“If there was enough political will to defeat hunger, we would defeat it right now - immediately,” says Enrique Yeves, chief of corporate communications at the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO).

“It is a scandal that in the 21st century there are still people that suffer from hunger in a world in which we produce more food than we need,” adds Yeves, speaking on the sidelines of the Jun. 15-21 FAO biannual conference opening today in Rome.

Almost one billion people do not have enough to eat, yet we throw away one-third to one-half of the food we produce, according to U.N. estimates. This is one of the paradoxes at the core of the global food system.
The world made progress over the last decade in combating hunger. But a widespread and lingering economic crisis has reversed this trend, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, according to FAO’s own assessments. High and volatile global food prices are putting additional strains on the world’s poor, as is the rapid depletion of natural resources caused by our unsustainable way of life.

This year, FAO’s membership will hit 195, once South Sudan, Brunei and Singapore join next week.

The sense of urgency in addressing hunger in the midst of the multiple global crises is reflected in the current attempt to reform FAO in order to make it more efficient and results-oriented.

FAO’s Brazilian Director General José Graziano da Silva has come up with a set of proposals, including concentrating the organisation’s work around five strategic objectives: eradication of hunger, increasing food production sustainably, reducing rural poverty, a focus on food systems, and increased resilience.

Da Silva, who came to FAO after being responsible for implementing the Fome Zero programme in Brazil, said to have lifted 28 million people out of poverty, may indeed have the needed stamina and good reputation to carry the reform package through.

Yet there will be resistance from governments gathering in Rome. One contentious issue is a minor budget increase put up for discussion: FAO’s budget was 1.005 billion dollars in the 2012-13 period, and the organisation is now asking for an increase of one percent from its member states for 2014-15.

Some member states may resist this budget hike and these may be precisely the rich countries, as larger developing ones (most notably the BRICS: Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) are already committed to increasing their financial contributions to FAO apart from the one percent: China by an additional 21.3 million dollars, Brazil by 14.3 million and Russia by 9.2 million dollars.

According to Antonio Onorati from IPC, the International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty, which monitors FAO, the changes proposed by the FAO staff entail a “system view” of food issues—that is, looking at all factors together and interlinked—which is welcome. He also welcomes the organisation’s increased openness to civil society.

At the same time, Onorati warns that some of the national delegations coming to Rome may be less open than FAO itself to such changes.

“In the 2000s, there was even talk of shutting down FAO altogether, as the mantra of liberalisation of markets as a solution for food security became dominant and the World Trade Organisation became the locus for most food talks,” explains Onorati.

“But then we had the economic crisis and the food crises, and the governments understood there was a need for a multilateral space for dealing with food issues. They also understood that the crisis of the food system is not only an issue for poor countries in the Global South but for the global elites too.”
Food Security in the Spotlight Post-2015

by Thalif Deen

As the United Nations prepares to launch an ambitious post-2015 development agenda later this year, the message from one of its Rome-based agencies is unequivocal. The eradication of hunger and malnutrition should remain a high priority when the current Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) end.

In its flagship annual report released here, the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) acknowledges that the world has made some progress on hunger and malnutrition, but stresses there is still “a long way” to go to resolve the lingering crisis.

FAO Director-General José Graziano da Silva is adamant: “We must strive for nothing less than the eradication of hunger, food insecurity and malnutrition.”

The only effective answer to food insecurity is political commitment at the national level, reinforced at the regional and global levels by government donors and international organisations, he says, citing as examples the Committee on World Food Security and the Zero Hunger Challenge initiated by U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon.

The numbers are staggering: malnutrition costs 3.5 trillion dollars - or 500 dollars per person - in lost productivity to the global economy, according to FAO’s “The State of Food and Agriculture” report. In comparable numbers, “that’s almost the entire annual gross domestic product (GDP) of Germany, Europe’s largest economy,” says the report.

Vitamin and micronutrient deficiencies, along with obesity and overweight, are largely responsible for the loss in productivity and the high cost of health care.

“Hunger can be eradicated by 2030,” says Jomo Kwame Sundaram, FAO’s deputy director-general for economic and social development. “But this will not just happen. A series of important measures must be taken.”

Sundaram says explicit political commitments to eradicate hunger must be backed up by resources, whether these are commitments at the G8 and G20 global level, or at the national and regional level, such as the Maputo Declaration in which African nations committed 10 percent of GDP to be invested in agriculture.

FAO estimated in 2011 (with a 2009 reference year) that 50.2 billion dollars of public investment is needed annually for the world to eradicate hunger by 2025, a sum to be complemented by private investment.
For the past five years, Melusi Mhlanga has spent nearly 200 dollars each season for inputs, but the maize yields have not matched his investment.

"With good rains I have been able to get more than 20 bags from my two-hectare field but now I barely manage 10 bags," says Mhlanga, who spoke to TerraViva at his homestead in Nkayi, where he has diversified into livestock breeding. "Good rains are important for farmers but so is knowhow, which has been a challenge for me, and I decided to focus more on cattle breeding and running a business than on growing crops."

Mhlanga operates a general store, a bottle store and a grinding mill, which he says are the new sources of income for him and his family since the maize failed. He now grows sorghum and millet for subsistence. Extension services are critical in advising farmers on best agronomic practices to boost productivity and food security. Farmers like Mhlanga are potential role models under a well-funded agriculture sector.

However, state investment in Zimbabwe’s agriculture has been hijacked by political priorities at the expense of long-term food and economic gains. Once the top contributor to GDP, farming is now second to mining. Tobacco is still the main agricultural export.

"Agriculture and land has become a political football between the main national parties, and with the donors," says Ian Scoones, an agricultural ecologist and professorial fellow at the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex, UK who has extensively researched Zimbabwe’s agricultural sector.

"Neither ZANU PF nor the MDC have a coherent agricultural and rural development policy. Neither has thought through the implications of land reform."

Economic analyst Eric Bloch says Zimbabwe can restore its agricultural fortunes but first needs to tackle its external debt burden, convert current offer letters on land to transferable leases, and clarify the implementation of the Indigenisation Act which is precluding potential investors.

The World Food Programme estimates that up to 1.6 million Zimbabweans will need food aid after a poor harvest by smallholder farmers who contribute about 50 percent of national maize crop.

"The only times that the government has put a lot of resources into agriculture is during election years for obvious reasons," says agricultural economist and farmer Peter Gambara.
La especulación financiera con productos agropecuarios, en particular cereales y granos, es una causa de los precios volátiles de los alimentos y contribuye a crear una escasez artificial en tiempos en que el hambre afecta a cientos de millones de personas, afirman especialistas.

Gobiernos e instituciones internacionales no logran todavía los controles necesarios para reducir estas prácticas. La Unión Europea (UE) está discutiendo la actualización de su sistema para regular la especulación, incluyendo la de productos agropecuarios, conocida como Directiva Relativa a los Mercados de Instrumentos Financieros (MiFID, por sus siglas inglesas). Pero un análisis de las organizaciones no gubernamentales Foodwatch y Oxfam Alemania sostiene que el proyecto tiene vacíos importantes.

"Los vacíos legales permitirían en el futuro a los especuladores dejar de operar en el mercado organizado y regulado, y trasladar sus operaciones al mercado de transacciones entre particulares, casi completamente carente de reglas", aseveró. "También beneficiarse de las numerosas excepciones que los lobbies financieros han impuesto en el proyecto para continuar sus transacciones sin controles", añadió Bode.

Para eliminar tales excepciones, Foodwatch y Oxfam exigen a la UE que introduzca los llamados límites de posición vinculantes, que establecen para cada banco o fondo de inversión la cantidad máxima de contratos de futuros (transacciones de compra y venta de contratos y no de los productos en sí). Mediante esos contratos, es posible especular con el alza o la caída del precio del futuro, actuando únicamente en los mercados financieros, indican los especialistas Olivier Chantry y Mónica Vargas, del no gubernamental Observatorio de la Deuda en la Globalización.

\[ Varios bancos y fondos de inversión están renunciando a especular con productos agropecuarios y otros reconocen los efectos nocivos de la especulación. \]

Foodwatch y Oxfam reclaman que se excluya de los mercados de productos agropecuarios a inversores institucionales, como compañías de seguros y fondos especulativos, y que se prohíban los certificados y otros derivados que se emplean en las transacciones financieras con alimentos. Con todo, varios bancos y fondos de inversión están renunciando a especular con productos agropecuarios y otros reconocen los efectos nocivos de la especulación.

El 26 de mayo, el banco DZ, el cuarto más grande de Alemania y que representa a más de 900 pequeños bancos y cajas de ahorro regionales, decidió abandonar de manera definitiva las operaciones con productos agropecuarios. En un comunicado, Lars Hille, miembro del consejo ejecutivo del DZ, abogó por la introducción de límites, como los pedidos por Foodwatch y Oxfam, para "controlar los volúmenes de las transacciones" puramente financieras con alimentos.

Otros bancos alemanes, como el Commerzbank y el DekaBank, han dado un paso similar. Aunque su participación total en el mercado financiero de productos agropecuarios es marginal, su valor simbólico es considerable, pues desmiente las posiciones oficiales de los líderes del sector, como el Deutsche Bank y la compañía de seguros Allianz, que continúan manejando buena parte de los fondos de inversión con alimentos en Alemania, un negocio de 14.000 millones de dólares, según estimaciones de Oxfam.

Los fondos globales de inversión en los mercados agropecuarios manejan un volumen estimado de 72.000 millones de dólares.
Twenty-nine-year-old Andrzej W. and his partner lived for almost a year off of food found in the trash bin of the upscale supermarket Piotr i Pawel in Mura-now, a neighbourhood near the centre of the Polish capital Warsaw. And they ate in style.

“I can hardly name now the expensive cheeses and chocolates we found there, because I never buy them normally, they are luxury goods,” he says. “There was everything in these bins: vegetables, fruits, dairy, sweets, eggs, some close to expiry date, others past, eggs thrown away only because one or two were cracked, just like you see in American movies about dumpster diving.”

When he discovered Piotr i Pawel, Andrzej had occasionally retrieved vegetables and fruits thrown away at other markets in the city, but this was a whole new experience. “I felt like Ali Baba finding the secret treasure!” he says. “I was so happy to find all this great food, but at the same time I felt angry that so much gets wasted and sad that I cannot take it all away with me.”

According to data from the European Commission, 89 million tonnes of food are wasted yearly in the EU, equalling 179 kilogrammes per person. Poland alone wastes 8.9 million tonnes every year, followed by the UK, Germany, the Netherlands and France. This data, the most recent available, is from 2006 and some food activists argue that it is a gross underestimation.

At the same time, explains Maria Gosiewska from the non-profit Polish Federation of Food Banks, recent years have seen a serious push by the EU to reduce waste levels: at the end of 2011, the European Commission called for reducing edible food waste by 50 percent by 2020; the European Parliament also passed a resolution setting a reduction target of 50 percent of all food waste by 2025.

Tristram Stuart, founder of the UK anti-food waste movement Feeding the 5000, says of Central and Eastern European locations such as Budapest and Prague, “Food waste in these countries may become more of a problem as consumption increases, so it might be a good idea to nip the worst effects of Western food systems in the bud before they take root.”
Afrique Centrale: Domestication du Gnetum

par Arsène Séverin

“Après la cuisson de ma sauce de pâte d’arachide, je vais plonger le koko (gnetum) pendant que la marmite n’est pas au feu. Cela dure une quinzaine de minutes avant d’être servi à table”, explique Antoinette Djaba, une mère de famille à Brazzaville, la capitale congolaise.

Sa recette s’appelle “Trois pièces”: du poisson salé à la pâte d’arachide garnie au légume du gnetum – ou koko son nom local au Congo et dans d’autres pays d’Afrique Centrale – qui est une plante herbacée ayant plusieurs vertus.

C’est un plat très apprécié des Brazzavillois et d’autres populations d’Afrique centrale. Ainsi les plantes de koko sont ravagées dans les forêts congolaises. A Abala, un district au nord de Brazzaville, les communautés ne vivent que de ce lé-gume sauvage riche en protéines et en sels minéraux.

“Par jour, un véhicule pick-up plein de paquets de koko quitte Abala pour Brazzaville”, déclare Jeanne Apounou, une commerçante, qui vend un paquet de 75 grammes de gnetum à environ 10 cents US. Mais à Brazzaville, ce paquet revient à 40 cents; ce qui pousse beaucoup de commerçants et de paysans à cultiver cette plante.

Selon l’Université de Brazzaville, entre 850 et 1.000 tonnes de Koko sont cueillies chaque année dans les forêts congolaises et consommées dans le pays.

Au Gabon, en plus de la consommation, les populations vantent les vertus médicinales du gnetum. “Quand un nourrisson est constipé, on utilise les feuilles de gnetum (kumu au Gabon) pour le soigner; de même pour cicatriser une plaie”, affirme Jean-Aimé Mourima, un écologiste au Gabon.

Avec la ruée vers le koko, la plante devient rare dans les forêts. Igor Oyami, un sexagénaire du village Itoumba, à Abala, explique: “Il y a des périodes où le koko se fait rare, parce que trop de cueillettes. Sa disparition est proche”.

Les autorités camerounaises attribuent aux coopératives des quotas annuels de commercialisation du gnetum (okok au Cameroun). Selon la douane camerounaise, ce pays a exporté 150 tonnes de gnetum par mois vers le Nigeria voisin en 2011.

La domestication du gnetum est entreprise dans les pays de la sous-région grâce à la FAO. Des techniques de pépinières ont été réalisées à partir des graines et de boutures des lianes de gnetum.

Au Cameroun, des femmes, regroupées en coopératives, vivent aujourd’hui de la vente du gnetum qu’elles ont domestiqué. Appuyée par le Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR) basé en Indonésie, une coopérative de femmes à Esoka (centre du Cameroun), cultive 10 hectares. Leur revenu individuel avoisine 900 dollars par mois, selon le CIFOR.

Au Congo, les expériences de domestication du koko sont menées sur deux sites: Madingou Kayes et Abala. Les paysans d’Etsende, d’Ikouele et d’Ekouassende, à Abala, cultivent les graines mûres et séchées du gnetum dans leurs anciens champs de manioc.

“C’est un succès au niveau des deux sites. Les paysans peuvent récolter jusqu’à trois fois par mois le koko dans leur champ”, affirme Dieudonné Koguïya, représentant de la FAO à Brazzaville.
Dear Reader:

TerraViva, a special publication of IPS news agency, the leader in coverage of development issues, civil society and the emerging South, is once again circulating, this time in the meeting rooms and hallways of the FAO building. The print version of TerraViva was available early this year at the Abu Dhabi Sustainability Week in the United Arab Emirates, and a few months before that, in June 2012, at the Rio+20 global conference on sustainable development in Rio de Janeiro. Now, in Rome, our independent publication is dedicated to food.

We are producing it in an extraordinary setting: the 38th FAO conference, which will focus on the challenges facing agriculture, emerging global scenarios and, naturally, the new balances of power arising from them.

As in dozens of TerraViva editions produced over the last 20 years at U.N. or civil society conferences, our publication hopes to be an instrument of reflection and reporting with a critical eye on the crucial issues facing humanity.

In terms of food and agriculture, this means raising adequate funds to provide the current FAO leadership with the conditions that would make it possible for the agency to fulfil its mandate with regard to a strategic plan for the future.

During the conference, a significant number of countries that have met the Millennium Development Goals and World Food Summit hunger reduction targets will be recognised. A critical focus on the limitations and difficulties encountered along the road is necessary, but we must also be capable of recognising progress. We have brought together in Rome a team of top-level journalists from Africa, Asia, Europe and Latin America, who represent more than 400 colleagues from our network spread across 140 countries, and who will give TerraViva a multicultural and pluralistic perspective.

In this regard, I would like to thank the FAO authorities for their continuous support in the preparation of this publication. TerraViva is also available on-line, in several languages, to millions of readers around the world.

At the same time, TerraViva will follow the impact of the Media Talks organised by IPS Web TV in its pilot phase, from Monday, June 17 to Friday, June 21 in the Sheikh Zayed Conference Hall. The debates will focus on the MDGs, the new scenario in Africa, food waste, price speculation, and the role of the media in development. These debates will be reproduced on thousands of web sites so they are not limited to a FAO conference room.

We hope TerraViva meets your expectations.

Welcome!

IPS Director General Mario Lubetkin