

The Anti-Hunger Imperative

By José Manuel Barroso

Brussels – There are plenty of summits to choose from this year, but the World Summit on Food Security deserves not to be lost in the crowd. This meeting in Rome from November 16-18 provides badly needed political momentum to three linked issues that rank among the most challenging of the current era: food security, biodiversity, and climate change.

Collectively, we are failing in the fight against world hunger. More than one billion people in the world today do not have enough food to meet their basic daily nutritional needs, and the situation in developing countries is getting worse.

This is, first and foremost, a moral outrage. How can it be that in the twenty-first century, when we have taken men to the Moon and back, we still cannot feed everyone on this planet? Policymakers must recognize, moreover, that food insecurity is linked to the lasting effects of the economic crisis and ongoing climate change, and that it represents no less a threat to our global community.

To be fair, world leaders have responded. At the recent G-8 summit in L'Aquila, Italy, we made a firm commitment "to act with the scale and urgency needed to achieve global food security," and we collectively pledged \$20 billion over three years. This is a sizeable commitment, but it may not be enough – more needs to be done to increase agricultural production, to free up the potential of trade to address food insecurity, and to deal with the increasing impact of climate change on agriculture.

The European Commission, too, has responded, with finance for food security coming via a number of instruments. Our European Union food facility, agreed last year, is mobilizing an additional \$1.5 billion for a rapid response to rising food prices. And we will pump in another \$4 billion in the coming three years to fund activities that help countries improve food security and adapt to climate change.

Extra money to address food security problems, among other things, should be one of the key outcomes of the finance package that the EU strongly supports for the next crucial event on the summit calendar: the Copenhagen climate conference in December. Changing weather patterns and the increasing magnitude and frequency of extreme weather events will require substantial investments if farmers are to adapt successfully. These changes hit the poorest the hardest, and global trends mask deep regional disparities.

Small farmers, predominantly in developing countries, will bear the brunt of climate change. If we do not act quickly, the 40 poorest countries, predominantly in sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America, will by 2080 lose from 10% to 20% of their basic grain-growing capacity due to drought.

But answers to this problem are close to hand. The impact of biodiversity is often insufficiently understood, which means that we have undervalued its contribution to tackling global challenges. The more diverse the variation of life forms within a given ecosystem, the more resilient it is to change.

So biodiversity can act as a natural “insurance policy” against sudden environmental changes and a buffer against losses caused by them (as well as by pests and diseases). Biodiversity is essential for reliable and stable long-term food production. The famines in Ireland in the nineteenth century and in Ethiopia in the late twentieth century provide clear evidence of the vulnerability of undiversified crops to environmental changes, and the dramatic consequences of such vulnerability for the population.

Crop diversity can also deliver important ecosystem benefits. Varieties that are tolerant to drought and flood can not only increase productivity, but also can prevent soil erosion and desertification. In southern Ghana, for example, farmers have managed to reduce crop failures arising from rainfall variability and unpredictability by cultivating several drought-tolerant types of the same crop species. In addition, crop diversification has reduced the need for costly and environmentally damaging pesticides.

So I am convinced that we should raise the profile of biodiversity in tackling climate change and food insecurity, and that we need more high-level attention to this subject.

Next week, when leaders meet in Rome, I hope that we will agree on the key priorities to fight hunger and food insecurity, and in particular to establish an authoritative source of advice on food security to governments and international institutions. In fact, we need for food security what the United Nations’ Intergovernmental Panel has done for climate change: a science-based red-alert system for the planet. And at the start of a new five-year term at the European Commission, I will continue to do all I can to promote this important issue.

But even the best and most up-to-date donor policies will remain vain exercises if governments in developed countries fail to translate their commitments into hard cash and improvements in agricultural investment worldwide.

So finally let the World Summit on Food Security provide tangible evidence of a commitment from all governments to a common objective: a world free of hunger. History will judge us unfavorably if we fail.

José Manuel Barroso is President of the European Commission.