



# Human Security at the United Nations

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United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs - Human Security Unit

## Human Security at the United Nations

This is the fifth issue of "Human Security at the United Nations," a newsletter produced by the Human Security Unit at the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

This issue focuses on what lies behind the recent rise in global food prices and its implications on global food security as well as its impact on human security.

Previous issues include: "Gathering Pace – Human security debate at the General Assembly" (Issue 4 – Winter 2008/2009); "The human costs of climate change" (Issue 3 – Spring 2008); "Building peace: A challenge that rests on achieving human security" (Issue 2 – Winter 2007/2008); and "Human security: Towards an integrated approach" (Issue 1 – Fall 2007).

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## Rising Food Prices and its Implications on Human Security

The sudden rise in global food prices over the recent years has significantly impacted the human security of millions of vulnerable people across the world. Accordingly, by the second quarter of 2008, global food prices had risen by an average of 83% compared to the same period in 2007. Furthermore, based on reports by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), the price for staple foods during the same period had soared sharply with corn rising by 74%, rice by 87%, and wheat by a staggering 130%. The FAO estimates that the recent rise in global food prices have negatively affected at least 3 billion people world-wide and have forced over 100 million people below the poverty line, with serious implications for nutritional well-being, economic stability, political security and a host of other humanitarian and developmental challenges.

The driving force behind the dramatic rise in global food prices has been attributed to a complex combination of interrelated supply and demand factors. A recent **Chatham House** briefing paper lists some of the major supply factors including the inelasticity of global food supplies due to changing policies of major cereal producers; reduced agricultural output due to climate change and extreme weather conditions; and increasing costs of agricultural inputs such as fertilizers, shipping and distribution costs as a consequence of rising fuel prices. On the demand side, increasing allocation of crops for bio-fuel production; increased consumption of cereal intensive meat and dairy products in newly emerging economies such as China and India; as well as stock holding policies of several large producers have been cited as contributing factors to the precipitous decline in world grain stocks currently at their lowest level in 30 years.

## The Impact of the Food Crisis on Human Security

Food insecurity is inherently interlinked with political security, socio-economic development, human rights and the environment. Consequently, a sharp rise in food prices can have significant impact on human security reaching far beyond the immediate effects of hunger and malnutrition. High food prices force vulnerable families to adopt coping strategies that not only have short-term negative affects, such as consuming fewer and less nutritious foods, but can also result in potentially longer-term reversals in poverty reduction and human development by cutting back on health care and education in order to maintain immediate staple food consumption.

Furthermore, coupled with already fragile political and security situations, the ramifications of rising food prices are significantly magnified and can trigger slow-onset crisis in conflict and/or post-conflict situations where political and social institutions are fragile and unable to provide the rapid responses and the social protections needed.

As a result, various low-income food deficit countries have witnessed protests and civil riots related to rising food prices. Similarly, countries already ravaged by war are faced with serious difficulties resulting

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in growing incidences of malnutrition that is hampering post-conflict recovery and economic growth. In addition, even in countries where steady progress towards hunger and under-nourishment had been achieved over the last decade, rising food prices coupled with the impacts of global financial crisis such as decreasing foreign investment, rising inflation and reduced remittances, have left many, especially rural subsistence farmers, vulnerable to food insecurity. And while global food prices have begun to slowly fall and stabilize as of late, the ramifications for human security continue to reverberate among millions of vulnerable urban and rural net food buyers.

## Response by the International Community

In view of the global challenge caused by rising food prices, the international community has placed food security at the forefront of its agenda. Among recent efforts, the United Nations under the guidance of the **High Level Task Force on the Global Food Security Crisis** has proposed a comprehensive two-pronged strategy for ensuring food security for all. The first set of responses focuses on meeting the immediate needs of vulnerable populations through measures such as enhanced accessibility to emergency food assistance; increased productivity and production by smallholder farmers; and adjusted trade and taxation policies. The second set of interventions considers the underlying factors behind the food crisis and builds on longer-term strategies that strengthen national social protection systems; focus on agriculture as the main driver in boosting food production and reducing hunger and poverty; advocate for fair agricultural trade policies; and develop an international biofuel consensus that takes into account the global food and nutrition security needs of future generations.

Meanwhile, the **Madrid High-Level Meeting on Food Security for All** reaffirmed the commitments agreed to at the 1996 World Food Summit to reduce the number of undernourished people by half by 2015. Delegates recognized the need to address funding gaps and highlighted the importance of mobilizing resources, most notably, towards the establishment of needed social protection programmes that provide food assistance to the most vulnerable.

More recently, leaders at the **G20 Summit** in London noted that countries already vulnerable to higher food prices have suffered further from the recent financial crisis as a result of declining remittances from workers living abroad; the collapse of commodity prices; and contraction in tourist industries. Fearing that the current financial and food crisis could result in chaos and violence, the Summit agreed to provide additional support to the hardest hit countries and to do whatever is necessary to restore sustainable globalization and prosperity for all.

## Human Security and Food Security: The Added Dimension

Despite best efforts at the international level towards an integrated response to food insecurity, the traditional divide between humanitarian and development assistance continues to result in fragmented responses that focus mostly on emergency interventions and trade related measures. Yet the persistence of high food prices into the future and their potential negative impact on growth and development requires us to go beyond traditional food security frameworks with their focus on demand and supply conditions and to take into account the broader aspects of human security such as health, economic and environmental concerns.

By considering the different ways that food insecurity threatens peoples' survival, livelihood and dignity, the human security approach allows us to comprehensively address the full range of factors that affect people's security. As such, human security adopts a context-specific approach that takes into account the inter-linkages and externalities between policies and programmes related to food security and other areas such as health, education, environment, economic, personal and community security. Moreover, the human security approach ensures that programmes and strategies, while taking into account local conditions, also give due

### Recent Human Security Publications

**Human Security in Theory and Practice**, United Nations, 2008

**Global Assessment Report on Disaster Risk Reduction**, UNISDR, 2009

An extensive list of food security related publications can be found in the **Human Security Unit Digital Library**

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consideration to the interplay between international and local dynamics surrounding food security. In addition, human security encourages the consideration of people-centered solutions that are embedded in local knowledge and experience, and that build on untapped capacities at the community level. Central to the human security framework is the question of how to shield individuals and communities from 'downturn risks' in ways that are truly sustainable and empowering. In situations of food insecurity, a human security approach sharpens the attention on preventative strategies to reduce risks, to address chronic vulnerabilities that lie at the root causes of food insecurity, and to strengthen community resilience.

### **Human Security in Action - A UNTFHS Funded Project - Support for Sustainable Livelihood Recovery among the Conflict-Affected Population in the North-East Regions of Sri Lanka**

Twenty years of violent conflict coupled with significant destruction brought by the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami has taken its toll on agricultural production in North-Eastern Sri Lanka. Together with on-going assistance for resettlement, reconstruction and rehabilitation, there is an urgent need to increase agricultural productivity and improve food security among the affected population. Moreover, the revitalization of small businesses in rural areas is crucial for improving market opportunities for locally produced agro-based products and increasing the economic stability of the productive sectors.



Training on agricultural machinery to increase agricultural output in food insecure regions of North-Eastern Sri Lanka. © UN/2009

In collaboration with District Chambers of Commerce and the Ceylon National Chamber of Industry, the project led by UNIDO takes a multi-sectoral community-based approach that aims to revitalize agricultural activities and

increase food production through investments focused on small-scale farmers, including women and other vulnerable groups. Subsequently, the project promotes access to assets and services and ensures better management of natural resources; removes constraints to domestic trade and stimulates public-private partnerships; and improves overall rural food production and economic activity.

The project is firmly grounded in the protection and empowerment framework. Local structures such as agricultural institutions, rural production groups, and banking and credit facilities assist small-scale farmers and encourage entrepreneurs to invest in food production activities. Meanwhile, technical and entrepreneurial trainings empower individuals and communities to improve their knowledge and skills and advance strategies that enhance food production and promote sustainable food security. For further information on this and other UNTFHS funded projects, please visit the [HSU website](#).

### **Latest News and Events**



Participants engaged in a human security analysis, mapping and planning exercise during the first training workshop in Accra. © UN

**Regional Training Workshop: “Applying the Human Security Concept in Project and Programme Development, Implementation and Impact Assessment”** was held in Accra, Ghana, from 8–10 June 2009. Organized by the Human Security Unit/OCHA, in collaboration with UN Ghana and Sciences-Po, Paris, 40 participants representing 10 UN agencies from Central and West Africa attended the three day training workshop. The second Regional Training Workshop will be held in Bangkok, Thailand, in October 2009. Participants will represent the Asia region.

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**Sixth Meeting of the Friends of Human Security (FHS)** was held on 4 June 2009 at the United Nations Headquarters in New York. Chaired by Ambassador Claude Heller of Mexico and Ambassador Yukio Takasu of Japan, Member States discussed the added value of human security in 5 areas currently of significance to the international community: (i) The financial and economic crisis and its impact on the MDGs, (ii) The recent outbreak of H1N1 influenza, (iii) Peacebuilding, (iv) Violence against women, and (v) Climate change. Member States also expressed their support for a second General Assembly thematic debate on human security and a report on human security by the Secretary-General. Documents from the meeting will be made available on the HSU website shortly. Documents from the meeting will be made available on the [HSU website](#) shortly.

**Eleventh Ministerial Meeting of the Human Security Network (HSN)** was held in Dublin, Ireland, on 27 May 2009, marking the ten year anniversary of the Network. The new Chair of the HSN, Costa Rica, proposed the following potential areas of exploration during its tenure, including: developing the HSN as a think-tank for new ideas; releasing joint statements on human security issues to raise the visibility and profile of the HSN; preparing discussion papers on human security issues in collaboration with NGOs and academia; and promoting open debates surrounding human security issues. Documents in support of the meeting are being finalized and will be made available on the [HSU website](#) shortly.

Further details of these and other events will be posted on the [HSU Website Calendar of Events](#).

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