

**Public statement by the United Nations Special Rapporteur  
on the right to food, Mr. Michael Fakhri**

**Response to joint statement by the leaders of the World Bank Group (WBG), the  
World Trade Organisation (WTO), the International Monetary Fund (IMF)  
and the World Food Programme (WFP)**

*Geneva, 20 May 2022*

On 13 April 2022, the leaders of the World Bank, the IMF, the WTO and WFP issued a [joint statement](#) warning that the war in Ukraine was adding to threatening global food security making the existing food crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic even worse. They called for urgent, coordinated action on food security and appealed to countries to avoid banning food and fertilizer exports.

The UN Special Rapporteur welcomed the joint statement and commended the four leaders for calling for urgent action and raising the profile of the long-standing global food crisis. Nevertheless, in a letter addressed to all four international organizations, the Special Rapporteur detailed his concerns. These concerns have global impact and he wishes to share his analysis with the larger public.

The joint statement by the World Bank, the IMF, the WTO and WFP focuses on increased agricultural production, financial support, open trade, and the provision of emergency food supplies. According to the UN Special Rapporteur, this simply highlights what the respective institutions have been doing over the past years, if not decades, without addressing the core challenges facing the world's food systems.

For over two years, there has been no globally coordinated response to the food crisis despite the rising rate of hunger, famine, and malnutrition and despite the increasing degree of conflict in food systems. However, in the recent weeks, with the Russian wrongful attack against Ukraine, there have been numerous reactions to the newest shock to food systems. Like other [UN human rights experts](#), the Special Rapporteur condemns the violation of human rights in armed conflicts. The fact, however, that only now has there been a global response to the long-standing global food crisis indicates that what may be also at stake today is the international institutions' legitimacy and national governments' ability to govern.

Ever since the COVID-19 pandemic began, a number of States and many civil society organizations have been calling for coordinated action through institutions such as the Human Rights Council, International Labour Organization, and the Committee on World Food Security.

*Framing the Problem*

Food systems emit approximately one third of the world's greenhouse gases and contribute to the alarming decline in the number animal and plant species. Intensive industrial agriculture and export-oriented food policies have driven much of this damage. Ever since governments started adopting the Green Revolution in the 1950s, the world's food systems have been increasingly designed along industrial models, the idea being that, if people are able to purchase industrial inputs, then they can produce a large amount of food. Productivity was not measured in terms of human and

environmental health, but exclusively in terms of commodity output and economic growth. This same system disrupted carbon, nitrogen and phosphorous cycles because it requires farmers to depend on fossil fuel- based machines and chemical inputs, displacing long-standing regenerative and integrated farming practices.

Thus, calling for increased production without a clear indication of what kind of production methods and types of food are concerned, there is a risk of reproducing mistakes of the past. Despite a 300 per cent increase in global food production since the mid-1960s, malnutrition is a leading factor contributing to reduced life expectancy. The problem with hunger is not a global lack sufficient production, but inequality and other systemic impediments to access adequate food.

Moreover, the fundamental problem is not that farmers' access to chemical fertilizers has been disrupted by the war in Ukraine, it is that so many farmers rely heavily on chemical fertilizers in the first place. Chemical fertilizers do not ensure food security. Their pervasive use sometimes increases crop production in the short-term, but it creates a longer-term dependency on corporations and trade. Chemical fertilizers also deplete nutrients from the soil and cause environmental harm through runoff violating people's right to a healthy and sustainable environment. In the immediate term, it is important to make sure fertilizers reach farms whose farming system depends on chemical inputs, but the ultimate goal must be to wean them off this dependency as soon as possible.

#### *Global Markets are One Source of the Problem*

The solutions suggested in the joint statement may be contradictory or counterproductive.

For example, the World Bank has recently advised countries to reform existing agricultural support policies to produce better outcomes that can tackle food insecurity and climate change. Yet current WTO rules and negotiation history make those types of changes very difficult especially for developing countries. The WFP has focused its efforts on immediate humanitarian relief but has not done enough to ensure that WFP supply chains transform local and regional food systems and enhance people's dignity and ecological biodiversity. The World Bank and IMF have provided support to the food and agricultural sector but have done so in a way that has emphasized market-led land reforms and financial sector deregulation. This has caused further instability and increased food insecurity, especially amongst small-scale farmers and Indigenous peoples, by enabling land grabbing in developing countries and further speculation over commodity futures.

The war in Ukraine is one of the most recent global shocks to food systems, but it is not the cause. In 2011, the FAO recorded record food prices and in the past year inflation has been on the rise globally. As in 2007 and 2010, the main problem today is not only the price spikes but price volatility. Indeed, for too long food has been treated as a commodity or a financial instrument, often open to speculation. Matters have been made worse with the rise of biofuels, whereby products like soybean and maize are not just food but fuel, directly linking the price of vegetable oil to the price of petrol. There is also a too high degree of market concentration in food markets and agri-food companies continue to grow their profits amidst all this suffering.

International markets are one cause of the breakdown of food systems. The core problem is that current markets do not absorb shocks and instead amplify them. Prices do not provide helpful information about supply and demand and instead reflect market power and investors' fears. The

world's international institutions have played a central role in how these markets have been designed and governed.

*New Trade Rules Must be Part of the Solution*

One of today's most acute challenges is that the WTO agricultural negotiations have not advanced since 1995. The fact that there remains no permanent solution over national food stockholding programs highlights that what is at stake is not just farm policy but food security.

Moreover, there is a growing consensus amongst different coalitions within the WTO that the Agreement on Agriculture (AoA) is outdated. Some AoA provisions, such as the differential rule on domestic support and the Special Agricultural Safeguard, are mainly for use by developed countries. The AoA does contain exceptional provisions that could theoretically ameliorate the negative effects of trade on particular countries, or on groups of people within countries, from the negative impacts of trade. Countries that are especially vulnerable to international markets have attempted to introduce or enhance mechanisms such as special and differential treatment, special safeguard measures, special products, and the Ministerial Decision on measures concerning the possible negative effects of the reform programme on least-developed and net food-importing developing countries. These provisions could have had clear, implementable outcomes but instead they have been systematically opposed, eroded and marginalized. In sum, the AoA's provisions and its implementation have been inequitable.

The challenge is that food security has been treated as something to be dealt with as an exception to trade policy. There remains, however, no coherent international food policy informing WTO operations, just as trade policy is not adequately addressed in Rome-based agencies. It remains to be seen whether we can have an action-oriented discussion around trade and food policy within the WTO, or whether that conversation should be hosted elsewhere.

The Special Rapporteur therefore encourages the leaders of the concerned international organizations to reflect upon the ways in which their respective institutions have contributed towards causing the crisis we face today while they consider ways forward.

ENDS

**Mr. Michael FAKHRI** is the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food. He was appointed Special Rapporteur d by the Human Rights Council in March 2020 and assumed his functions on 1 May 2020. Mr. Fakhri is a professor at the University of Oregon School of Law where he teaches courses on human rights, food law, development, and commercial law. He is also the director of the Food Resiliency Project in the Environmental and Natural Resources Law Center.

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