



The challenge of urban food distribution and production

Statement of Jacques Diouf
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Mr. Chairman,
Mr. President of the Inter-Parliamentary
Council,
Mr. Secretary-General,
Honourable Members of Parliament,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me first express my sincere thanks for your kind invitation. It is a great honour for me to address this assembly of parliamentarians from all over the world and to reaffirm the commitment of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations to continue and increase its cooperation with the Inter-Parliamentary Union.

This cooperation has found gratifying expression in our joint efforts in favour of world food security and the implementation of the Plan of Action of the World Food Summit. I wish to recall the support of the parliamentarians and the IPU during the preparation of the Summit, in particular the recognition of the right to food as a basic human right, as well as the important declaration of support adopted by the Parliamentarians' Day that took place during the Summit in November 1996.

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That commitment was recently reaffirmed by the Specialized Inter-parliamentary Conference on Attaining the World Food Summit's Objectives Through a Sustainable Development Strategy, held in Rome from 29 November to 2 December last year. The results of that Conference are a milestone, not only in our work together, but also in mobilizing civil society in support of the Summit's goal of halving the number of undernourished people by the year 2015 and its ultimate objective of ensuring food security for all.

At the Specialized Conference you addressed the double challenge of satisfying the needs of the poor and undernourished of today while preserving the resources that should sustain the life of future generations. Today you are focusing on the manifold problems of large cities and here again, food security is a crucial issue.

A majority of North Americans and Europeans have lived in cities since the middle of this century, a majority of Latin Americans since the 1960s and a majority of people in the Near East since 1980. Asians and Africans are still predominantly rural, but this picture is changing rapidly. Asian cities are currently growing at an average rate of 3 percent per year, compared to an overall population growth in Asia of 1.4 percent. African cities are growing at a rate of 4 percent per year, against an overall population growth of 2.6 percent. Furthermore, these averages hide the fact that certain cities are actually growing at over 10 percent each year.

The challenge of urban food distribution and production

The great social problems arising from the combination of demographic growth, slow rise in per caput income and unequal distribution of wealth are taking on a predominantly urban character. One of the main challenges of the forthcoming decade will be to provide adequate quantities of nutritional and affordable food for urban inhabitants. If food does not arrive at the right place at the right time, if it is of poor quality or too expensive, serious trouble could ignite. Urban political unrest and social instability are already well-documented throughout the world whenever food prices have suffered sharp increases. Access to food at an affordable price is a crucial issue of concern to anyone committed to the well-being of fellow citizens.

In this connection, I should like to outline three of the main dimensions of urban food production and distribution systems, that can be summarized as:

- urban and peri-urban food production;
- urban food marketing and distribution; and
- the retailing of street foods

Urban and peri-urban food production

Besides food imported from abroad and from the countryside, another flow is generated within the cities themselves, as urban dwellers attempt to produce their own supplies in gardens, on spare public land, river banks and alongside public facilities. It is estimated that one-quarter to two-thirds of urban and peri-urban households in developing countries are involved in agriculture.

In some poor areas of Nairobi, for example, food production and sales provide an average of three-quarters of the income earned by the urban dwellers. Urban and peri-urban agriculture is often carried out on a part-time basis by women, who can combine this activity with childcare and other household work. One study showed that 68 per cent of urban farmers in Harare are women.

This type of agriculture includes horticulture, livestock and fodder production, aquaculture and forestry. Horticulture – mainly vegetable production – has expanded rapidly in and around cities in many developing countries, as an informal activity practised by poor and landless city dwellers, as well as by commercial enterprises.

Commercial, peri-urban production of livestock is an extremely fast-growing sector: it represents 34 per cent of total meat production and nearly 70 per cent of egg production worldwide.

The diverse activities that make up urban and peri-urban agriculture have in common the proximity to large settlements of people. This creates opportunities as well as risks.

The opportunities stem from easy access to consumer markets and the production of fresh, perishable food with less need for packaging, storage and transportation. Also important are non-market access to food for poor consumers and the potential for creating agricultural jobs and incomes. Opportunities also arise from proximity to services, including waste treatment facilities and the possibility of benefiting from waste recycling and re-use possibilities.

Despite its potential efficiencies, agriculture within urban and peri-urban areas has also raised criticisms. Concerns have arisen over competition for resources (land, water, labour and energy) and incompatible uses (smells, noise and pollution). However, a great deal of urban horticulture also takes place in hazardous zones, thus reducing flooding and creating buffer zones which increase land stability.

Marketing and distribution systems

Many of the inefficiencies and service breakdowns experienced in large cities in the developing world are due to the fact that wholesale and retail markets are ill-maintained or ill-managed, or simply too old and small to meet the growing needs. Wholesale markets are still often located in the centre of the cities, with resulting problems of space, refrigeration and conservation of foodstuffs. Heavy vehicle and foot traffic result in traffic jams, while waste products and heavy water use lead to environmental damage. The combination of all these conditions causes high food losses, the costs of which are imposed on consumers.

New retail markets are not being built fast enough to meet the needs of growing urban populations, nor has the capacity of existing markets kept pace with the increase in the number of vendors. One response of market vendors to this lack of space has been to create "spontaneous markets" wherever possible near consumers. In Dakar, three quarters of the retail markets are spontaneous markets and in New Delhi these account for 60 per cent of all fruit and vegetable markets. In Lima, out of 306 markets surveyed, only 72 were operating in established municipal market facilities, while the rest have arisen spontaneously, often near slums where there is poor access to public facilities.

The street food phenomenon

At the far end of the food chain, most of the food consumed in cities must be purchased and poor families may spend as much as 60-80 per cent of their income on it. Many of these purchases are in the form of ready-prepared and cooked meals taken on the street. This type of food forms a significant part of urban food consumption – for both poor and middle-class inhabitants – representing

20 to 25 percent of household food expenditure in a range of cities across the world. Residents of Accra spend one-third of their food budget on street food and other meals prepared away from home, with the lowest income group spending the most on street food.

Street food has a broad impact on nutritional status, as its consumption is widespread and it provides a relatively cheap source of food to the population at large. It is also an important means of livelihood for people without other means of income and it is an area where women can find employment relatively easily. It is estimated that there are more than 120,000 street food vendors in Bangkok alone.

However, certain health issues associated with street food need to be addressed. Vendors are typically untrained in food hygiene or sanitation and they often work under very crude and unsanitary conditions. They rarely have access to clean water for use in food preparation, or for washing hands and used dishes and there is often a lack of proper waste disposal facilities. Food wastes can accumulate, attracting rodents and insects that can cause further contamination problems.

The contribution of FAO

A major part of FAO's work programme is concerned with the need to target the most disadvantaged groups in the developing world with special measures to facilitate access to food, improved nutrition and sustainable livelihoods – thus providing a safety net for the food insecure. The focus of this work is upon the improvement of rural livelihoods, farm incomes and household food security in food-deficit and economically marginal rural areas. However, at the same time, it is recognised that demographic trends in the developing countries, in combination with currently inadequate levels of per caput food consumption, require a strong growth in food supplies.

In responding to this challenge, it is essential to bear in mind the strategic links between efforts to raise the efficiency of rural agriculture and the growing problem of feeding the cities. Implementing a global strategy to address urban food supply and distribution problems requires large public investments in infrastructure, in information and in the reinforcement of technical competence at all levels. International organizations constitute an important element within the institutional framework necessary to achieve success in these areas and FAO has already taken steps to mobilize this dimension.

Just two months ago, the FAO Committee on Agriculture discussed the question of urban and peri-urban agriculture and urged the creation of an inter-disciplinary, pro-active programme in which FAO would work together with NGOs, research institutions and other interested UN agencies. Programme development is already under way with the

aim of joining the synergistic potentials of many national and international organizations and institutions concerned with the needs of urban food systems and growing urban populations.

But even before this initiative, FAO was already active in the area of food supply to the cities. Since 1989, the Organization has engaged in a series of actions specifically aimed at improving the street food sector. It has concentrated upon updating codes of hygienic practice, as well as other food safety recommendations, and on providing information and training for enforcement personnel.

FAO has also assisted cities in incorporating peri-urban forest management in their environmental and biodiversity efforts. Moreover, management of peri-urban livestock has been a major component of the Organization's mixed farming systems programme and intensive horticulture has been the focus of work in many African cities which has successfully increased food security and employment. Other interesting initiatives include the FAO sub-regional programme on "Food Supply and Distribution in Francophone Africa" and the work envisaged under the inter-regional programme on "Food Supply and Distribution to Cities". The latter addresses the relationship between urbanization, urban growth, food marketing and food security, and constitutes a major follow-up to the World Food Summit, which gave priority to improving the efficiency of marketing systems and linkages between production and consumption areas.

In order to improve food security in low-income food deficit countries, in many of which rapid rural-urban migration is swelling the cities, FAO is strengthening its Special Programme for Food Security (SPFS), which was launched in 1994 and is a major tool for implementing the recommendations of the World Food Summit. This programme, currently operational in 39 countries and under formulation in 34 others, is formulated and implemented by national experts under the direct responsibility of each government, with the technical assistance of FAO. Financial support comes from a variety of sources, including the concerned governments, bilateral donors, development banks and other funding institutions, NGOs, private sector entities and FAO itself.

The SPFS's multidisciplinary and participatory approach, as well as its strong emphasis on meeting people's needs directly while generating employment, increasing social equity and promoting gender sensitivity, make it ideally suited to facilitating the development of urban and peri-urban agriculture. Pilot programmes on urban horticulture have already been prepared in Africa and Asia.

However, all these actions, although qualitatively important, are still a minimal part of what is needed to attain the objectives of the World Food Summit. These actions

have to be multiplied, involving not only the government but all the sectors of civil society, of which parliaments constitute the highest expression.

As it was clearly stated by your recent Specialized Conference in Rome, the commitments of the Summit were made by governments on behalf of States, but they can be honoured only if parliaments and their members are fully involved in the implementation process. Parliaments provide the legislative framework at national level for creating the enabling economic and social environment required for improving food security, and can play a crucial role, when discussing the national budget, to ensure that agriculture and related sectors essential to food security receive all the necessary priority in the allocation of public funds, including official development assistance.

Furthermore, members of parliament can play a decisive role in enrolling all the sectors of civil society in the common endeavour for food security. I wish to mention in particular the Food for All Campaign, an FAO initiative that has received the wholehearted support of the Inter-Parliamentary Union as a useful mechanism for mobilizing stakeholders at all levels of society in support of the Plan of Action and keeping the food security issues at the heart of the national political debate. Members of parliament could further support this important initiative by promoting the creation of National Committees of the Food for All Campaign in their respective countries and taking action to facilitate the institutional and operational aspects.

I now wish to draw your attention to TeleFood, the global media initiative launched by FAO in 1997 to promote public awareness and the mobilization of civil society. This

initiative, which is closely related to the Food for All Campaign, has received the active support of parliaments in many countries and obtained a great success for two consecutive years, reaching each time millions of people in over 60 countries. The generous contributions of the public have allowed FAO to implement more than 319 small projects in 91 countries. These projects, which involve small amounts, have allowed poor farmers –including urban and peri-urban farmers and frequently women– to rapidly improve their productivity and their capacity to meet their basic food needs. I should note that not a single cent of the funds collected by TeleFood is spent in meeting any organizational or administrative cost. However, in many countries fund-raising has been hampered by lack of tax deductions for individuals, companies and institutions willing to contribute. The support of parliaments in this regard would represent an important contribution to the success of this important initiative.

Before concluding, I should like to put on record my high appreciation for the active commitment of the Inter-Parliamentary Union and its Members in the global endeavour for food security. However, it is no surprise to me. Being myself a former Member of Parliament, I know that you are guided by a deep sense of duty towards the well-being of the people that you represent. By keeping in touch with your respective constituencies you have a direct feeling of their needs and concerns, and you can also transmit, discuss and disseminate important initiatives. Parliaments and their members are a precious asset in the cooperative effort for implementing the Plan of Action of the World Food Summit and making effective the basic human right to food.

Thank you.