odi

Global Hunger and Food Security after the World Food Summit

The World Food Summit (WFS) organised by the FAO in November 1996 – the 12th international conference under UN auspices since 1990 – took place in an atmosphere of widespread scepticism. Many of those attending were suffering conference fatigue, as reflected in the press coverage which focused often on the contrast between the subject matter, hunger, and the 5,000 delegates enjoying the gastronomic and other delights of Rome. The meeting was also overshadowed by yet another humanitarian crisis in the African Great Lakes region. Substantively, two decades after the World Food Conference of 1974, the Summit Declaration on world food security and associated Plan of Action reaffirmed the commitment of the international community to eradicating the hunger and malnutrition affecting around one-fifth of the *population of the developing world and specifically to halving the number of undernourished people over a period of 20 years.*

This Briefing Paper considers what the Summit specifically achieved and failed to achieve. Such a retrospective examination also provides an opportunity to reflect on the usefulness of the international conference as a focal point in addressing issues of global significance.

Déjà vu or something new?

It is easy to be cynical about the outcome of the WFS. Seen in a historical context, will it prove to have been yet another failure in the many attempts to achieve world food security over the past half century? Coming at the end of a series of UN-sponsored international conferences since the beginning of the 1990s, there was a feeling of resignation, even resentment, that yet another expensive talking-shop, with an unrealistic programme of action and inadequate commitment of additional resources, would raise false hopes and lead nowhere. Concern was heightened by the questions raised as to what had substantially and sustainably been achieved by the 23 resolutions adopted at the previous World Food Conference twenty or so years earlier.

The real achievements of the 1974 Conference process have perhaps been underestimated. The gap between aspiration – eradicating hunger – and the continuing reality of approximately 800 or more million undernourished people is stark. Nevertheless, the proportion of undernourished people has fallen substantially from 38% in 1969/71 to 20% in 1990/92 according to FAO. World food production has outpaced population growth; the combination of successful dissemination of new technology, more intensive input use and closer integration of markets has sustained the growth in production, belying the more pessimistic forecasts of 20 years ago. However, an important qualification is that per capita food production has not increased in most highly-indebted, low-income countries, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa.

Equally impressive, famine has been virtually confined since 1974 to conflict situations, where considerable political and logistical difficulties hamper delivery and access. The drought-related crises particularly affecting pastoralists in marginal environments in Africa, such as in Western Darfur (Sudan) or Turkana (Kenya), were largely alleviated by post-1974 food security arrangements. This containment of famine is, to a significant degree, the real achievement of the process of international negotiation of which the 1974 Conference was the focal point. New institutional arrangements were made and a fresh conceptual framework for discussing international food problems was elaborated.

From 1945 until the early 1970s, US food surpluses had, in effect, been the guarantor of world food security. The massive food aid to India during its drought crisis of 1965/6 is a good example. Then the US abdicated this solo role by its prioritisation of commercial sales to the then USSR and its explicit use of food as a political weapon. By 1974 in a world crisis situation of drought, floods and famine with turbulent international cereal markets there was a considerable institutional gap to be filled. FAO's Global Information and Early Warning System (GIEWS) met the needs of other donors lacking US Department of Agiculture's intelligence network of agricultural attachés, in providing country-specific assessments of food problems and import requirements. The governance of the World Food Programme was strengthened.

Box 1: The quest for food security: concepts and definitions

The quest for food security – the avoidance of hunger and famine – is as old as civil society itself. Adequate nutrition and food security are important outcomes of development: conversely, they are vital contributors to the development process. However, food security as a concept was initially seen in the 1970s mainly as a 'food problem', particularly that of (a) ensuring production of adequate food supplies and (b) maximising stability in their flow. That view led to a focus on international measures to reduce price variability and finance additional costs of exceptional imports, and to self-sufficiency strategies at a national level.

In 1983, FAO expanded its concept to include a third prong, securing access by vulnerable people to available supplies. Attention should be balanced between the demand and supply side of the food security equation. The world food problem is, therefore, not synonymous with the world hunger and food insecurity problem. Achieving longer-term food security is inextricably linked to overcoming other world crises of population, unemployment, debt, energy, environment and political security – all problems with a significant national and local component – that breed negatively on each other.

The broader concept of food security is reflected in the World Food Summit definition: 'food security, at the individual, household, national, regional and global levels [is achieved] when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life'. It recognised that poverty is 'a major cause of food insecurity and [that] sustainable progress in poverty eradication is critical to improving access to food', but noted that 'conflict, terrorism, corruption and environmental degradation also contribute significantly to food insecurity.'

From the relatively straightforward concept of 'food self-sufficiency', a counter-intuitive view of development has thus emerged, based on the premise that those who are short of food will only be able to obtain it in the longer run if they can pay for it, leading to the concept of 'food self-reliance'. This view has highlighted the importance of employment and markets; it also underscores the need for safety-nets and market protection for the unemployed and other vulnerable groups. However, some forms of protection such as general consumer subsidies have sometimes disrupted the functioning of markets and undermined comparative advantage, leading to the call for market liberalisation. The complex chain of causality goes on, leading back to food insecurity.

The joint WFP/FAO International Emergency Food Reserve provided a vehicle for collective emergency food aid, albeit with more limited advance commitments than the 500,000 tonnes of cereals envisaged. The Food Aid Convention commitments, initially set in 1967 at 4.25 million tonnes a year, were expanded in 1980 to 7.6 million tonnes, much closer to the 1974 Conference target of 10 million tonnes of cereals. The Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR), established in 1971, also oversaw a rapid increase in research funding for food crops and livestock: the number of centres increased from 4 to 13 and expenditure from US$50 million to $250 million in 1980 (see *ODI Briefing Paper*, 1994 (3) September . The International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) was created to fund small-scale agriculture with soft loans, hopefully to be boosted with OPEC petrodollars. The World Food Council set up in 1977 succeeded, at least initially, in sustaining an international dialogue on food issues resulting notably in the food strategies initiatives of the early 1980s. Within FAO the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) provided another forum for annual review of wider issues. The 1974 Conference also introduced and gave widespread recognition to the new policy concept of food security (see Box 1).

In clear contrast to the debates and resolutions surrounding the 1974 Conference, the preparations for the 1996 Summit shared no widespread sense of a deepening crisis that necessitated a major initiative on economic, humanitarian or political grounds. A tighter world cereals market situation and an accompanying price spike in 1995 temporarily raised concern about problems of unstable supply and the possible effects of the GATT Uruguay Round. But these pressures eased during 1996.

The choice of date for the Summit was probably far from ideal. The newly established World Trade Organization (WTO) was to hold its first meeting within weeks. Worse, the attention of the major force in world food policy, the US, was inevitably elsewhere, with the Presidential election also in early November. And within the UN itself, the impending election of the Secretary-General was a further distraction for departments of foreign affairs.

There is also a widespread perception in official circles that there are too many institutional arrangements, too many bodies with overlapping mandates and duplication of responsibilities, not just in the area of food security, but in the whole international system for supporting human security and development. The effect of contracting aid funding is that these resources are potentially being spread ever more thinly, raising problems of effectiveness and efficiency.

Progress on food security

The 1996 Summit has been important in confirming a near-consensus on the main features of the global problem of food insecurity as it now exists. It recognised the unacceptable dimensions of problems of hunger and malnutrition. Second, these problems were seen as primarily associated with poverty, intensified by interacting with conflict and other sources of political instability. Third, food security was recognised as not just a technical matter of assuring food supplies. Instead, three aspects – availability, stability of supply and access for all – were recognised. This broad view has awkward policy implications (see Box 1).

The complexity of food security has been a major barrier in reaching consensus on how to achieve it; and inconclusiveness of policy prescriptions has resulted in inadequate action. The concept has evolved, developed, multiplied and diversified in recent years reflecting the diverse nature of the problem as experienced by poor people themselves. There are now close to 200 different definitions of 'food security'.

Between the World Food Conference of 1974 and the WFS of 1996, a series of international conferences have been held on key issues – children, nutrition, environment, human rights, population, social development, women and habitat – relating

directly and indirectly to food security. A number of UN agencies, many bilateral programmes and most NGOs have made the improvement of food security a major objective of their activities. Within the UN system alone, including the international financial institutions, at least 36 bodies are directly and indirectly involved in food security and nutrition objectives. There are also now 18 international centres of the CGIAR.

The Sub-Committee on Nutrition (SCN) of the UN's Administrative Co-ordinating Committee (ACC) estimates that between 1987 and 1991 the resources provided for nutrition and other sectors relating to food security averaged $5 billion a year, of which 60% was supplied bilaterally and 40% from the international system, principally the World Bank. Total expenditure (excluding food aid) on projects designed to have a direct impact on improving nutritional status in developing countries (a narrower and shorter-term concept) is estimated to have averaged $144 million a year during the same period, representing 0.2% of total official development assistance (oda). On a per capita basis, these funds averaged 4 US cents per person a year for all developing countries, and were unlikely to have had a major impact on the nutritional situation. Meanwhile, FAO estimates that international assistance to agricultural development declined from $16 billion in 1988 to $10 billion in 1994. These quite modest totals, and especially the decline in aid to agriculture, were major factors in FAO's decision to call the Summit. With so many aid agencies involved, there is a real danger that as food security is regarded as 'everybody's business', it has become 'nobody's responsibility'. There are also inevitable 'turf problems' resulting from the overlapping mandates in areas such as food aid (Box 2).

> **Box 2: Mandates and responsibilities: the issue of incoherence.**
> The current institutional incoherence can be illustrated by the practical case of food aid. Each major aspect of food security policy involves similar issues of incoherence, overlapping mandates, arbitrarily divided responsibility and these were not addressed in any systematic way in the Summit process.
> Various aspects of food aid policies and their implementation are considered in parallel in different fora. The actors involved variously include aid, development and sectoral agricultural food and export ministries. Minimum commitments under the Food Aid Convention are monitored by a **Food Aid Committee** of donor countries, with the International Grains Council in London acting as Secretariat. The **FAO Committee on World Food Security** (CFS) in Rome provides a general framework for food security policy. The FAO **Consultative Sub-Committee on Surplus Disposal** in Washington DC monitors food aid to ensure free trade principles are not violated. This is now also a **WTO** issue. The WFP **Executive Board**, which until 1995 was called the Committee on Food Aid Policies and Programmes, also has a mandate to consider wider food aid policy issues. **UNICEF** (New York), the UN **High Commissioner for Refugees** (Geneva) and the **Department of Humanitarian Affairs** within the UN Secretariat (Geneva and New York) have an interest in aspects of food aid and convene international meetings in relation to their wider responsibilities. Up to 1993, the **World Food Council** with its own Secretariat in Rome provided an annual forum, primarily for Ministers of Agriculture, to discuss food security including food aid issues. But there is no single forum or body through which a major international or national crisis would automatically be considered or overall policy reviewed and negotiated.

WFS declarations and plans

The WFS has served to bring food security back on to the international agenda and to integrate it into the series of world issues that the previous conferences of the 1990s addressed.

It has also established a focus on food security that is multifaceted and multi-sectoral instead of the production and stockholding orientation of the past. This has contributed to developing consensus around the kind of regime that is required to achieve food security in sustainable ways. It has provided opportunities for airing different views and opinions and has acted as an instrument of advocacy for co-ordinated action at the national level, supported by the international community.

The WFS Declaration and Plan of Action were hammered out by Member State representatives over a period of 18 months prior to the Summit in a series of regional and co-ordination meetings. The texts were finally agreed on 31 October 1996 and the Declaration was adopted unanimously at the beginning of the meeting. It reaffirmed 'the right of everyone to have access to safe and nutritious food, consistent with the right to adequate food and the fundamental right of everyone to be free from hunger'. It considered it 'intolerable that more than 800 million people throughout the world, and particularly in developing countries, do not have enough food to meet their basic nutritional needs', and set what was regarded as an attainable target of 'reducing the number of undernourished people to half their present level no later than 2015'. A mid-term review was to be carried out by 2006 to ascertain whether it was possible to achieve this target. The emphasis was placed on national action, supplemented and reinforced by international co-operation.

The Summit reiterated that the availability of enough food for all can be attained. Reference was made to the fact that the 5.8 billion people in the world today have, on average, 15% more food per person than the 4 billion people of 20 years ago. But a warning was given that further large increases in production, through the sustainable management of natural resources, are required to feed a growing population and achieve improved diets.

A Plan of Action, with the common objective of universal food security, espoused seven 'areas of commitment':
- ensuring and enabling political, social and economic environment;
- implementing policies aimed at eradicating poverty and inequality and improving physical and economic access to food by all;
- pursuing participatory and sustainable food production and rural development policies and practices in both high and low potential areas;
- ensuring trade policies conducive to fostering food security for all;
- preventing and forestalling natural and man-made disasters and meeting transitory and emergency food requirements;
- allocating public and private investments to foster human resources, sustainable agricultural systems and rural development in high and low potential areas; and
- implementing, monitoring and following up the Plan of Action.

Throughout the Action Plan, reference was made to the relevant agreements reached at the previous conferences of the 1990s. Substantively, the negotiators saw off the extreme Malthusians who consider the answer to world food problems to be a combination of rigorous population control and massive efforts to produce more food in high potential areas. The poverty reduction strategy for food security addresses also the needs of poor and vulnerable people living in low potential areas. Critics argue, however, that what has been achieved is only a restatement of commitments acceptable to every government rephrased in the sustainable, participatory, gender-sensitive, anti-poverty, environmentally-friendly terms of the moment. One of the few new and specific proposals commits governments to monitoring progress in reducing chronic hunger. Its implementation involves the production of hunger maps to be used in identifying vulnerable populations, and monitoring hunger reduction strategies (Box 3).

Furthermore, as with most other UN conferences, the

> **Box 3 Vulnerability and risk mapping**
> Typically after natural disasters there are acute pressures, for example from local politicians, for relief and reconstruction funds to be distributed more broadly and thinly than would be justified by a policy of targeting the most severely affected. Identification of the spatial priorities for investment in food security and disaster preparedness can be equally problematic. Vulnerability and risk mapping, which draws upon technical advances in Geographic Information Systems (GIS) may be a useful tool for informing and thereby strengthening decision-making in these difficult areas.
>
> For example, after the 1974 famine in Bangladesh, Bruce Currey, a geographer, prepared a widely-circulated map of 'Areas liable to famine'. The WFP subsequently adopted a simplified version of this disaster vulnerability map in determining food aid allocations to national food-for-work and vulnerable group development food distribution to poor, female-headed households. And following the droughts in sub-Saharan Africa in the early 1980s, NGOs, experimenting with early warning systems, further developed the concept of vulnerability mapping. For example, Save the Children Fund (UK) has incorporated a range of technical and socio-economic data into the compilation of food security and nutritional status maps in Ethiopia.
>
> The Summit Plan of Action has accorded such risk mapping a potentially important role in vulnerability assessment and monitoring for each low-income food-deficit country and other countries and regions vulnerable to emergencies. However, the most effective ways of employing GIS have yet to be convincingly demonstrated. Does the state of the art yet justify what might become standardised parallel exercises in many countries? Some researchers on early warning systems suggest that the problem is no longer one of information *per se* but of the networking and uses of information.

agreements reached are not binding. No fresh aid or other commitments were made amid much reference to working within 'available resources'. No new institutional arrangements were proposed. Implementation of the recommendations contained in the Plan of Action is to be 'the sovereign right and responsibility of each State'. Co-ordination of international co-operation, especially among agencies of the UN system, will be carried out using existing mechanisms and forums. Thus FAO's reporting on its responsibilities in monitoring the Plan is to be through its Committee on World Food Security (CFS) to the ACC and then to ECOSOC. Many see these established forums and their procedures as a bureaucratic waste of time. At the country level, UN agency representatives are required to work with the UN resident co-ordinator to support implementation of the Action Plan. Thus the channels of communication are clear, but substantively it remains unclear whether there will be any new or different actions to monitor.

Civil society institutions

The Plan of Action makes many references to actors or institutions in civil society in implementing and monitoring the Plan. In affirmation of this role, the NGO Forum at the Summit, which involved over 1,000 organisations from 80 countries, set out its own alternative model for achieving food security based on decentralisation and a break-up of the present concentration of wealth and power. The collective statement *Profit for the Few or Food for All* highlighted six key elements:
- strengthening the capacity of family farmers and local and regional food systems;
- reversing the concentration of wealth and power;
- changing farming systems towards agro-ecological principles;
- recognising that primary responsibility for ensuring food security lies with national and local governments, whose capacity must be strengthened and accountability enhanced;
- strengthening and deepening the participation of people's

organisations and NGOs at all levels; and
* guaranteeing in international law the basic human right to food.

The most obvious differences in emphasis between the governments' and the NGOs' statements concern the role of trade and markets and the right to food. The former sees market globalisation and liberalisation following ratification of the Uruguay Round as largely positive in effect at a national level. Trade reduces fluctuations in food consumption, relieves part of the burden of stockholding and promotes growth. Trade-related aspects of food security are also a WTO issue. The NGOs, however, are critical of the effects of both trade liberalisation, particularly because of the lack of accountability of transnational corporations operating within the global economy, and of structural adjustment programmes on the poor and food-insecure.

Hunger and malnutrition were regarded by the NGO Forum as fundamentally questions of justice. The right to the sustenance of life should come before the quest for profit. The Forum's message was 'Queremos una tierra para vivir'. The Summit Plan committed the UN only to exploring the legal ramifications of a universal right to food which, in a dissenting note, the US representative interpreted as an objective or aspiration and not a binding commitment or obligation.

Prospects for global leadership and cohesion

As global food security is an international issue, what would need to be done to ensure global leadership and cohesion? Leaving it to the institutional arrangements established by the World Food Conference in 1974 has been only partially successful.

The 1996 Summit emphasises strengthening the existing institutions by increasing their efficiency and co-ordination. No additional resources are contemplated, however. Only in the role envisaged for FAO in supporting the assessment of hunger problems (Box 3) and in monitoring performance against conference commitments is there any substantive follow-up. This may well imply business as usual for everyone, but within gradually tighter budgetary constraints. Such an outcome is broadly similar to that of the 50th anniversary of the Bretton Woods institutions on the future of the Multilateral Development Banks (see *ODI Briefing Paper* 1996 (4) November). Perhaps a conference convened by one UN specialised agency with a limited sectoral mandate cannot hope to address these broader questions of the future structure of the international system.

A proposal was made at the World Food Conference in 1974, but not agreed, to establish a 'world food security council'. Instead, the World Food Council was set up in 1977 as a separate body but without executive authority, and with a mandate that cut across that of other agencies. Its demise in 1993 suggests that this is no solution. Nor can a co-ordinating authority reasonably be located in a single agency such as FAO with restricted sectoral representation – typically in its case Ministries of Agriculture, largely responsible for production and producers' interests – and a limited sectoral mandate. No single agency or institution has the resources, capacity or competence to overcome food insecurity alone. And it should not be left to NGOs and the private sector, important as their contributions can be.

Some proposals have been made to meet these problems. A 'UN economic security council' has been advocated as a decision-making forum at the highest level to review threats to global human security and to provide a structure to deal with issues of world governance and world action vis-à-vis poverty and social needs in a systematic and politically realistic way. The Group of Seven (G7) industrialised countries and the Group of Fifteen (G15) developing countries have been called upon to establish a joint high-level steering committee for sustainable food and nutrition security. Whatever decisions are taken on UN reform, a focal point is needed on food security at the highest political level, to ensure that it remains a central issue in action for economic and social development and peace, with cohesive and co-ordinated programmes of international development assistance.

Another alternative to the special international conference in global dialogue would be to give the regular activities of the UN and its specialised agencies more intensive problem-centred focus. Thus the FAO might organise, perhaps every four to five years, a specially expanded session of its governing body on issues of major concern. The WFS has confirmed that organisations in civil society should have a role in dialogue with governments in such meetings.

On the issue of food security for all, the division seems to be not over whether this can be achieved, but on whether it will be done. As the UN Secretary-General put it at the World Bank conference on Overcoming Global Hunger in November 1993: 'The world now produces enough food to feed its population. The problem is not simply technical. It is a political and social problem. It is a problem of access to food supplies, of distribution and of entitlement. Above all, it is a problem of political will'. However, as the contrasting experiences of 1974 and 1996 underline, political will is not some 'given', but is heavily contingent on circumstances and the pressures that can mobilise and sustain a coalition for change.

With hindsight, the preconditions for a major initiative at the WFS were lacking. First, there was no shared sense of either an immediate food crisis or an otherwise inexorably deteriorating longer-term food security situation. Second, the specific dates meant that the attention of trade and foreign policy specialists was largely elsewhere. Third, the immediate humanitarian security issue, which overshadowed the WFS process, has been conflict-related emergencies. Fourth, with the future structure and financing of the UN as a whole in question, reconfiguring some component parts was unlikely to be a G7 or G15 or global priority.

Perhaps the Summit's achievement has been to achieve a near-consensus on the nature of the pre-eminent issue of food security, namely, how to tackle the inter-related problems of hunger and poverty. However, it failed to address the difficult international and inter-agency institutional issues. The Declaration and Plan of Action reflect the negotiations amongst Member States within and around the FAO Committee on World Food Security, and the outcome will depend on what they choose to make of this agenda. What has been the overall balance sheet? A costly process, particularly in terms of human resources, for relatively limited outcomes? The alternative view might be that in a global economy where policy agendas are defined in international media events, the issues of hunger and food security would be marginalised without such a highly publicised forum.