

Mandate of the Special Rapporteur on the right to food

March 31 2020

We are living in an extraordinary time. As we discussed last week, the health emergency due to pandemic Covid 19 is now becoming a food emergency. Every day, from big metropolitan areas, to cities, to suburbia, to small towns, and finally to rural communities, besides dealing with immediate health problems, all these ways of living together at various levels of social complexity, are increasingly concerned with how to obtain quantitatively and qualitatively available, accessible, affordable, nutritious and sustainable food. Even in the middle of Europe, farmers can no longer count on finding migrant farmers for the next harvest season. This troublesome prospect exists, even if farming flourishes, the season is good, and maybe enhancements of agriculture are available but not farm workers. Among the risks of not being able to harvest adequately is that storage warehouses are at risk of being emptied while the Covid 19 challenge continues to persist.

It is urgent that governments do not wait until widespread food shortages emerge, but act now in anticipation of challenges ahead rather than waiting until these threats materialize, and then being compelled to react in an emergency atmosphere. It will be a tragic mistake for governments to wait until society suffers the traumas of food insecurity in variously stressed circumstances.

There are other reasons for concern: Countries that are not food self-sufficient, countries that are net food importers will not be even be able to obtain staple foods, let alone healthy fresh foods. This is because many big food exporting governments are already limiting or banning exports, so as to retain what is available for their own citizens. These adaptations to the current crisis may have negative future effects on the agricultural systems of many countries. The past Ebola crisis in West Africa provided an example of how a pandemic has long-lasting debilitating impacts on agriculture sector.

Food prices are skyrocketing in many parts of the world. Vulnerable groups are struggling with economic accessibility due to lost or reduced incomes, as well as a consequence of physical inaccessibility. We need also to be sensitive to the plight of the half billion people now living in conflict and post conflict zones. These include Yemen, South Sudan, Syria, and Gaza. We should extend our concerns to the more than hundred million people who are currently at the edge of starvation, and worry about the fate of the quarter of the world's populations live under the economic sanction imposed by national governments without the backing of the UN.

Therefore, we cannot adopt a “business as usual” attitude when talking about the 2021 World Food Summit. The Committee of Food Security (CFS) was born during the 2008 food crises, as a response to the recognized need for a coordinated, collaborative body to deal with global food security policy making. CFS after more than a decade remains a unique multi stakeholder global governance model. Its innovative, inclusive, participatory governance mechanism, including the goal of realizing right to adequate food for all, the CFS is a valuable platform especially in times of extraordinary challenge and uncertainty. Human rights must be in the forefront of our efforts to protect vulnerable, people who are presently experiencing severe food insecurities, most of them as we know, are small holder farmers, food producers supply local markets, and predominantly women. Since 2009 CFS has produced many helpful policy documents that reflect the participation of its various constituencies. CFS has been the scene of lively discussions, and at times frustrations and disagreements have surfaced, but always we were able to manage, finding common ground.

The World Food Summits since 1996 have bestowed a valuable legacy. These summits brought together thousands of representatives of small scale food producers, indigenous peoples, peasants, rural communities. The next summit should be built on this positive legacy of past summits that have lent support to food sovereignty, local food systems, which are the most resilient food systems in times of uncertainty and emergency, and the conservation of entire ecosystems and the protection of biodiversity.

The next summit should be built around this CFS sense of priorities by highlighting and supporting the right to adequate food, and sustainable production methods like agorecology that facilitate the work for small scale local farmers.

I believe and hope that Dr. Kalibata will appreciate the CFS’s scientific and evidence based knowledge that combines a collaborative, participatory, multi-stakeholder working method, which is essential if we are to respect, protect, and fulfill the right to adequate food for all, not only as an ideal but as a reality.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Hilal Elver', written in a cursive style.

Hilal Elver
Special Rapporteur on the right to food