



PRESS STATEMENT

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Food Summit: Some Progress But More Needs to be Done

The UN food summit closes with a strong statement on agriculture, but fails to adequately address trade, biofuels, safety nets, and implementation

By Joachim von Braun

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The final declaration of the “Conference on World Food Security: Challenges of Climate Change and Bioenergy” strongly affirms the need for investing in agriculture, a very positive development. It is noteworthy that governments recognize the need to dramatically increase food production and to provide assistance to small-scale farmers in developing countries to boost their productivity. This focus on agriculture is very much needed and long overdue.

However, the summit declaration is weak in four other areas: trade, biofuels, safety nets for vulnerable people, and accountability for implementation. Looking forward, strong action is needed in each of these areas.

- **Trade:** Export bans and other trade distorting measures only exacerbate the crisis. Unfortunately, the summit barely came to a consensus for recognizing the problem, let alone taking action. IFPRI research found that the elimination of export bans would stabilize grain price fluctuations, reduce price levels by as much as 30 percent, and enhance the efficiency of agricultural production. The G-8 summit and international meetings should take a stronger stance on this issue.
- **Biofuels:** Biofuels that use grains and oilseeds contribute significantly to food price inflation. IFPRI analysis shows that these types of biofuels accounted for 30 percent of the rise in grain prices between 2000 and 2007. Corn-based ethanol accounted for 40 percent of the increase in maize prices during this period. Nevertheless, the summit shied away from distinguishing between beneficial and risky types of biofuels. Ultimately, the declaration dodged the issue by calling for “in-depth studies.”

- Safety nets: Poor people are hit hardest by food price increases. Governments need to invest more in measures such as child nutrition, school feeding, and conditional cash and food transfer programs, to mitigate the price effects for people living on the edge. Safety nets like these help avoid the suffering of people who are unable to afford enough food, and they increase the long-term resilience of poor people to crises. A substantial body of research by IFPRI and other organizations has confirmed that well designed safety-net programs have high payoffs, both in terms of economic productivity and poverty reduction.
- Implementation: The declaration lacks clarity as to who is responsible for its implementation. Without these specifics, the outcome could be similar to the previous two food summits in 1996 and 2002: a lot of good intentions, but few results. Global hunger has barely declined since 1996, and is now getting worse in light of the current food crisis.

Progress must be made on these issues to address the global food crisis. Throughout much of the world, the poorest people are being squeezed by high food prices. They need action now.

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