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COMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC, SOCIAL
AND CULTURAL RIGHTS

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The World Food Crisis¹

Statement

1. The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights is alarmed at the rapid worldwide rise in food prices and the soaring energy prices that have precipitated a global food crisis and are adversely affecting the right to adequate food and freedom from hunger as well as other human rights of more than 100 million people.
2. The world has lived for too many years with a chronic crisis of 854 million people suffering from food insecurity and two billion people suffering from malnutrition and undernutrition.
3. Prices of basic staple foods (including rice, maize, wheat etc) have risen by up to 60 per cent around the world. The poorest people in the world are the most severely affected as they already spend up to 60-80 per cent of their income on food, compared with 20 per cent in the developed world.
4. The food crisis underscores the interdependence of all human rights, as the enjoyment of the human right to adequate food and freedom from hunger is of paramount importance for the enjoyment of all other rights, including the right to life.
5. The Committee calls upon all States to revisit their obligations under article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Under article 11(1) of the Covenant, States parties recognize “the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living for himself and his family, including adequate food, clothing and housing and to the continuous improvement of living conditions”.

¹ Adopted by the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights on 16 May 2008 during its fortieth session (25th meeting).

6. In its general comment No. 12 (1999) on the right to adequate food, the Committee affirms that “the right to adequate food is indivisibly linked to the inherent dignity of the human person and is indispensable for the fulfillment of other human rights enshrined in the International Bill of Human Rights².

7. All State parties are obliged to ensure for everyone within their jurisdiction physical and economic access to the minimum essential food, which is sufficient, nutritionally adequate and safe, to ensure freedom from hunger³.

8. Under article 11(2) of the Covenant, States parties recognize the “fundamental right of everyone to be free from hunger”. In its general comment No. 12, the Committee underlines the fact that “States have a core obligation to take the necessary action to mitigate and alleviate hunger as provided for in paragraph 2 of article 11, even in times of natural or other disasters”⁴, and that the core content or the minimum essential levels of the right to adequate food and freedom from hunger implies “the availability of food in a quantity and quality sufficient to satisfy the dietary needs of individuals, free from adverse substances, and acceptable within a given culture, and the accessibility of food in ways that are sustainable and do not interfere with the enjoyment of other human rights”⁵.

9. The current food crisis represents a failure to meet the obligations to ensure an equitable distribution of world food supplies in relation to need. The food crisis also reflects failure of national and international policies to ensure physical and economic access to food for all.

10. The Committee calls upon all States to address the immediate causes of the food crisis, individually through national measures, as well as internationally through international cooperation and assistance to ensure the right to adequate food and freedom from hunger. The Committee notes that many of the measures undertaken to help States and persons affected by the crisis are of a humanitarian nature and supports their immediate implementation.

11. The Committee therefore urges States to take urgent action, including by:

- Taking immediate action, individually and through international assistance, to ensure freedom from hunger through, inter alia, the provision and distribution of emergency humanitarian aid without discrimination⁶. Humanitarian aid should be provided in cash resources wherever possible.
- Where food aid is provided, care should be taken to ensure that food is purchased locally wherever possible and that it does not become a disincentive for local production. Donor countries should prioritize assistance to States most affected by the food crisis;
- Limiting the rapid rise in food prices by, inter alia, encouraging production of local staple food products for local consumption instead of diverting prime arable land suitable for food crops for the production of agrofuels, as well as the use of food crops for the production of fuel, and introducing measures to combat speculation in food commodities;
- Establishing an international mechanism of coordination to oversee and coordinate responses to the food crisis and to ensure the equitable distribution of food

² See general comment No. 12, para. 4

³ Ibid., paras. 15 and 36.

⁴ Ibid., para. 6.

⁵ Ibid., para. 8.

⁶ Ibid., para. 18.

supplies according to need, and that the policy measures adopted will respect, protect and fulfill the realization of the right to adequate food and freedom from hunger.

12. The Committee also calls upon States to pay attention to the longer-term structural causes of the crisis and to focus attention on the gravity of the underlying causes of food insecurity, malnutrition and undernutrition, that have persisted for so long.

13. The Committee urges States parties to address the structural causes at the national and international levels, including by:

- Revising the global trade regime under the WTO to ensure that global agricultural trade rules promote, rather than undermine, the right to adequate food and freedom from hunger, especially in developing and net food-importing countries;
- Implementing strategies to combat global climate change that do not negatively affect the right to adequate food and freedom from hunger, but rather promote sustainable agriculture, as required by article 2 of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change;
- Investing in small-scale agriculture, small-scale irrigation and other appropriate technologies to promote the right to adequate food and freedom from hunger for all, including implementing the recommendations of the International Assessment of Agricultural Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD) of 2008⁷.
- Introducing and applying human rights principles, especially those relating to the right to adequate food and freedom from hunger, by undertaking ex ante impact assessments of financial, trade and development policies at both the national and international levels, to ensure that their bilateral and multilateral financial, trade and development commitments do not conflict with their international human rights obligations, particularly under the Covenant.
- Applying and reinforcing the FAO's "Voluntary Guidelines to Support the Progressive Realization of the Right to Adequate Food in the Context of National Food Security", in the light of the present food crisis.

14. In conclusion, the Committee emphasizes that the world food crisis severely affects the full realization of the human right to adequate food and to be free from hunger, and therefore calls upon all States to fulfill their basic human rights obligations under the Covenant

⁷ See www.agassessment.org.