



# THE HUMAN RIGHT TO FOOD

Not just a guideline

## Abstract

Access to sufficient, appropriate food is a human right. Governments of countries affected by hunger have the obligation to create the framework conditions to enable people to gain access to sufficient, nutritious and culturally appropriate food.

Governments in the North have to evaluate the policy measures of all their departments with respect to possible exacerbation of hunger in other countries. Civil society in both North and South should utilise the right to food as an instrument for monitoring state actions, for demanding suitable strategies to combat hunger and for ensuring that they are implemented.

Within the framework of international agreements, governments have the obligation to implement the right to appropriate food. It is part of binding international law and set down in Article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (social pact) of 1966. States have the obligation to respect, protect and guarantee the human right to food. In order to promote the implementation of the covenant, the “Voluntary Guidelines to Support the Progressive Realisation of the Right to Adequate Food in the context of national food security” were adopted by 187 states in the FAO Council in 2004. Access to sufficient and appropriate food can be achieved by producing one’s own food or by earning enough money to buy food. If this is not possible, social security measures and emergency aid such as cash payments or provision of food aid must take effect (cf. Section 4 on social security). In these cases, it must be ensured that the food distributed does not contain hazardous substances and that it is culturally acceptable.

All states that have signed the Guidelines are directly bound to the obligations derived from international agreements on the right to food. This also has consequences for the work of international aid organisations, whether governmental or non-governmental. Emergency aid and development support in this sense are more than just charity. On the contrary, industrialised

countries are obliged to support people in developing countries in claiming their rights. National and international development organisations must orient their work on the needs identified by the people themselves and on the strategies undertaken by governments in the affected countries to meet the requirements of the right to food (e.g. Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers). At the global level, the recommendations of the UN committee for economic, social and cultural rights with regard to the human right to food should be followed.

A programme approach oriented toward the right to food is needs-based. In the context of rural development, this includes:

- Supporting locally adapted agricultural advisory services and research
- Supporting small-scale farming families and households headed by women in producing food for their own needs and for sale
- Implementing poverty-oriented land reforms
- Ensuring access to financial means and appropriate technologies
- Special support for disadvantaged social groups
- Setting up social security structures in rural areas.

The experience of Welthungerhilfe and its partners shows that project work and political work on the right to food can supplement each other very effectively. Supporting sustainable agriculture and rural development (e.g. setting up small-scale farming producer groups and marketing groups or providing training in respect to sustainable cultivation and appropriate nutrition) have a direct effect on improving food security. Harmful framework conditions can be identified within the context of development programmes. Based on this, political lobbying can then focus on corrective measures to improve the situation. Governments must regulate land rights issues; they are responsible to create market transparency and set standards in food quality and safety. These are sovereign state issues which should not be handled by private actors.

The right to food is an essential self-help tool. Poor and malnourished people gain a new self-awareness when they know

they have a right to food. They are transformed from recipients of charity into people with a say in their own future. In many countries affected by hunger, the state's responsibility to ensure the right to food has been substantiated by governments or courts. Poor and marginalised people often do not know their rights or how and where they can claim them. Here, international development organisations and local partners can provide support.

Even in countries where the right to food has not yet been given concrete forms and cannot be claimed, civil society can still hold the state to account. National and regional hunger indexes, for example, can direct attention to the extent and causes of hunger. Civil society reports on implementing the right to food can document weaknesses in state action and cases of discrimination in access to appropriate food. In such reports, NGOs can also frame strategies for meeting the challenges (cf. Section 8 on civil society).

The right to food strengthens the position of individuals vis-à-vis their governments. Civil society has to seek dialogue with the government in each case in order to lobby towards changes on the ground. In view of often difficult framework conditions local players know best the forms and intensity of possible political action. The scope of foreign organisations is very limited in this respect, although these organisations can act as agents for change in initiating processes for creating transparency and building awareness of problems. They can provide funding to initiate dialog and ensure follow-up. Another role of international organisations is to ensure that partners in the South are heard on the political level in the North. A responsible food policy which promotes the right to food of all people everywhere is required globally.

Obligation	Description	Examples of failure to comply
<b>Respect</b>	The state must not infringe on the right to food	State expropriation of land without adequate compensation to those affected, so that their livelihoods are not secured
<b>Protect</b>	The state must ensure that third parties (e.g. companies) do not infringe on the human right to food	An investor overuses water resources to the extent that local agriculture is deprived of water. The state is aware of the situation but takes no action
<b>Guarantee</b>	The state must gradually introduce measures to ensure the right to food for all	Particular social groups are not benefiting from state transfer payments for securing people's basic needs

#### Welthungerhilfe's involvement in relation to the right to food:

Carrying out informative work on the right to food as a component in rural development programmes and projects.

Supporting partner organisations which use the right to food as an instrument to evaluate their government's activities and to demand responsible strategies to combat hunger.

Carrying out civil society lobbying and awareness building in the North to raise consciousness and find consensus that private consumption, economic strategies and policy design must not have negative impacts on the right to food in countries in the South.

#### Welthungerhilfe's demands in relation to promoting the global right to food:

Donor countries should place the human right to food at the core of their development policy for rural areas and intensify consultancy and awareness-raising on the topics of land rights and sustainable land use.

The governments of industrialised countries in particular must put an end to all policies which infringe upon or endanger the right to food for people in the South (e.g. agricultural export subsidies or over-ambitious bio-energy targets).

International obligations on combating hunger must be fulfilled (e.g. implementation of the Millennium Declaration).

Developing countries must give highest priority to combating hunger.

Developing countries must implement the "Voluntary Guidelines to Support the Progressive Realisation of the Right to Adequate Food in the framework of their national food strategies".

This section is an excerpt of the WHH Position Paper Rural Development. Please also consult all other sections at [www.welthungerhilfe.org/position-paper-rural-development](http://www.welthungerhilfe.org/position-paper-rural-development)

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