

Pressure mounting for action on food

By Stephanie Holmes
BBC News, Rome

World leaders are gathered in Rome for urgent discussions on how soaring food prices are making millions of lives - and their own positions - more precarious.

A cocktail of factors - low stocks and a weak dollar, soaring energy prices, a hunger for richer foods and the thirst for biofuels - has, according to the World Food Programme, pushed some 130 million additional people over the edge and into poverty.

Jacques Diouf, director-general of the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), which is running the summit, told the BBC that the development of international agriculture has for too long suffered from being last on the list of political priorities. Instead, he argues, agriculture needs vastly more resources to reflect its role.

"If the world is serious about spending \$1,204bn on armaments, then I think they should also ensure that 860 million people also get access to food," he said.

"We cannot spend those kind of resources and not give priority for ensuring the most fundamental human right - the right to exist. And to exist you need to have food!"

Loud voices

Mr Diouf says the proposal to multiply by at least 10 times the organisation's budget, to \$30bn, will buy poor rural farmers the seeds, fertilisers, animal feed, infrastructure and irrigation they need to feed themselves, their communities and their countries.

SUMMIT AGENDA

Price controls, trade tariffs and export bans

Subsidies for biofuels

Help for farmers in poorer countries

Effect of climate change on agriculture

Overseas development aid for agriculture in 1980 stood at 17% of total world governmental budgets, but present levels, he says, have shrunk to 6%, although the world's population continues to grow and is expected to reach nine billion by 2050.

Yet perhaps for the first time, the hungry are not a silent, invisible, inconceivable mass. The urban poor, who feel the impact of food prices directly as they are forced to buy what they eat, have led riots and protests on the streets from Port-au-Prince to Cairo to Buenos Aires.

"A government has been toppled, we have had rioters in the streets, I believe now we will address this problem as seriously as we did in the 1970s, provided we put in the kind of resources needed," Mr Diouf said.

Global governance

Joachim van Braun, of the Washington-based agricultural think-tank the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), agrees that the level of anger felt by the urban dwellers, whose food bills now constitute over 50% of their income, is one of the key factors of the current food crisis.

We'd better get our house in order so the world doesn't go into an ad-hoc crisis mode over one of its most basic problems - how to feed its people

Joachim van Braun, International Food Policy Research Institute

"I think a number of world leaders have really been shaken by the outbursts of extreme frustration and aggression," he said. "There have been protests in 30 countries - that is what has triggered the response, not the suffering."

He agrees that agriculture has been pitifully underfunded yet is convinced that the lack of a single, efficient mechanism to deal with the challenges of a volatile international commodities system remains an unresolved problem.

"The global governance architecture for agriculture is not what the world needs - it simply isn't producing the goods. If you look at the UN response - the UN secretary general took charge and wanted to co-ordinate across over 20 UN agencies. It gives an indication that no single mechanism exists that the boss himself decides to take it on."

Although analysts may argue about the balance of influences that triggered the crisis, and how it was worsened by panicked interventions from governments eager to keep a lid on domestic prices, two key factors he says - high energy prices and climate change - will not go away.

"We'd better get our house in order so the world doesn't go into an ad-hoc crisis mode over one of its most basic problems - how to feed its people," he said.

The IFPRI's recipe for creating resilience to future shocks includes eliminating export bans, kick-starting food production programmes, regulating market speculation and completing the latest round of world trade negotiations to dismantle an international market distorted by subsidies and trade barriers.

Marginalised farmers

On a patch of grass across the road from the FAO building, a small group of Oxfam supporters, a few dressed as ears of corn, staged a small protest.

We know that at a lot of these conferences many statements are made, but nothing gets done without a proper framework

Madelon Meijer

Oxfam

Oxfam's agriculture policy advisor, Madelon Meijer, expressed hope tinged with cynicism about the summit's outcomes.

"Agriculture definitely needs more money," she said. "The question is how you invest that money - it needs to be spent on marginalised farmers, it needs to target women who provide the bulk of the food. The fact that we have 40 heads of state and the UN task force present is positive but it's about keeping promises.

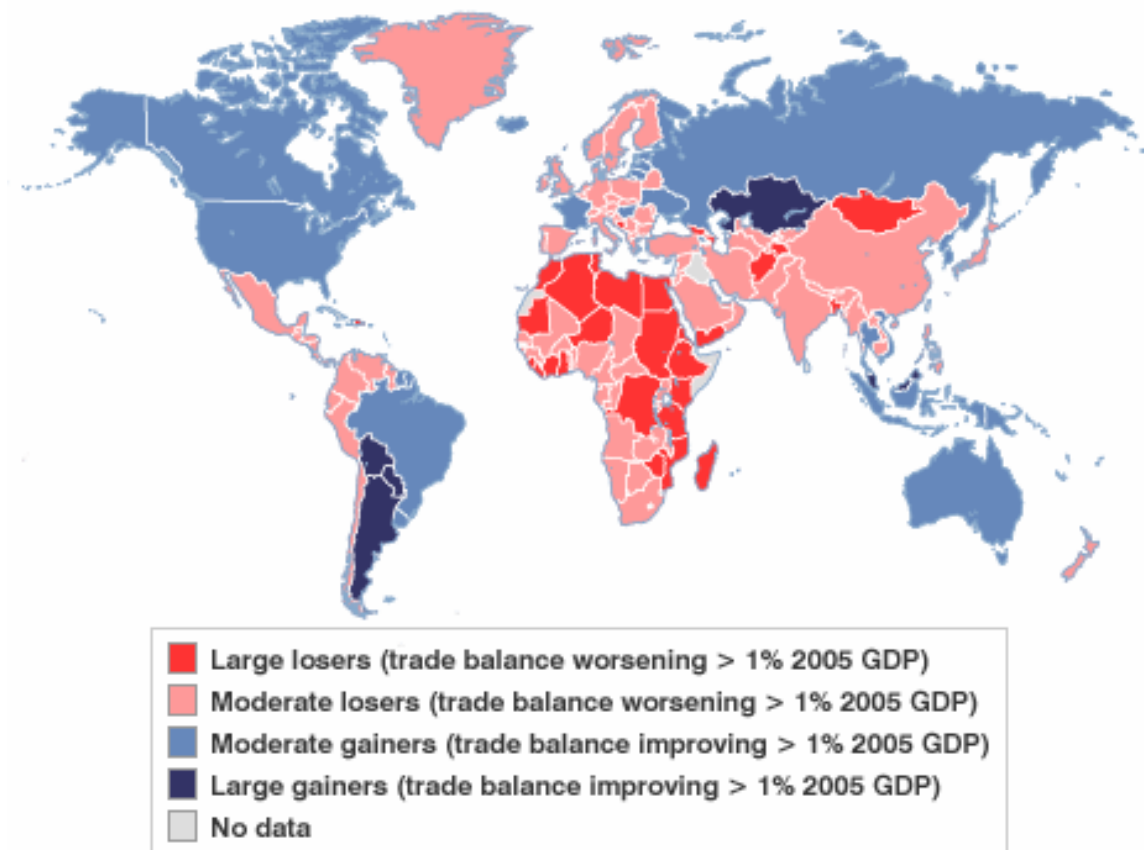
"We know that at a lot of these conferences many statements are made, but nothing gets done without a proper framework."

Mr von Braun, who will be addressing the conference, agrees.

"The key will be not to repeat pledges and commitments. We've seen that before and we don't need to see that again, it would be frustrating," he said.

"What's needed is a clear focus on implementation with definitions of accountability. There has not been enough focus on how it should be done and who should do it and that is how progress is determined."

2007 - 2008 IMPACT OF PROJECTED FOOD PRICE INCREASES ON TRADE BALANCES



SOURCE: USDA

Story from BBC NEWS:

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/europe/7432864.stm>

Published: 2008/06/03 08:55:39 GMT

© BBC MMVIII