Hilal Elver, Special Rapporteur on the right to food  
Keynote Remarks  
14 October 2019

Distinguished guests,

It is my pleasure to address you today in my official capacity as the Special Rapporteur on the right to food. As endorsed by the Human Rights Council, it is my responsibility to promote the progressive realization of the right to food and the fundamental right of everyone to be free from hunger. As my term as SR is coming to an end, I want to take this opportunity to express gratitude for our collaborative work of the entire CFS family, the chair, the secretariat, and friends of the right to food. I leave my position with high hopes for the future achievements of CFS.

However, we have a great challenge in front of us. The alarming SOFI figures we heard this morning confirm that working towards the progressive realization of the right to food is urgent and imperative if we are to achieve our goals and implement the SDGs to the extent possible. It has been my pleasure to support this approach in my role as a member of the Advisory Group.

We must use this SOFI data to inform our work, making sure that a human rights-based approach to food security and nutrition is adopted in all of our efforts, and used to help countries formulate and implement policies that effectively realize the human right to food, and SDGs. In other words, directing particular attention and energy to those groups in society who are most vulnerable.

CFS’ future plan, the multi-year programme of work (MYPoW) for 2020-2023, is compatible with all the targets of the 2030 Global Agenda. As the member of the AG, I particularly have expressed my support for the proposal on gender equality and women’s empowerment, and on youth in agriculture and food systems, as I believe they are currently being left behind in the quest to realize the right to food. Women and youth are critical for reducing poverty, hunger, and malnutrition throughout the world, and they are the most affected by adverse impact of climate change, disasters, wars and economic crises.

Moreover, they often lack adequate legal protections, limited access to assets, resources and opportunities, and are excluded from decision-making processes. As a result they are at a greater risk of human rights violations.

I also affirm my support for the proposed work stream on reducing inequality, which is vital to food and nutrition security. Inequality, more specifically, the inequitable distribution of food and productive resources, is a fundamental barrier to the right to food. Addressing this inequality is a necessary step to implement the good policies that is under the domain of the CFS work. It is also central to the SDG’s fundamental principle of “no one left behind.”

The current MYPoW expresses a wish to leave no one behind, to address and support the most marginalized, the vulnerable, those who experience true challenges in today’s world to achieve the right to food.
Distinguished guests,
Unfortunately, the SDGs have not yet been able to catalyze the necessary and promised action or political will, as progress on the goals continues to stall nearly four years after their adoption. Reports from the High Level Political Forum held in July 2019 found that “progress towards the goals is too slow and the world is facing setbacks... even regressing in some areas, such as hunger and malnutrition.”

Addressing hunger—the focus of SDG2—should rank among the top priorities. Yet, with 821 million people currently experiencing food insecurity, SDG2 appears to be an unreachable goal.

This reality indicates that the right to food is still a distant aspirational principle in far too many countries and that urgent action is needed to address persistent hunger and malnutrition. The reasons to discuss why countries are undermining such a fundamental human right are many and complex.

But it is important to recognize that we cannot solve hunger and malnutrition by only focusing on SDG2. We require a comprehensive, transformative approach. We must also remember that SDG 2 is not interchangeable with the right to food, even though it is indicative of our progress in realizing this right.

In my latest thematic report that I will present to the General Assembly in New York next week, I focused on the role of SDGs in eliminating hunger and malnutrition. I explain that, if properly implemented from a holistic, human rights-based approach, the SDGs, in their entirety, have the potential to serve as a transformative global agenda. And with the support of the CFS, this ambitious goal will contribute greatly to the realization of the right to food, as well as other economic, social and cultural rights.

Even though my report was written before progress on the SDGs was discussed at the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) in July and the SDG Summit in September, it is aligned with the findings and outcomes of these events.

Let me share with you some of the main findings of my report that are relevant to today’s discussion.

(1) To ensure that no one is left behind, States must afford greater attention to populations that experience heightened inequality.

The right to food requires that food be economically accessible for all, but since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, global wealth has become increasingly concentrated in the top 1%, while over 730 million people are still living in extreme poverty.

The President of the UN Economic and Social Council noted that a lack of progress under SDG 10, which aims to address inequality between and within countries, remains a “major obstacle” to achieving the SDGs and threatens to “derail” progress on the 2030 Agenda.

Still, not a single Voluntary National Review on progress under SDG 10 featured socio-economic data on refugees, who, along with asylum seekers, account for 29 million people. Only three countries mentioned indigenous people, who account for 450 million globally. The representation and participation of indigenous peoples in CFS should be enhanced.

It is for this reason that I have emphasized my support for the resurgence and strengthening of the CFS future (MYPoW) workstream on “reducing inequalities for food security and nutrition.” We must empower populations experiencing or at risk of poverty, consider the impacts of social protection schemes, and progressive fiscal policies that have a redistributive impact.

(2) We must also recognize the critical role that human rights should play in the implementation process.
For too long, human rights have been sidelined in forums outside of Geneva. Even the 2030 Agenda, for example, does not explicitly recognize the right to adequate food, and the term “human rights” appears only once in all 17 goals.

Nevertheless, SDGs and human rights are closely aligned and mutually reinforcing: The principle of “leaving no one behind” is based on human rights principles of equality and non-discrimination. At the same time, achieving zero hunger, poverty eradication, decent work, and climate change (to name a few) requires the realization of economic, social and cultural rights. All these areas of concern are implicitly or explicitly under the mandate of the CFS.

A HRBA to the SDGs and to food system governance, generally, will highlight the role of human rights institutions in strengthening policy cohesion and mainstream human rights principles of universality, indivisibility, equality and non-discrimination, as well as accountability and rule of law.

Even though ECOSOC’s summary report from the HLPF recognized the: “cross-cutting importance of human rights in the 2030 Agenda,” and called for the high-level political forum to “enhance this perspective,” human rights were pushed to the background at the SDG summit. For instance:

(A) Economic, social and cultural rights fell to the side, with SDG 2 receiving some of the least support in the “Acceleration Actions”

(B) The “Political Declaration” commits to the fulfillment of human rights but does not express the need for greater integration. This outcome is contrary to statements by leaders that human rights are salient to adopting an integrated, holistic approach to the SDGs, and are an intrinsic aspect of sustainable development.

Governments must recall that it is their duty, first and foremost, to support the progressive realization of right to food. Commitments made under the SDG framework supplement and enhance—but do not replace—these obligations.

This is especially important when engaging with private-public partnerships. For instance, 19 business leaders in the food industry, One Planet Business for Biodiversity, answered a call for greater action at the SDG Summit; more than 150 food companies in the UK also announced commitments to reduce food waste under SDG 12.3.

It will be the obligation of states, however, to make sure that these companies comply with the Guiding Principles for Business and Human Rights and do not undermine the right to food in pursuit of sustainable development.

In conclusion, we must only look at the massive youth support for the Climate Change Summit, a few weeks ago to grasp this potential empowerment on behalf of a better human future for all. Children and youth exercised their fundamental human rights of assembly and freedom of expression; demanding those in responsible institutional and governmental roles recognize the human rights principles of equality, rule of law, accountability, as well as reminding us fundamental principle of sustainable and ecologically sensitive development: respecting future generation.

The CFS must respond creatively to this activism and recognize the importance of involving the next generation in food and agriculture—and in the overall protection of human rights. Youth will be the next leaders of change. Our job is not to listen only, but act with sufficient energy to move toward a world increasingly free from the curse of hunger and malnutrition.
We are challenged to achieve an ecological equilibrium that will be absolutely essential for maintaining the health of land and ocean food systems. We should do everything possible to fulfill the great potential of agroecology, for its own sake and to help conquer poverty and hunger.

Distinguished guests:

Committing to a global agenda for change will require states to prioritize the interests of the world over those of a single nation, to trade in market-driven policies for human-centred solutions and to allocate sufficient resources to support implementation of the goals. Finally, to attain these goals a democratic, just, and peaceful world is vital.

Thank you.