
THE RIGHT TO FOOD AND POLICY COHERENCE: TIME TO DELIVER

- **Michael O'Brien**

Tackling world poverty and ending global hunger have long featured among the rhetoric of world leaders, governments and international institutions. Yet in 2010, an unprecedented number of people, 1.2 billion, are living in hunger and poverty. A business as usual approach will not deliver food security, sustainable agriculture or poverty reduction. If we are to tackle hunger seriously then it is time that a right to food approach is given primacy in shaping global, European and Irish policy and actions. Such an approach requires political courage and leadership. It means making political choices directed towards the pursuit of the common good. In practical terms it means ensuring our endeavours in aid are not undermined by commercially driven policies in food, agriculture and trade. This comment piece outlines what a right to food approach and policy coherence demand from and can contribute to the global, European and Irish responses to hunger.

Introduction

On the eve of the Jubilee year (2000), Trócaire published a book called *Food* as part of its Christian Perspectives on Development series.¹ It noted that “every day, even as our world awakes to the marvels discovered or invented by human intelligence, we are also faced with the scandalous reality that one in seven human beings gets up to starve”.² Marking the millennium, world leaders set numerical and time bound targets for a range of development goals, including progress towards the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger.³ Yet a decade later, one in six are living in hunger. We have learned to tolerate the intolerable.

The food crisis of 2007-08 led to riots across developing countries, highlighting the fragility of food security for the world’s poor.⁴ The riots also highlighted the link between hunger and political instability, thus leading hunger to rise up the international political agenda, culminating in a World Summit on Food Security in 2009. The food crisis was triggered by both immediate and longer term structural causes. Among the key longer term causes has been underinvestment in agriculture, unfair trade policies and changing weather patterns as a result of climate change.

The share of aid devoted to agriculture declined sharply from 19% in 1980, to 3.8% in 2006.⁵ While the United States and the EU domestically invested an average of \$17,765 and \$7,614 annually per farm from 1986 to 2007, they invested a miniscule \$1.01 (US) and \$2.46 (EU) in small farms in poor countries over nearly the same period.⁶ While there were recent commitments, such as the G8 L’Aquila commitment to mobilise \$20 billion over three years, there has been little new investment in agriculture. The heightened recognition by the international community of the centrality of investing in agriculture and rural development demands the delivery of committed resources as well as effective co-ordination of efforts and coherence across a number of sectoral policy areas such as trade, agriculture, aid and climate change. These global efforts need to be guided by the right to food and its associated policy implications.

The right to food as an approach to tackling hunger

Addressing the World Summit on Food Security Pope Benedict XVI spoke of the need to cultivate a public conscience that considers food as a universal right for all human beings, without distinction or discrimination.⁷ Food is not just another commodity, food is life. The right to food is a fundamental one without which many other rights cannot be enjoyed. The right to food is established under article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as well as in article 11 of the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. While the latter Covenant came into force in 1976, recognition of the importance of the right to food has taken several decades. Only in 2002 was an intergovernmental working group established to develop voluntary guidelines to support the progressive realisation of the right to food in the context of national food security. The FAO (UN Food and Agriculture Organization) Council adopted these guidelines in 2004 and a number of developing countries have adopted framework laws to make the right to food justiciable.⁸

Promotion of a right to food approach has implications for both practice and policy. The UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food has sought to describe what a right to food approach means at an operational level and must address the root causes of hunger and malnutrition. The right to food serves as a mechanism for increased coherency across the different sectors relevant to the realisation of the right to food, including not only food aid, agricultural and rural development, but also social protection, land policies, education, trade and investment. It therefore has implications in terms of identifying activities which best address the needs of the most vulnerable, support robust accountability mechanisms, endorse modes of agricultural production whose overarching objective is the realisation of the right to food as well as relevant policy areas in other government departments such as agriculture, energy, environment and trade.

A Global Strategic Framework

There is long recognition of the need for a mechanism of policy coherence and action co-ordination on food, agriculture and nutrition to advance the right to food. However, a lack of political engagement, resources and scientific expertise compromised the work of the intergovernmental body established within the UN to review and follow up world food security policies. Addressing the root structural causes of hunger has been hindered by the fragmentation of effort and lack of coherence in the international governance of our food system.

Trócaire's March 2010 policy report on food strongly welcomed the successful reform and revitalisation of the Committee on World Food Security.⁹ The Committee's remit includes developing a Global Strategic Framework for food security and nutrition. This development is a crucial step to bring greater co-ordination, policy coherence and accountability to the effective delivery of a global response to hunger.

The added value of the framework resides in its comprehensive and inclusive nature. Fulfilling this ambitious agenda requires that the voices of all relevant stakeholders, particularly those most affected by food insecurity, are heard. It also requires incorporating the work of existing intergovernmental and UN frameworks such as the UN High Level Task Force's Comprehensive Framework for Action, the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme, the Voluntary Guidelines of the Right to Adequate Food as well as the work of independent multi-stakeholder processes such as the International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development.

Other bodies whose operations affect food security should be guided by the global framework, for example, the pursuit of coherence by different funding initiatives, such as the Global Agriculture and Food Security Programme at the World Bank as well as G8 or EU initiatives. All relevant stakeholders including governments and institutions like the World Bank, the World Trade Organisation should also be required to report regularly to the Committee on Food Security on how their policies and activities are following through on the goals, principles and processes set out in the Global Framework. Proposals for the elaboration process and timeline of the Framework began in 2010. At the time of writing it is understood that its development will be the subject of a lengthy intergovernmental negotiation process and only time will tell if the result delivers on the ambitious objectives set.

The EU's Policy Framework

At a sub-global level, the European Commission communication to the Council and the European Parliament in March 2010 called on the EU and its member states to support the application of the right to food approach in developing countries, including right to food based political and legal frameworks.¹⁰ In May 2010, The European Council's conclusions on this policy framework were presented as part of the overall process of establishing the EU position for the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) High Level Review in September 2010.¹¹ The Council's conclusions noted the primary responsibility of partner countries in achieving food security and the importance of reinforcing all levels of food security governance based on right to food principles.

For the EU and member states the policy framework calls on states to act together and focus instruments and tools of EU development assistance in food security on key priority areas. Amongst the priority areas are supporting national, regional and international initiatives for the implementation of the Voluntary Guidelines on the Right to Food, particularly the elaboration of the FAO Voluntary Guidelines on Responsible Governance of Land Tenure and other Natural Resources. Additionally it calls for the development and implementation of principles and a code of conduct governing sustainable large-scale investments in land by EU member states. The Commission communication called on the EU and its member states to enhance the coherence of international food security governance and support the rapid reform of the Committee on World Food Security as the central body on food security.

The policy framework will also have an implementation plan. This should guide food security policies of both Commission and member states as well as provide clear guidance on how to increase policy coherence for development with other relevant policy areas including trade, fisheries, agriculture and climate.

However, the Council's conclusions on some contentious issues are vague. What does a call for a comprehensive, ambitious and balanced conclusion to the Doha Round mean? The Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food has been more forthcoming and provides useful guidance for EU policy. The Rapporteur believes that such a conclusion to the Doha Round could be important for improving world food security. That holds only, however, if a set of conditions were met. These include, but are not limited to, the possibility for states retaining the freedom to

insulate domestic markets from the volatility of international prices. The Rapporteur says safeguard measures are critical and of the essence in maintaining national food systems in countries that cope with import surges. He has presented a series of recommendations to make trade and human rights compatible. Thus any final Doha deal would be subject to human rights' impact assessments to ensure compatibility with member states' obligation to respect, protect and fulfil the right to food.

While the Doha talks remain inconclusive, why does the EU seek to conclude bilateral trade agreements, such as Economic Partnership Agreements, which include measures like standstill clauses, a ban on export taxes and weak safeguards that serve to undermine the right to food? Under the Lisbon Treaty the EU has an obligation to ensure coherence between policies and development policy objectives. Policy coherence for development needs to be institutionalised into policy-making. This would require among others, addressing the Common Agricultural Policy 2013 review from the perspective of its impact on food security in developing countries to ensure consistency with the EU Policy Framework for food security. Time will tell how the proposed reviews of the EU's policy framework deal with coherence issues.

Ireland's hunger strategy

Addressing hunger is a cornerstone of Irish government foreign policy and overseas development. The 2008 Hunger Task Force Report informs the government's response and specifically Irish Aid's response, underlining the need for a comprehensive approach to hunger. Since the Report appeared, the numbers living in hunger have significantly risen. Delivery of a more integrated international system of food governance has been advanced through the successful reform of the World Committee on Food Security, the updating of the UN High Level Task Force Comprehensive Framework for Action, new financial initiatives and new policy frameworks such as the EU's framework to help developing countries address food security challenges. Yet as varied elements of the global food architecture take shape, global co-ordination and policy convergence depend on successful completion of fundamental tasks, such as the delivery of a global strategic framework for food security and nutrition.

Does Ireland share the view expressed in the European Commission's March communication on a policy framework to assist developing countries address food security challenges that the Committee on Food Security is "the central body on food security"? How would such a policy position impact on Irish Aid's work to support the reform of the international architecture? The successful reform of the global food architecture is dependent on high-level political engagement. Such engagement by developed countries, including Ireland, was notably weak at the 2009 World Summit on Food Security. Honouring the Summit's declaration committing members to implement fully the reform of the Committee on Food Security requires high-level political commitment from both developed and developing countries.

In addition to developments on food governance, since 2008 new challenges have become more visible, including climate change, the energy crisis, commodity speculation and land grabbing. These dynamic governance processes and policy issues make Irish Aid's plans to publish a progress report in 2010 to detail work already carried out in relation to each of the Hunger Task Force recommendations and the impact of that work most welcome. Presumably the Report will reflect on new initiatives and opportunities to enhance Ireland's response.

Trócaire believes it is time to place the right to food and policy coherence at the heart of an Irish policy framework on food security. This means Ireland should give explicit expression in its hunger related work to a rights-based approach to food security. This requires elaboration beyond the scope of this comment piece on what the promotion of a right to food approach would mean in terms of implementing programmes on food security.

In regards to policy coherence, the Hunger Task Force Report recommended that "within the EU, Ireland should work towards promoting policy coherence in areas relevant to addressing global hunger. These include issues such as supporting the development of trading arrangements which deliver genuine benefits for the food insecure in developing countries, focussing on the biofuels mandate of the Commission in terms of its effects on food security and other related issues".¹²

Adopting the right to food approach as a guiding principle of Ireland's work on hunger could promote policy coherence in other policy areas. The Advisory Board for Irish Aid in its Policy Coherence for Development Report¹³ recommended that "the government should ensure that there is coherence between its

development co-operation budget and EU trade and agricultural policy reform, particularly in Irish Aid partner countries, either to safeguard livelihoods of those who may be adversely affected by preference erosion or to help producers to take advantage of new market access opportunities where they arise”.¹⁴

Adopting a right to food approach would support Irish Aid’s work to advance policy coherence across government. For example, it would create an opportunity for Irish Aid to expand on what it understands would be a successful conclusion to the Doha Round in terms of food security. It could question Ireland’s support for new trade agreements with African Caribbean and Pacific countries, known as Economic Partnership Agreements, based on human rights impact assessments that underline their need to cohere with the right to food. It would guide fiscal contributions to other multilateral organisations, including the World Bank. It would inform the design of policies in areas like aid for trade ensuring that they systematically advance progress towards the right to food by prioritising the interests of smallholders and women farmers. It would mean Irish Aid proactively seeking an end to dumping, unfair export competition and other trade distorting practices by European food and agricultural companies that undermine food security in developing countries as part of the Common Agricultural Policy review.

An Irish Government hunger strategy articulating a clear rights-based approach based on policy coherence would be a significantly valuable addition to our contribution to the realisation of the first MDG.

Endnotes

- ¹ Joseph, Josanthy (1999), *Food*, Christian Perspectives on Development Issues, Dublin: Trócaire, Veritas and CAFOD
- ² Ibid. p.13
- ³ The first Millennium Development Goal (MDG) is the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger with a target of reducing by half the proportion of people who live in hunger by 2015.
- ⁴ Food price riots were recorded in more than 20 countries around the world in 2007-08
- ⁵ FAO (2009), *Declaration of the World Summit on Food Security*, Rome
- ⁶ Oxfam (2009), “Investing in Poor Farmers Pays – Rethinking how to Invest in Agriculture”, Oxfam Briefing Paper
- ⁷ Address of Pope Benedict XVI to FAO on the occasion of the World Summit on Food Security, FAO Headquarters, Rome, 16 November 2009

- ⁸ Examples of countries which have adopted framework laws to make the right to food justiciable include Brazil, Ecuador, Guatemala, Nicaragua, and Peru.
- ⁹ Trócaire (2010), *Food for All: An Agenda for Addressing Root Causes of Hunger*, Policy Report, March, p.4
- ¹⁰ “Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament on an EU policy framework to assist developing countries in addressing food security challenges”, Brussels, 31 March
- ¹¹ European Council (2010), “Council Conclusions on an EU policy framework to assist developing countries in addressing food security challenges”, Brussels, 10 May
- ¹² Hunger Task Force Report (2008), p.45
- ¹³ Advisory Board for Irish Aid (2009), “Policy Coherence for Development: The State of Play in Ireland”
- ¹⁴ Ibid, p.52