a handout. These giant companies with their multimillion-dollar profits insist that they will need state help if they are to increase food production.

Small farmers will inevitably find themselves increasingly squeezed and driven from their land as the food giants move in to dominate Africa and other semi-colonial countries.

In the past, Overseas Development Aid (ODA) has been presented as the main thrust of the bid to reduce world hunger. In reality, very little of this went to poor farmers. Most of it found its way into the coffers of the banks through loan repayments and transnational corporations because it was tied to trade deals. But there is now increasingly a shift away from the use of ODA.

Speaking last month, Diouf explained that \$45 billion was needed in development aid to agriculture in developing countries. He compared this to the \$355 billion spent in 2007 supporting agriculture in the world's leading economies.

The Food Summit commits donors to "substantially

increase the share of ODA (Overseas Development Aid) devoted to agriculture and food security," without setting a numerical target.

A recent report by the British think tank Chatham House highlighted the poor state of agriculture in sub-Saharan Africa. It explained that current agricultural production was 15 percent below that achieved in the early 1960s.

Spending on agriculture is lower today, the report explained, than in 1980. Two thirds of Africa's population is involved in agriculture, but they only receive 5-10 percent of government spending.

Only 4 percent of the land growing crops in Africa is irrigated and most of the irrigated land is held by South African commercial farmers. Poor transport infrastructure exacerbates the problem and keeps prices for basic foods high.

The decision of the FAO to abandon its target for hunger reduction is a vivid demonstration of the shift of wealth from the poorest members of society to the very richest. It has taken place as the ongoing financial crisis of the capitalist system has seen enormous financial resources transferred to the financial oligarchy. This is happening at the expense of workers' living conditions all over the globe.

The poorest are paying the highest price for this transfer of wealth. The situation in semi-colonial countries in Asia, Latin America and Africa is only the most extreme example of a process that can increasingly be seen even in a country like America. Rising levels of actual hunger are being reported as workers lose their jobs and wages of those employed are driven down, creating a social crisis on a scale that has not been seen since the Great Depression.

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