



**Access to land and the food crisis:
*Feedback and reflections by the ILC Secretariat on
The FAO High Level Conference on World Food Security***

From 3rd – 5th June 2008, 5,159 representatives of 181 countries, including 42 heads of state, met in Rome at the [High Level Conference on World Food Security: the Challenges of Climate Change and Bioenergy](#). ILC members participating included FAO (the host), IFAD, World Food Programme, the World Bank, and IFAP. The International NGO/CSO Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty (IPC) held a parallel Forum on the same topic entitled [Terra Preta](#) at which a number of ILC members participated, including FAO and IFAD.

Food insecurity, but little mention of land insecurity

In the shadow of the current food crisis, most deliberations in the conference were addressed at how to achieve greater food security for the 862 million people who are undernourished in the world today. However, in statements of concern and proposed solutions to food insecurity, very little was said about a deeper form of insecurity related to the crisis that is also on the rise: insecurity in access to land for the 1.5 billion people in the world in smallholder households involved in agriculture on 2ha of land or less.

The lack of a clear focus on access to land in the High Level Conference (HLC) is significant gap, for two reasons. Firstly, being a primary asset in production, land and natural resources are an essential safety net from food insecurity for the poorest households. Being a basis for social relations, access to land is also often an important factor in preventing social exclusion and thus economic exclusion. Secondly, the three key issues raised by the conference: increase in food and commodity prices; adaptation and mitigation measures to climate change; and rapidly increasing use of agrofuels are converging factors that are likely to *increase exclusion from land* for the poorest landusers. These trends are driving a growing demand in commercial demand for land. Increasingly, this is bringing large-scale investors in land, agricultural production and potential carbon sequestration in direct competition with smallholders and common-property users for the land which they use. As many such users have no formal tenure rights on their land, they are vulnerable to dispossession. As documented, for example, in a report entitled [Fuelling exclusion? The biofuels boom and poor people's access to land](#) released by FAO and IIED in the week of the conference, dispossession is already evident.

The deliberations of the HLC gave a window into the opinions and likely trends of world leaders, including the United Nations System, of how high on the agenda access to land is likely to be in a global response to current global trends. *How strongly will securing access to land for the world's poor feature in the medium and long-term strategies of international agencies and governments to provide food security?* The indications from the HLC are not optimistic. Despite a clear recognition at the HLC of the importance of addressing the longer-term causes of hunger, there was little mention from the floor of access to land. Instead, most governments appear in the longer-term to be looking to the promise of technological innovation as the key to food security for all. President Lula of Brazil appeared to capture the sentiments of many speakers to follow when he spoke in the

opening morning of working towards a 'golden revolution' in agricultural production for developing countries combining the three ingredients of 'land, sun and innovation'.

If the pledges made at the HLC are kept, investment by donors in agriculture is likely to increase in the medium term. The United States, by far the biggest single donor in fighting world hunger (US\$5 billion pledged for 2008-9 at the HLC), revealed its longer-term strategy for food security as being based on investment in science and technology. However, the label 'innovation' seemed to be most commonly used in the context of scientific research for increasing productivity, with little mention of facilitating community-based innovation for small-scale production, drawing on traditional and local knowledge.

In concluding his opening statement to the HLC, the Director General of FAO emphasised that the problem of food insecurity (as many members of ILC would also say of land insecurity) is a political one. Nonetheless, the solutions proposed during the conference remained overwhelmingly technical.

A lone voice in the statements by Heads of State on the importance of secure access to land by smallholders for food security was, unfortunately, Robert Mugabe, whose actions in increasing food insecurity in his country may cause others to associate agrarian reform with social and economic instability. In contrast to the Commission on Sustainable Development's 16th Session in May 2008, at which groupings such as the G77 and European Union made clear statements on the importance of secure access to land, promoting secure access to land does not appear to be a priority for most governments in the context of the food crisis.

What does 'a new deal for agriculture' look like?

Statements delivered by most leaders at the HLC largely presented a vision of future agricultural production that appears to be dominated by large-scale commercial production. Smallholders (including common property-users) generally do not seem to be considered as potential drivers of improved agricultural production. Exceptions to this (apart from the statement by Robert Mugabe) came mostly from inter-governmental and donor agencies. AGRA's announcement at the HLC of a partnership with the three Rome-based agencies to improve agricultural production of smallholders in the 'breadbasket' regions of Africa was one step in this direction, but still seemed heavily reliant on injection of external technological inputs rather than local knowledge, priorities and needs.

While most UN Agencies mentioned the role of smallholders, IFAD was virtually alone in putting the potential of smallholder production at the centre of its statement. Nonetheless, the [statement by IFAD](#) made no explicit reference to the increasing insecurity of tenure faced by smallholders, and gives greater emphasis in proposing solutions to increasing productivity and improving market access than to access to land.

The Terra Petra Forum gave voice to alternative perspectives from civil society on three topics related to current food crisis and to HLC agenda:

On the **food crisis**: participants highlighted the need for a new vision for global governance of food and agriculture. They appealed strongly to the right to food sovereignty as the overarching framework. Calls were made to defend small producers, women, pastoralists, indigenous peoples and their traditional knowledge against industrial-scale agriculture, and against the dismantling of agriculture in developing countries and the (negative) effects of bilateral trade agreements on the food production chain, agrarian structure and ultimately the current food crisis. As speculation and futures trading on appears to have partly been responsible for price increases (captured by traders rather than producers), participants called for prices of agricultural products to be linked directly to production costs. Participants also emphasised that in view of worsening

employment conditions in agriculture, workers in both agriculture and fisheries need to be active part of the discussion on the food crisis and food production more generally.

On **climate change**: Terra Preta participants advocated for the promotion of existing/indigenous practices as part of the strategy of climate change mitigation. Their wider promotion of family farming as the agriculture of the future could provide viable alternatives in current debates on climate change mitigation, which are generally focused on the macro-level.

On **agro-fuels, land and water**: A large consensus emerged on the need to reaffirm in the frame of the right to food sovereignty for all, the centrality of land and agrarian reforms (with a major emphasis on, but not limited to, land and water access as part of the right to food), and on the need to associate land to its different values beyond being an economic asset, including culture, identity, biodiversity, and environmental protection. On agro-fuels, participants opposed them as a solution to current energy crisis, but instead are contributing to the current food crisis. Some support was expressed for local-level production of agrofuels for local consumption.

Finally, and in contrast to the mild messages emanating from the HLC, the Terra Preta Forum presented a strong motivation for agriculture of the future to be based on the food sovereignty of households (i.e. building on family-farming) rather than food security of countries (likely to be based primarily on large-scale commercial agriculture). In motivating for a response to the food crisis more focused on the root causes of food insecurity, secure access to land, particularly for marginalised sections of society, was one of the pillars of their declaration (point 6). The Via Campesina Delegate reminded HLC delegates that at the World Food Summit +5 conference in 2002 he had *eaten* a copy of the FAO policy in his presentation. as a statement that what it was proposing would not feed the hungry. He claimed that his assertion has been borne out by failure of the number of hungry in the world to have declined since FAO's policy has been in action.

Official interaction of delegates of Terra Preta with the HLC was unfortunately limited to one lunchtime forum and one statement on the final day, thus limiting the scope for debate on their proposals. Nonetheless, IPC's contention with the HLC failing to address the fundamental structures of inequality in production and trade was shared by a number of countries. This caused extended debate on the finalisation of the Declaration, spearheaded by Venezuela, Cuba and Argentina. In the end these countries stated that would not block consensus in adopting the Declaration, but noted it saw little to celebrate, and expressed 'regret that an opportunity was lost' to combat the 'structural problem' of hunger.

The likely future of agrofuel¹ production

As one of the main drivers in demand for new agricultural land, the extent of political support for agrofuel production is an important determining factor in the impact it is likely to have on land rights.

The legitimacy of agrofuel production in the face of a food crisis was hotly debated by delegates. Some countries strongly advocated the production of agrofuels, such as Brazil (for ethanol, not biodiesel) and the United States. Others were firmly against the use of agricultural land for agrofuels rather than food production, such as the statement by President Rajapakse of Sri Lanka, that 'Sri Lanka is firm in the decision that no land that can be used for food will be used for bio-fuel whatever the commercial attraction may be'.

¹ Although most statements at the HLC used the term 'biofuels', 'agrofuels' may be a more accurate term, emphasising the agricultural production of feedstock for fuel as opposed to use of biological products for fuel (which could, for example, include firewood).

Many countries (such as France and Egypt) followed a middle ground, acknowledging valid debates about the viability of agrofuels, but emphasising the need for alternative energy sources. Once again, hopes for the future were put in technological innovation to produce a new generation of agrofuels that uses agricultural waste rather than competing with food production.

One of the most debated clauses of the Conference Declaration was that on agrofuels, which ultimately reflected the middle-ground position, focusing on both the challenges and opportunities posed by agrofuels.

A large driver of agrofuel production, particularly in the United States, are the subsidies that they attract. Although there were strong calls for the elimination of trade tariffs and subsidies on agricultural products by southern countries such as Brazil, reflected in a milder manner in paragraph 7(e) of the Conference Declaration, no announcements were made on the reduction of such subsidies, indicating that this is unlikely to change in the short-term.

Almost no statements on agrofuels differentiated between local-level production of agrofuels to supply local energy needs, and large-scale industrial production of agrofuels. As with expectations of food production for the future, it appears that most countries who support agrofuels are anticipating large-scale commercial production, albeit using improved technology, as the preferred model.

Where will the extra land come from?

According to one estimate² at least 515 million Ha of new land will be required by 2030 to meet the demands of new agricultural production (200m Ha), agrofuel (290 million Ha), and industrial forestry (25 million Ha). This does not include demands from shifting production as a result of global warming. The same study estimates that 250-300 million Ha of underutilised agricultural land could be put into production. Despite the unwelcome possibility of encroachment into forested areas, and the optimistic possibilities of innovation to significantly increase agricultural productivity, it appears inescapable that competition for existing agricultural land will increase steeply. This competition takes place on an uneven playing field – in many cases between large-scale investors and local land-users who often hold no statutory rights over the land they use.

Trans-national investment in agricultural land – increasingly negotiated on a bilateral basis between governments - is already becoming more apparent. Recent press reports claim that Japan has acquired 12 million hectares of land in South-east Asia, China and Latin America to produce food for export to Japan,³ the Libyan government has leased 200,000 hectares of cropland in Ukraine to meet its own food import needs,⁴ and the Chinese government is considering assisting Chinese companies to buy farmland in Africa and South America, to help guarantee food security.⁵ Investment Banks are also eyeing the investment potential of farmland, and Morgan Stanley has reportedly purchased several thousand hectares of land in Ukraine.⁶

As long as smallholders do not have secure rights to land, they remain vulnerable to dispossession in the face of new demands for land. However, with secure land rights, smallholders are more able to negotiate on favourable terms with external interests in their

² Don Roberts, Managing Director, CIBC World, presentation to Council of Forest Industries 2008 Annual Convention April 2008, Kelowna, B.C.

³ <http://english.chosun.com/w21data/html/news/200803/200803040011.html>

⁴ <http://english.sabah.com.tr/A67FE5AE3F2C485087CC1023DEAF5C94.html>

⁵ Financial Times, 8 May 2008

⁶ <http://www.reuters.com/article/email/idUSNOA33740020080313>

land. Furthermore, the inability of many would-be smallholders to gain access to land emphasises the need for the 're-legitimisation' of agrarian reform, since it fell out of favour with the neo-liberal policies of the 1970s onwards. Re-allocation of idle tracts of land from the holdings of large landowners would allow small-scale farmers to be more at the centre of the agricultural expansion envisaged over the next two decades.

The curious silence on the IAASTD and on the Right to Food

On 15th April 2008, a groundbreaking report on global agriculture was launched by 64 governments at an intergovernmental plenary in Johannesburg; The International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD). Being authored by 400 scientists from 100 countries, it was able to cut across the different ideological biases on agricultural production that shaped many of the statements at the HLC.

The [IAASTD report](#) received almost no mention at the HLC. Perhaps this is partly because its conclusions are at odds with the analysis and proposed solutions of many leaders at the HLC. The report concluded that *'the way the world grows its food will have to change radically to better serve the poor and hungry if the world is to cope with a growing population and climate change while avoiding social breakdown and environmental collapse'*. The report found that technological innovations in agriculture have generally favoured large-scale producers, and their costs have been borne by small-scale producers, their communities and the environment. The IAASTD report strongly supported the potential of small-scale producers in agricultural development, pointing to the need for dedicated support for smallholders – including ensuring equitable access to land - if this potential is to be achieved.

The other documents that received surprisingly little reference were those upholding the right to food as a human right. The right to adequate food is recognised by Article 25 of the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#), and Article 11 of the [International Covenant of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights](#). It is also supported by FAO's Voluntary Guidelines on the Right to Adequate Food. Predictably, the strongest mention on the right to food came from the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food. The Special Rapporteur reminded delegates that international law firmly defines the right to adequate food as one which states must not only respect, protect and fulfil within their own borders, but also in response to food insecurity beyond their territories.

The Special Rapporteur strongly supported the role of small-scale farmers in achieving food security. He also emphasised that searching for solutions will require moving 'along the causality chain from the situation of the hungry and malnourished to the actions and omissions which result in such violations of the right to food'. Growing insecurity of tenure by the poorest is clearly one such cause, even though it is not mentioned by the Special Rapporteur.

Significantly, other than the Special Rapporteur, FAO and IPC made the only statements that framed food security as a human right.

How can ILC bring land higher up the agenda for action in providing food security?

The debates and outcomes of the HLC on World Food Security make it evident that many governments, and even a number of international agencies, do not associate the world food crisis with a deeper crisis of losing access to land, which threatens the long-term ability of the world's poorest to feed themselves. In fact, the desire of many governments in the south to increase agricultural production through attracting large-scale commercial investment is likely to further accelerate the trend of growing insecurity of the world's smallholders and common property-users.

Firstly, one reason that the HLC Declaration failed to represent the diversity of views on such issues as the importance of secure access to land is that in an inter-governmental process such as this, the declaration is only negotiated by governments. In advance of future summits of this nature, ILC could be better prepared to provide delegations from governments – from both the north and the south - with which its members work closely to provide more information on the importance of land tenure. To some extent, the disappointing outcome was not caused by a lack of information. FAO itself had produced some excellent background publications on land-related issues, but ILC could put more effort in encouraging delegations to take advantage of such information.

Secondly, ILC, as a coalition that encompasses both intergovernmental and civil society agencies, is one mechanism that can facilitate a greater exchange of information and collaborative action on land-related questions across these boundaries. IFAD and FAO were notably among the few intergovernmental observers participating in Terra Preta. Forums such as the HLC are not in themselves spaces of dialogue between civil society, governments and intergovernmental organisations. Nonetheless, if such dialogue is achieved through other mechanisms, it can be expressed and possibly influence the outcomes of forums such as the HLC. The initiative begun with IFAD and other ILC members leading up to CSD16 on encouraging a collaborative response to tenure insecurity provoked by increased commercial pressure on land is intended to contribute towards this.

Thirdly, ILC members could encourage greater reference to and use of international legal instruments (such as those referring to the right to food) and of global research-based documents, such as the IAASTD, which provide a strong evidence base for the advocacy efforts of members.

Fourthly, ILC should consider how to develop closer links with a number of organisations who are active in promoting the land rights of poor land users, but with whom we currently have limited links. In particular, FIAN, Oxfam and Action Aid demonstrated the existence of a clear link between access to land and the implications of commodity prices, agrofuels and climate change, and are active advocates at a global level.

Fifthly, there remains patchy evidence on the impacts on land tenure security of new commercial pressures on land. Some ILC members, such as IIED, have begun documenting and analysing impacts in specific countries, but many gaps remain. Research-based organisations within the network could be a part of collecting more systematic information on such impacts as a tool for advocacy and to guide informed responses.

Sixthly, some events emerged as fundamental to continued global debate on food security, climate change and bioenergy. These include forums on bioenergy in Brazil in November 2008, on Climate Change in Poland and Denmark in December 2008, the World Social Forum in Brazil in January 2009, and CSD17 in May 2009. ILC membership will need to consider which of these may be the most strategic in motivating for a greater focus on land tenure security of the poor.