

# After 25 years of progress, world hunger is on the rise again

Since 2015, the number of hungry people in the world has increased. FAO director-general José Graziano da Silva stressed that almost 60% of the people suffering from hunger in the world live in countries affected by conflict and climate change. He was speaking at the recent opening of the FAO's biennial conference.



FAO director-general José Graziano da Silva greets Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni of Italy. © FAO / Giuseppe Carotenuto

The FAO currently identifies 19 countries in a protracted crisis situation, often also facing extreme climatic events such as droughts and floods. It has signalled high risk of famine in northeast Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan and Yemen with 20-million people severely affected.

The livelihoods of these mostly rural people have been disrupted and "many of them have found no option other than increasing the statistics of distress migration", Graziano da Silva said.

## Translating pledges into action

"Strong political commitment to eradicate hunger is fundamental, but it is not enough," he said. "Hunger will only be defeated if countries translate their pledges into action, especially at national and local levels."

"Peace is of course the key to ending these crises, but we cannot wait for peace to take action," and FAO, the World Food Program and the International Fund for Agricultural Development are all working hard to assist vulnerable people, he said. "It is extremely important to ensure that these people have the conditions to continue producing their own food. Vulnerable rural people cannot be left behind, especially youth and women."

Some 1,100 participants will attend the FAO Conference from 3-8 July, including one head of state, one prime minister, 82 ministers and numerous representatives from international organisations, the private sector and civil society.

FAO's top priorities for the next two years include promoting sustainable agriculture, climate change mitigation and adaptation, poverty reduction, water scarcity, migration and the support of conflict-affected rural livelihoods as well as ongoing work on nutrition, fisheries, forestry and antimicrobial resistance.

## **Broad support and need for action**

The prospect of the worst food crisis since the Second World War - affecting northeastern Nigerian, Somalia, South Sudan and Yemen - means "we mustn't be resigned but make renewed and extraordinary efforts," said Italian Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni delivering the keynote speech.

He described the UN's Zero Hunger objective as a way to achieve peace, justice and equality and preserve the world for the future.

Gentiloni appealed to all of Europe to share Italy's burden of large-scale arrivals in his country, in order to be "faithful to its own history, principles and civilisation". But development efforts must go beyond responding to emergencies, he said.

"We cannot save people by putting them in camps," insisted Graizano da Silva. "To save lives, we have to save their livelihoods."

Pope Francis expressed strong support for FAO's agenda, emphasising the need for solidarity and recognition of human rights. "We are all conscious that the intention to assure all their daily bread is not enough - it is imperative that we recognise that everyone has the right to food," the pontiff said in remarks delivered by Cardinal Pietro Parolin, the Vatican's secretary of state.

## **Role of agriculture**

Achim Steiner, who headed the United Nations Environment Programme for a decade until 2016 and is currently administrator of the United Nations Development Programme, gave the McDougall Memorial Lecture honouring the Australian economist who was an effective advocate for FAO's creation.

Agriculture may account for only 4% of global gross domestic product but its real role is far greater and spans "extraordinary narratives" about people, land and their cultures, Steiner said in a lecture focused on the future agricultural economy in the wake of the Paris Agreement on climate change. Inadequate policy and budgetary attention to a sector currently affected by high levels of waste and the erosion of natural resources, reflects a "high-risk strategy", he said.