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# Hunger: Is the G-8 ready to clean its plate?

By Anne Laure Constantin

This weekend, agriculture ministers from the G-8 will gather in a beautiful castle above the city of Treviso, in central Italy, to discuss the global food crisis. Missing among the scheduled gala dinners, aperitifs and wine tastings are those most affected by the food crisis, as well as a clear understanding of what has gone wrong.



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Since the G-8 summit was first discussed in Japan last year, the global food situation has worsened. Agriculture prices at the global level have plummeted but the poor are still confronted with high food prices at home and shrinking purchasing power due to the economic downturn. One billion people are currently suffering from hunger and the number is on the rise.

The key players at the G-8 meeting are countries largely responsible for creating the crisis in the first place—and they are entirely unapologetic about it. G-8 countries, particularly the United States and the European Union, have pushed agriculture policies that reward short-term private profits over essential public priorities like food security, jobs and proper management of scarce natural resources. Aggressive trade liberalization policies and agreements, focused on the commercial interests of G-8-based firms, have shaped an unfair and concentrated global agriculture market. The 2008 “food crisis” exposed how three decades of flawed policies severely damaged developing countries’ food production capacity. If the world is to meet its 21st century food challenge, G-8 countries need to urgently change the way they produce their food, as well as their approach to international trade negotiations. Yet none of this is on the summit’s proposed agenda.

One essential topic G-8 ministers will discuss is the need to increase aid to agriculture. On the face of it, U.S. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack will bring good news: He will reiterate the U.S. commitment to doubling its support for agricultural development, pledging U.S. \$1 billion for 2010. This is much needed. However, there is a big “but.” As it stands, the initiative is mostly good news for U.S.-based agribusiness companies and laboratories. Recent declarations by Secretary Vilsack<sup>1</sup> indicate that some of the money will be used in the old tradition of U.S. aid—namely to spearhead agricultural technologies, like biotechnology, that bolster the private sector rather than support small-scale farmers’ productivity. The U.S. needs to urgently revise this approach and abide by the calls of farmers from around the world who request support for “sustainable, organic, ecological friendly agriculture which is owned, controlled and managed by small farmers.”<sup>2</sup>

Unfortunately, the G-8 is disconnected from affected communities. Without those who can make change happen on the ground to address hunger and food secu-

riety, the G-8 farm summit makes little sense. Earlier this year, at a global meeting in Madrid on food security, developing countries made it clear that they have no interest in an exclusive G-8 initiative against hunger.

The global challenge of hunger is too important and complicated for just the G-8. We need a genuine commitment to a truly inclusive and multilateral process to reform the policies and institutions that led us into this mess. The G-8 is proposing a "Global Partnership" to bring together governments, civil society and the private sector around "renewed commitment and mutual accountability to achieve a comprehensive and coordinated international response to hunger."<sup>3</sup> While not perfect, it has potential. A Global Partnership could revive political momentum to address hunger, while effectively involving all relevant groups in the effort. It could move toward concrete policy reforms and help address long-standing flaws in the global governance of food and agriculture. But it needs to be framed under the auspices of the U.N., not by an exclusive group of countries. No matter how good the ideas, without global buy-in, the meeting in Treviso will end up a waste of money and gala dinners.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Carey Gillam, "US's Vilsack says science can help overcome hunger," *Reuters*, April 7, 2009, <http://www.reuters.com/article/latestCrisis/idUSN07445141> (accessed April 15, 2009).

<sup>2</sup>Asian Farmers Association, Statement at the Governing Council of the International Fund for Agricultural Development, February 2009, <http://asianfarmers.org/?p=591#more-591> (accessed April 15, 2009).

<sup>3</sup>See *Madrid process towards an inclusive global partnership*, Government of Spain, January 2009, <http://www.ransa2009.org/html/en/index.htm> (accessed April 15, 2009).