

DEVELOPMENT: Food Summit – Concern Yes, Concrete Steps No  
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<http://www.ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=45569>

**MADRID, Jan 27 (IPS) - A "High Level Meeting on Food Security for All" convened by the United Nations and the Spanish government ended Tuesday without approving concrete measures but with a commitment to redoubling efforts to bolster official development aid (ODA).**

Representatives of national governments, civil society, trade unions, the private sector, academia, multilateral organisations and donor agencies from around 100 countries took part in the two-day meeting, in which the closing speeches were given by Spanish Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero and United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon.

The problem of hunger suffered by one billion people around the world – nearly all of them in the developing South – was discussed in-depth throughout the meeting, and the progress achieved since the June 2008 high level conference in Rome was reviewed, in order to establish mechanisms for better coordination.

Although concrete resolutions were not adopted, the conference issued strong statements on the need to act with respect to questions like funding. The final declaration urges governments and international institutions to make good on their previous pledges of aid.

The participants also expressed "the urgent need to strive even harder to achieve international commitments of increasing substantially financial resources and ODA, particularly in relation to nutrition, food, agriculture and hunger-related programmes and policies."

One positive aspect, according to non-governmental organisations (NGOs), was the conference's call to "eliminat(e) all forms of competition-distorting subsidies, in order to stimulate and conduct agricultural trade in a fair way."

Referring to the global food crisis, Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) chief Jacques Diouf, who is vice-chairman of the Secretary-General's High-Level Task Force on the Global Food Security Crisis, said "This crisis is not only still with us, but could still worsen."

To confront the crisis, he said that in his congratulatory message to U.S. President Barack Obama, he "proposed the convening, at the level of Heads of State and Government, of a World Summit on Food Security in 2009 to forge a broad consensus on the final and rapid eradication of hunger in the world."

He also said that "Proposals have focused on establishing a High-Level Panel of Experts on food and agriculture, charged with conducting scientific analyses and a Global Partnership to enhance dialogue with all partners and thus facilitate coordination and implementation of the action plans."

"I am convinced, and this has often been said and repeated, that there is no need to create new bodies. The need is to improve, reinforce, coordinate, in other words to reform what exists so as to render our action more effective," he added.

With respect to compliance with earlier commitments, Spanish Foreign Minister Miguel Ángel Moratinos told IPS that Spain would like all governments in the industrialised North to live up to their pledge to earmark 0.7 percent of GDP to ODA, by 2012.

Spain has already committed itself to that goal, and Zapatero announced Tuesday that his administration would increase ODA by one billion euros.

Another 15 countries have joined Spain in that commitment, promising 5.5 billion euros over the next five years, as well as the 1.3 billion euros pledged by the European Union several weeks ago.

"The countries of the North have resources and means, we know what the solutions are, and we can and must apply them," said Moratinos, who has broad experience in development aid in Spain and the European Union.

At one of the panels in the Madrid meeting, the representative of the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU), which groups 65 million workers globally, said one solution to increasing ODA is clear: by reducing the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) budget by a mere 10 percent, 100 billion dollars would be raised.

Speaking of funding, representatives of Doctors Without Borders/Médecins Sans Frontières and Action against Hunger complained that transnational corporations seek to use the theme of the fight against hunger to their own benefit.

Lidia Senra with Vía Campesina Europa agreed, saying "there is a strong interest in using the money to help address the problem of hunger in such a way that companies can sell their own seeds and fertilisers."

International meetings on hunger are important, she added, but "food sovereignty must be respected, and each country must be allowed to decide on its own agricultural policies, protecting the production of each country and region and fighting speculation."

Lennart Båge, president of the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), told IPS that one problem is that although prices have plunged, the food crisis continues.

But, he said, if small and medium farmers, who number around 450 million worldwide, are assisted, their production will be very important to enable them to pull out of poverty and contribute to feeding the rest of the world.

Four NGOs – Caritas, Engineers Without Borders, La Suma de Todos and Prosalud – launched the campaign "The Right to Food: Urgent".

In a public statement, they argued that the conditions are in place to overcome hunger, and that the fight must be based on respect for human rights, in a context in which states assume their obligations and develop political frameworks on agriculture aimed at

guaranteeing the right to food.

The groups also added that agriculture based on the right to food must be at the centre of the public agenda, that civil society as a whole should participate, and that no single formula can be offered, because although the crisis has common underlying causes, it takes on different characteristics in each country.

Furthermore, they said, governments must make it clear that the private sector shares the responsibility to fight hunger by means of the creation of a code of conduct for companies that work with agricultural inputs, which is based on the principle of the right to food.

The campaign congratulated Zapatero for the economic agreements achieved, and expressed hope that his government will assume an effective global leadership role in the effort to come up with new ways of fighting hunger.

In the final declaration approved at the High Level Meeting, participants "reaffirmed the conclusions of the World Food Summit in 1996...to achieve food security for all through an ongoing effort to eradicate hunger in all countries, with an immediate view to reducing by half the number of undernourished people by no later than 2015, as well as their commitment to achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)."

The first of the MDGs, which were adopted by the international community in 2000, is to halve the number of hungry people in the world by 2015, from 1990 levels.

They also expressed deep concern over "the unacceptable global food security situation that affects over 960 million undernourished people" and "the negative impact on food access and availability fluctuations exacerbated by the current financial crisis on the livelihoods of the poorest, most vulnerable in the world." (END/2009)