



Statement by His Excellency Archbishop Silvano Tomasi, Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations and Other International Organizations in Geneva
at the 16th Session of the Human Rights Council – Item 3
Geneva, 8 March 2011

Mr. President,

The right to food is a basic right because it is intrinsically linked to the right to life. Almost a billion people, however, do not enjoy this right. The challenge for the world's community is "to tackle one of the gravest challenges of our time: freeing millions of human beings from hunger, whose lives are in danger due to a lack of daily bread."¹ Two conditions are involved: there must be safe food available in sufficient quantity; each person should have access to food. Special attention should be directed to the 2.5 billion people dependent on agriculture for their daily sustenance. Among this population are found most of the people who suffer from malnutrition and hunger. Solutions exist to improve the situation, but they demand vigorous action by the governments and peoples of the countries concerned. The international community is also expected to act. My Delegation would like to indicate some conditions it thinks necessary for the enjoyment of the human right to food and the development of policies of food security as a prerequisite for self-sufficiency.

First, it is necessary to recognize and strengthen the central role of agriculture in economic activity; thus, to reduce malnutrition in rural areas, production per person must increase in order to enhance local, regional or national food independence. Investments to improve productivity are required in the areas of seeds, training, sharing of tools for cultivation and of the means for marketing. Structural changes are also demanded according to the specificity of individual states. For example, we must ensure security of land tenure for farmers, especially for those with small landholdings. The customary right of land ownership may be reconsidered. A clear property right gives the farmer the opportunity to pledge his land in exchange for seasonal credit to purchase necessary inputs. In addition, the aim of land tenure has now become increasingly important in the face of the expansion of the phenomenon of land grabs. In Sub-Saharan Africa, 80% of the land is occupied by poor who have no land titles. In addition, membership in cooperatives and access to information services would strengthen productivity.

¹ Pope Benedict XVI. *Message to Mr Jacques Diouf, Director General of FAO, on the occasion of World Food Day 2007.*

We must ensure that food flows to those who need it. The current food crises have shown that some regions are facing serious shortfalls, and in areas that traditionally produce food the stocks are now exhausted or limited. These circumstances entail strong restrictions to food aid in emergency situations. The smooth flow of food products involves several conditions: local markets should be efficient, transparent and open; information must flow efficiently; investment in roads, transport and storage of crops is indispensable. Barriers to exports that have been decided by sovereign states must be limited. These barriers temporarily exacerbate deficits in importing countries and strongly raise prices; finally, food aid that plays a vital role in cases of disasters must not disrupt local agricultural production. For example, the distribution of large amounts of food either free or cheap can ruin the farmers of the region who can no longer sell their products. In so doing, we jeopardize the future of local agriculture.

Adequate measures, therefore, should be taken to protect farmers against price volatility which has a strong impact on food security for several reasons: high prices make food unaffordable for the poor and low prices give farmers the incorrect information on needed seedlings after harvest for the following year. To prevent price volatility or at least weaken its impact, local food crops need to be protected against sudden disruptions in international prices. The customs duty at the entrance of an importing country (or the cyclical adjustment of special and differential treatment) must take into account both the needs of poor consumers and secondly the price to be paid to small farmers so they may afford a dignified standard of living and promote production. Speculation should be limited to the actors necessary for the proper functioning of the future markets. Governments should refrain from introducing measures that increase volatility, and are called to reconsider that food cannot be like any commodity, a matter of speculation or an instrument of political pressure. The establishment of regional stockpiles of raw food (cereals, oil, sugar) can have a twofold benefit: these stocks can be sold at an affordable price in case of shock and they can play a moderating role against the volatility of local prices.

The availability of food is not a sufficient factor to ensure food for everyone. People must have sufficient income to purchase food or food should have an affordable price for the poor. This raises the question of a comprehensive safety net that may consist in making available food products at subsidized prices for the poorest people at a regional level. The level of subsidy would vary according to the market price so that the cost of subsidized food can remain stable. It is illusory to believe there is a "good price" for wheat or corn. The price that a poor consumer may be able to pay may not correspond with what a small African farmer needs to live. We must construct mechanisms that bridge the gap between these two prices and for the poorest countries' solidarity requires that they be internationally funded.

A recent development in the world search for food security regards the purchase or rent of large extensions of arable land on the part of foreign organizations in countries other than their own. It seems a reasonable precondition to require that the people who are in the area should be respected, included in the project, and that the level of food security in the region should be increased. This said, investment in hunger and agriculture is essential to eradicate hunger and malnutrition.

In conclusion, Mr. President, food insecurity is not inevitable, given the vast agricultural and pastoral areas to be exploited still. With a concerted and determined action sustained by the ethical conviction that the human family is one and must move forward in solidarity, urban and rural populations together, the right to food can be implemented for every person.