

## **Will the world be able to feed itself in 2050?**

### **Food security and the developing world**

It is a pleasure to be here, sharing this platform with Tim and Farhad and to have the opportunity to share some thoughts with you on the questions that preoccupy us tonight—hunger, equity, and the protection of the fragile eco-systems on which we all depend for our survival.

Will the world be able to feed itself in 2050? 2050 is still 42 years away. That is a long time. As Keynes said, in the long run we are all dead, and 42 years is a pretty long time. But while I may be dead, I can reasonably hope my children will not be. And perhaps by then they will have children of their own, too. We have an ethical responsibility not just to those with whom we share this planet here and now, but also to those who come after us. That responsibility is an important part of what gives our lives and our decisions meaning. We shape the future with our choices today. It matters to me, and I believe it matters to all of us, that those who are alive in 2050 live free from hunger. All of them.

The question is how can we make that happen?

We need goals. Forty-two years to 2050 is a big project. If we look back 42 years ago, we find inspiration. Forty-two years ago, in 1966, governments adopted the UN Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights—a document that included the universal human right to freedom from hunger. We have not yet realized a world free from hunger. But most of the world's parliaments have ratified this document, and thereby pledged themselves to the realization of the human right to food.

Indeed, the world's governments have gone on setting targets. At the World Food Conference held in Rome in 1974, governments pledged to eradicate child hunger in a decade. In 1996, at the World Food Summit, governments settled for halving the number of people living with hunger by 2015. In 2000, governments renewed this commitment by making it one of the Millennium Development Goals.

We need goals and we have goals. But clearly goals alone are not enough. In 2008, we confront not just the broken promises of goals not met, but also a world in which keeping our promises has gotten even harder. This year's food price crisis reminds us how fragile the global food system really is. The crisis has revealed the decrepit state of dozens of national food systems around the world.

And it is not just developing countries that are vulnerable: we are, too. I am not suggesting we are about to see food riots in Adelaide's streets—I don't wish to compare what is happening in rich countries with the desperation that has descended on countries such as Ethiopia or Haiti. But many of Australia's agricultural practices are unsustainable. The system squanders water, depends on inputs such as inorganic fertilizers that show diminishing returns, the system destroys biodiversity and soil health, and is dependent on a very narrow range of plant and livestock varieties which has undermined our ability to respond to the new and unpredictable growing conditions with which climate change presents us.

Clearly, we need a better strategy if we are to meet our goals.

Here is one plan: liberalize world agricultural markets. End subsidies to inefficient producers, tear down tariff walls, and end public stockholding. This would allow world market supplies to move to where need is greatest (or more accurately, where prices are highest, which of course is not quite the same thing). World prices for agricultural commodities would rise, which would be good for the farmers who are profitable in the deregulated markets; environmental efficiencies would be gained by concentrating production where there is the greatest comparative advantage; and private companies would be able to manage the business of getting food from where it is grown to where it is

needed, cutting significant costs out of public budgets in those countries where the state used to play all or some of this role.

This is the vision that has driven negotiators at the GATT and then, after it was established in 1995, the World Trade Organization or WTO. This is the vision behind the WTO's Agreement on Agriculture. This is the vision of recent Australian governments, be they Liberal or Labour.

It is not a vision that persuades me, however. Let me say clearly: I don't believe trade is the key to food security. Trade does not merit the importance it is given by diplomats and economists and even some NGOs in their deliberations on food security. More precisely, while trade rules are a part of the problem, and better trade rules will have to be part of the solution, trade is not the right place to start building food security.

Trade is a tool—a useful tool, even a vital tool but except for the rarest of cases, it is not a foundation stone for development. Trade among equals can make everyone better off. But trade across the disparities that mar our world has tended to make the rich richer, if also in some countries more numerous, and has worsened the problems faced by several billion people, who must now compete with a global market place to even grow food on their own half hectare or less of land.

For Australia, a country of few people, considerable wealth, and great growing conditions, trading food is a way to make money to buy other things. Countries like Australia are part of a small group worldwide, a group that includes New Zealand, Argentina, the United States, Canada and Brazil, and will soon also include parts of the former USSR, countries like the Ukraine. These countries' capacity to produce agricultural commodities exceeds their domestic needs by a wide margin. For these countries, trade in agricultural commodities is a strategy to make the country richer. For much of this past century, indeed, many of these countries have been among the richest in the world.

But then there are the countries that can ill afford to import food, but whose domestic capacity to grow food is so disrupted that they must buy food abroad to have food enough to eat at home. These low-income net-food importing countries could and should grow a lot more food than they do. Much of what they import is inferior in quality, culturally inappropriate, and depresses the necessary spur to domestic production that could generate jobs, capital and a basis from which eradicate poverty. Many of these countries have been impoverished by a vision for economic development that promised wealth through exports. It turns out that for them trade is a problem, not a solution.

Globalizing world food markets increases the supply of some foods, but actually reduces the supply of others. Changes in land

tenure laws, for example, prompted by investment clauses of trade agreements, have allowed foreign investors to buy agricultural land in a number of countries. Their investments have reduced production of food crops in favour of commodities such as coffee, soybeans for animal feed, or palm oil for biofuel feedstock. The local economy gets an infusion of capital and some new jobs, but nutritional status often suffers, and the net distribution of wealth within the community is too often unequal, exacerbating the gap between rich and poor.

Opening markets increases choice and competition among suppliers, which can lower prices. But opening markets also increases competition among consumers. That works for televisions and cars. You have to have money if you want to be part of the market, and if the goods are not essential, then we can accept that not everyone will participate.

Food is different. Everyone has to eat. A functioning food system cannot just let prices fall where supply and demand dictate. Policy choices determine whose demand is effective in the market, and if we price those who live in poverty out of the market, then we need to find other ways to protect their right to food. Trade cannot help us. In effect, the model of globalization adopted and implemented over the past two decades in most every corner of the world has priced hundreds of millions of people out of their local food markets.

A term that helps us frame some of the elements of a better strategy is food sovereignty. First coined by a movement of peasant organizations at the 1996 World Food Summit in Rome, La Via Campesina, food sovereignty was introduced to counter the argument made by many governments that free trade was the solution to food security.

Food sovereignty is the assertion of people's right to determine democratically how to protect and promote the universal human right to food. The term emphasises the role of politics in realizing food security. It emphasises the importance of *who* makes decisions. Food security is not just a technical or numerical objective—securing an average of 2500 calories of nutritionally adequate food per person, say. It is about what people eat, whom they buy it from, whose livelihoods are supported, and whether everyone can afford the food available.

The question Via Campesina posed is whose interests within countries are served by the push to deregulate trade. National welfare can rise and food security can be achieved at the national level while millions go hungry—a fact many rich countries struggle with. La Via Campesina's domestic political struggles informed their position in global negotiations: local control of food systems and democratic decision-making are two of their fundamental principles.

Trade is useful. But it cannot carry the weight of realizing our vision for a system of food and agriculture that places the right to food at its heart.

I want to conclude with some proposed principles to guide our work to build a stronger framework for trade in a fairer and more sustainable food system.

1. Protect and promote the universal human right to food. Our food systems must provide enough food for all.
2. Acknowledge that agriculture is not only about the production of commodities. Agriculture plays a vital role in meeting material but also social, cultural, and environmental objectives. Food policies have to respect goods that have no market price, such air and water quality, and the spiritual significance of maize in Mexico, or rice in much of Asia.
3. Build local food systems. This does not mean a prohibition on trade, or food autarky. It means that food security should be built from the local first, respecting environmental constraints and paying attention to the overall demands on the world's resources that a trade-based food system imposes.
4. Privilege local knowledge and technologies. Not only will this promote biological and cultural diversity, but it will also better ensure that humanity has the resources it needs to confront challenges such as climate change.



5. Lower carbon emissions. Agricultural production, land use and transportation of food make agriculture the second biggest sector in greenhouse gas emissions.
6. Cut waste. The Stockholm International Water Institute recently estimated that the world wastes about half the food it grows. For poor countries, waste could be curbed through investment in transportation, storage and distribution systems. For rich countries, it is about our habits as consumers: buy only what we need, eat less, and move away from the built-in waste endemic in our food distribution systems.
7. Finally, trade policy does not work in isolation from the rest of the economy. It cannot be determined apart, as the WTO is currently apart from the rest of the multilateral system. For trade to be a useful tool, it has to be part of a bigger vision for what we want from our economies.

We have an opportunity here. We have an opportunity to make the shift—a paradigm change—to build a fairer and more sustainable food system. We need new measures of health, wealth and food security. Farhad's work exemplifies the possibilities open to us. As a major producer for world markets, Australia could lead this change. We need new measures of success, a new understanding of what we are striving to achieve, greater respect for the planet's limits, and greater respect for one another. I don't think it is too much to ask.