

6 April 2009

**Statement of Mr. Miguel d'Escoto Brockmann,
President of the 63rd Session of the General Assembly,
at the General Assembly Interactive Thematic Dialogue on the Global Food Crisis
and the Right to Food**

Excellencies,
High Representative of the Least Developed States,
Colleague and friend, Special Rapporteur Olivier de Schutter,
Representatives of the Rome agencies and of the United Nations System,
Brothers and Sisters All,

I am very pleased to open this informal dialogue of the General Assembly on the global food crisis. Today's discussion will bring to our Membership not only a diversity of views, but also of disciplines and knowledge. It is most appropriate that the General Assembly avail itself of various sources of knowledge and expertise, for indeed, the crisis we are examining in depth today, the Global Food Crisis and the Right to Food, is not independent or separate from the converging crises that are confronting us as an international community: climate change, the financial and economic crisis, the energy crisis, and the food crisis. Rather these crises converge, interact, fuel and aggravate each other.

To better grasp the magnitude, complexity and interrelationships of the World Food Crisis we will need to apply multiple tools. The UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Professor Olivier de Schutter, and my senior advisor for food policy and sustainable development, David Andrews, with assistance from the Rome agencies, have brought together a pool of qualified and outstanding speakers. They will analyze and discuss policy options for responding to the food crisis drawing upon four key instruments or dimensions: international law, emerging human rights law, the ethical and moral dilemmas, and science and technology. Together, these tools will afford us all a more comprehensive analysis, one that I am certain can contribute to the better formulation of solutions.

But I am particularly happy to be joined today by knowledge holders that bring to bear the concerns, worldviews and knowledge that all too often are underrepresented in our international policy forums. And here I am referring to our Third World scientists, our agroecologists, and our small-scale family farmers, and to our indigenous brothers and sisters. You are stakeholders and we are glad to welcome you here in this body, and learn together, through a dialogue of wisdoms. Not only do you constitute 50 per cent of the world's food producers, you also constitute a large percentage of the world's hungry.

This high-level gathering of economists, agroecologists, human rights specialists and other experts builds on the longstanding concerns of the General Assembly and other intergovernmental bodies regarding these issues. I think we all recognize the seriousness and the persistence of the food crisis that continues to unfold around the world and the need to keep it high on the international agenda.

Today we will attempt to find answers to difficult questions. Why do we continue to tolerate hunger and malnutrition now affecting a billion people in a world of abundance? What international policies are needed to assure the right to food? How can we change agricultural production to meet the challenge of food security in the future? Beyond the needed increases in food productions, how can we guarantee universal, sustained access to food – a problem that is more serious as millions more are tipped into abject poverty each day.

We build on the excellent analysis and reports of a range of UN bodies – the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), the World Food Programme (WFP) and other agencies and funds as well as the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food and the high-level initiatives on food security organized by the Secretary-General. We also have received scientific guidance from the International Assessment of Agriculture Science and Technology in Development (IAASTD) and other intergovernmental bodies. All of them tell us that we face an ongoing and deepening crisis that requires the establishment of a new global architecture for agriculture and food.

The United Nations has assumed a central role in addressing the pervasive challenges of food insecurity and access to food. We must support the call to strengthen our global response by relying on tools specifically based on the recognition of the right to food as a human right, specified in international law. This requires inclusive policies that recognize the needs and enable the participation of all sectors of society.

I agree with the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food, Olivier De Schutter, that we have a unique opportunity to profoundly reorient our food policies which currently leave a billion people on the verge of starvation. The ongoing food crisis is a symptom of a broader breakdown of selfish models of governance and production that have failed us and betrayed the trust of people around the world. These models are unsustainable and we must find alternatives both internationally and locally. It is also important to see the food crisis as directly linked to our financial crisis, the energy crisis and the overarching problems associated with climate change.

With the global downturn it is even more urgent to promote a rights-based approach to food policy. This will also address the needs of the billion small-scale farmers around the world, many of whom, astonishingly, do not have enough to eat. It will address the rights and needs of impoverished consumers – especially women and children -- as well who face hunger in the midst of abundance.

Without innovative and broad changes in our food policies, we will see hunger once again spread across the world like a medieval plague. The shameful reality is that, despite the fact that we have the knowledge, the financial and technological means to prevent it, half of the human population subsists at levels of malnutrition and poverty completely incompatible with their inherent dignity and rights. This is not only shameful—it is, to use religious terminology -- down right sinful, as I have often pointed out.

There is evidence that the dominant global and industrial food system has entered a process of decline. The meltdown of our financial markets and the growing calls for the overhaul of the deeply flawed Bretton Woods institutions have also initiated a process of dramatic change in the international financial architecture. We can only hope that the days of the dominance by the monoculture of industrialized food corporations are numbered as well.

UNEP, for example, recently released a report indicating that organic, small-scale farming can deliver the increased yields that were thought to be the preserve of industrial farming, without the environmental and social damage caused by industrial agriculture. Other reports point to the ecological damage and extraordinary costs related to meat production. The International Assessment of Agriculture Science and Technology in Development released its exhaustive report last year, reflecting the work of many United Nations offices, which emphasized that current methods of food production are no longer sustainable. It argued that we must change from industrial to agro-ecological methods.

Again, we are at a moment of dramatic change, perhaps a turning point. The voices for change are multiplying and, as old systems collapse in exhaustion, finally are being heard. It is time for a new politics of food, one that starts from the bottom up, not the top down. We need to have an approach to food production that is multi-functional, that has a concern for the poor and their right to food; a concern for the earth and its right to life; a concern for communities and their right to self-governance, what is referred to as food sovereignty.

At the United Nations, I have made democratization of the Organization my number one priority. So too, in food politics, I would advocate food democracy. We can move our food provisioning away from dominance by a few very large corporations to the control of people-oriented food systems that respect communities and their right to food sovereignty, and localized and regionalized food systems at the local and regional levels.

There is a growing awareness that we must face up to the fact that the “haves” of this world must change their way of life and the patterns of consumption that show little or no regard for the disastrous impact of their lifestyle on the wellbeing of their neighbors, our brothers and sisters, and our shared home, the planet Earth. We can learn from those who are moving in the direction of a new food politics, toward food democracy. We have to move ahead in this direction. With the looming calamity of global warming, we cannot hesitate to take action.

People are calling for an end to this culture of indifference to the welfare of others. We are seeing how these economic policies have accelerated global warming and the plunder of natural resources. We see the madness of converting crops into fuel to sustain gluttonous energy appetites. To perpetuate this culture is to continue to betray our most sacred values and principles and lead us to the most terrible consequences for people and our fragile planet.

Solutions proposed within the existing economic crisis are worsening the problems. In fact, the climatic crisis obeys the same logic as the food, energy and financial crises: the logic of policies based on short-term profits and speculation for maximum accumulation of wealth. These crises cannot be fixed one by one by technology alone. They require cross-cutting, global solutions.

Most of us here today are convinced that the confluence of crises we face do not have to provoke wider human tragedy. But we must overcome the moral mediocrity that keeps us from making the heroic sacrifices that the magnitude of the problems requires. We must address the underlying patterns of consumptions that are clearly unsustainable. We must reinforce the fundamental right to food. Realism, if not our conscience, should tell us that all humanity is in the same boat and that we will all sink or sail together. I am sure that our panel discussions today will move us in the right direction.

Thank you.