

30 October 2000

**Statement of H.E. Mr. Harri Holkeri,  
President of the 55th Session of the General Assembly,  
on the occasion of the event "Eliminating Hunger in the New  
Millennium"**

Hunger and undernourishment are a consequence of a wider problem, an expression of unequal distribution of resources, including food. This fact may be illustrated by some simple figures: The poorest 20% of the world's population has only about 1% share of global income, whereas the richest 20% has about 86% of it. Of all the food produced, the rich, representing about 5% of the population, eat about 45% of all meat and fish, and the poorest of our society eat only 5% of it. Women produce the bulk of food in the world, but they eat the smallest portion of it. Statistics show that illiterate women in rural and remote areas are the most disadvantaged. It has been shown that in the long-term, basic education constitutes the best value-added investment for the future, in terms of eradication of poverty and hunger.

In relative terms world hunger has been reduced during the last 50 years, yet the number of hungry people has increased. Today about 800 million of us, meaning 13% of the world's total population, go hungry every day. On the other hand, obesity is a growing problem in many industrialised countries, underlining the inequity in income, food distribution and production.

The goal of eradicating hunger and undernourishment from the world was the target of the World Food Congress in 1963. This goal was reiterated in the World Food Congress in 1974. It was still valid and a goal unmet at the World Food Summit in 1996. A common theme to all three World Congresses on Food has been the conclusion that eradication of hunger is an issue of political commitment. The first two of the seven commitments taken by the World Food Summit in 1996, were that of "ensuring an enabling political, social, and economic environment and that of implementing policies aimed at the eradication of poverty and inequality and improving physical and economic access to food by all". Hunger, poverty and lack of development opportunities are intimately linked.

At the moment it is estimated that food production and harvesting of natural resources is adequate to nourish all of us. But will it be so in the future? We must bear in mind that the primary production capacity of our planet is not without limits. I do not say that we have reached the limits yet. However, I note that agricultural crops and livestock production in developing countries increased only 2.6% in 1998, which represented a decrease as compared with 1997 and a significant decrease as compared with 1993 and 1996. Yet, there are some positive signs. In sub-Saharan Africa, total primary production increased about 4.3 % in 1998. This was true in Nigeria, Angola, Ghana, Mozambique and Uganda. Estimates for 1999 are not as optimistic. In Ethiopia, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, there was either stagnation of food production or a significant decrease in 1998.

During the last couple of years many African countries have experienced severe droughts and shifting patterns of precipitation, as well as severe floods and torrential rains. It is estimated that in many countries in Africa, food assistance will be needed in the next 12 months. We are not talking of a few thousand people; we are talking here about millions of people who need food aid.

When looking at the map of food shortages in Africa, there are two categories: areas with frequent incidence of drought, with low and vulnerable production potential, and areas with good production capacity but troubled with long-standing conflicts and civil strife. It is estimated that in 1990-1997 in sub-Saharan Africa, in the 12 countries that have experienced conflict situations, their primary production losses were about 40%. Also the infrastructure, transport and distribution systems are damaged and disrupted in crises. Refugees and internally displaced people frequently women, children and the elderly, constitute a specific group of those suffering from extreme hunger. In conflict-stricken countries it is not only a question of individual or household food scarcity but also lack of national food security.

Looking at the production capacity of our oceans, we can note a slight decrease in the world fish catch and supply and per capita fish input for food, as well as in the global import of fishery goods. Even if this decline may partly be attributed to the El Nino phenomenon in some regions, there may be a reason to ask whether we have reached the carrying capacity of our oceans and seas, or is the decline only temporary?

Hunger or adequacy of food has a strong link to the overall economic performance of any one country and region. Economic growth gives leeway to buy food. The performance of Africa's economies has been relatively positive during the last years, in the order of 3.1% to 3.4% of growth. Yet, to have a significant impact on the eradication of poverty and on the eradication of hunger, the economies of this continent should have a growth rate of more or less double the present one. Furthermore, only a few countries in Africa experienced particularly good growth rates. Many African economies are dependent on exports of primary products, world prices for which are fluctuating and have remained low. Agricultural trade is of particular importance to low-income food-deficit countries, with low capacity to finance food imports and with economies highly dependent on agricultural exports.

The Action Programme of the World Food Summit of 1996 focuses on rural and urban development as a means of hunger eradication. The emphasis in the Action Programme is on creating employment opportunities, developing social safety nets for the most vulnerable, in addition to the overall focus on increasing the primary production capacity of food through improved agricultural practices, pest management and improved quality of seed and productivity of crops. Intra-country inequities in food availability may be mitigated by suitably designed economic policies and by promoting rural development, with full utilization of local social capital instead of direct state or government interventions. To be successful, this necessitates a healthy and transparent relationship between the state and local governance. That link may have been missing or have been inadequate in the past to accomplish true poverty alleviation and food security. Local ownership of the process is needed. A recent publication of the Food and

Agriculture Organization concludes that world food security is not a technical, demographic, or environmental issue, but is primarily an issue of inadequate means of production by the poorest farmers who cannot produce enough to feed themselves. It is also insufficient purchasing power of rural and urban consumers to support smallholder farmers.

Food production in smallholder farms is frequently hampered by lack of investment and minor improvements. Micro credits have proved to be one useful way of helping poor people. Most recipients of micro credits are not, however, farmers but families with small income-generating businesses. Small loans are mostly used to finance non-farm rural economic and production activities, small-scale market gardening and cottage industry. They also represent a modality to empower rural women. Yet, micro credits are not an answer to everything. In fact, if poorly directed the poorest can become only poorer by borrowing and not being able to pay back.

There are well-known chronic problems in food production, such as lack of productive assets, including land. Lack of secure tenure has multiplier effects to the production capacity of the soil itself. Who would care for the soil if that soil may belong to another tenant in a few months time?

In closing, let me thank you for inviting me to this panel and say that I am honored to have had this opportunity to participate in this event representing those organizations in the United Nations family that are involved in food security and the eradication of hunger of the world.