AU and Partners Promote Citizens’ Rights to Food and Socio-Economic Development in Africa

The African Union Commission and representatives from the Pan-African Parliament Committee on the Rural Economy, Agriculture, Natural Resources and Environment, the East African Parliamentary Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition, Regional Economic Communities, United Nations organizations, academia, and civil society pledged to warrant concrete, concerted actions to break the vicious cycle of food insecurity and conflict in Africa to guarantee the right to adequate food, during the just ended AU Symposium on the Nexus between Human Rights, Food Security, and Resilience in Africa.

The symposium, which aimed at fostering dialogue on the need for the promotion and protection of human rights to realize the right to food and food security in Africa, was jointly organized by the African Union Department of Political Affairs, Peace and Security, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), in contribution to the implementation of the AU Theme of the Year 2022 in promoting a human rights-based approach to food and nutrition security.

On behalf of Ambassador Bankole Adeoye, AU Commissioner for Political Affairs, Peace and Security, Ambassador Salah Hammad stated that the ongoing war in Ukraine uncovered the reality of the African food system, which is poor and weak despite the vast fertile land and water that are available on the continent. The impact of climate change has exposed and aggravated the weaknesses and vulnerabilities of Africa’s food and health systems. “These current trends call for urgent actions to ensure that all Africans’ right to food is guaranteed to unlock their full potential to contribute effectively to the realization of a prosperous and peaceful Africa,” he added.

In a statement delivered by Ade Freeman, Regional Programme Lead at the FAO Regional Office for Africa, Chimimba David Phiri, the FAO Subregional Coordinator for Eastern Africa and Representative to the African Union and United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, noted that the right to food is the right to have regular, permanent and unrestricted access to quantitatively and qualitatively adequate food that ensures a productive life. Generally understood as the right to feed oneself in dignity, the right to adequate food is a long-standing international human right to which many countries have committed. He added that conflicts drive food insecurity and malnutrition, and food insecurity and hunger drive conflicts, forming a vicious circle that is difficult to break. Approximately 60% of the world’s hungry people live in countries experiencing conflict. “There is, therefore, a need to prioritize food security-related policies and programmes in conflict-prone countries, to build resilience by helping people and countries cope with and recover from conflicts while contributing to prevent conflicts and support economic development more broadly.”

Meanwhile, H.E. Hope Tumukunde, Ambassador of Rwanda to the AUC and Chairperson of the Permanent Representatives Committee (PRC) Sub-Committee on Human Rights, Democracy and Governance, urged for greater coordination between stakeholders to overcome food insecurity on the continent. She highlighted that apart from the food shortage, severe malnutrition continues to be a major threat to life and quality of living, especially among...
children under 5. Those who survive malnutrition during that critical period end up having long-term mental, health, emotional, and physical challenges. She further highlighted the need to make food and nutrition security a flagship ambition of the AU and to empower development agencies to properly support AU Member States to realize the right to food.

Exploring the Nexus between Human Rights and Food Security

The symposium deliberated on the relationship between nutrition, food security, and human rights and the roles of the human rights-based approach to food security in Africa and the role of parliamentarians in promoting and protecting the rights to food in Africa. It also shored up the justifiability of the right to food and the follow-up of the implementation of existing legal, policy, and judicial frameworks and commitments. The meeting also contributed to forging commitments for implementing socio-economic rights as a catalyst for realizing food security and building resilience in Africa.

Participants agreed that upholding the right to food without peace and security is difficult, and vice versa. Though essential, legal frameworks and policies at the country level are not enough. Complimentary actions are critical to filling implementation gaps, with an urgent focus on food security and other related elements, including water security. Participants also noted that the role of natural resources in the conflict–food security nexus has largely been overlooked, given that regions with high-value natural resources such as minerals are often the breadbasket in some countries but constitute tension zones due to the exploitation of these natural resources. In addition, the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and strengthening market linkages were raised as positive steps toward improving food security in the continent.

Stakeholders agreed to continue the conversation toward addressing the critical right to food. The African Union Commission proposed to institutionalize this initiative and recommended sharing the outcomes with all Permanent Representatives of the African Union. The FAO, on its part, committed to supporting further conversations on this important nexus.

Context - lagging behind food security targets

Africa is not on track to meet the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 2 targets to end hunger and ensure access by all people to safe, nutritious, and sufficient food all year round and to end all forms of malnutrition. The most recent estimates show that 282 million people on the continent, over one-fifth of the population, faced hunger in 2020, 46 million more than in 2019. According to the findings of the Cost of Hunger in Africa (COHA) Study conducted in 21 countries, estimations show that AU member states are losing the equivalent of between 2 and 16 per cent of their Gross Domestic Product (GDP) due to child under-nutrition.

Furthermore, the current security trends on the continent significantly affected food security through loss of access to means of production and massive displacement of populations. The disruptions create an additional burden of nutrition challenges, as member states have to find a way to cover the nutrition gaps and the decrease in agricultural production.

These discussions took place at the AU Headquarters in Addis Ababa from 21 to 22 February 2023.

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