

Food Summit in Rome presents “watered down” goals

James Brewer
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The United Nations’ world food summit in Rome demonstrated the incapacity and unwillingness of the world’s major powers to address the crisis of global hunger.

While normally these sorts of gatherings are feel-good events long on promises and short on results, no one could put a good face on this year’s world food summit, organized by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). It was, from start to finish, an abject failure.

The summit was preceded by backroom deals that limited even the goals announced by the conference on its first day. “Rich countries have watered down the declaration to be made at next week’s World Food Summit,” the *Financial Times* noted, “removing from the final draft both a new hunger reduction target and a commitment to boost agricultural aid to the high levels of 1980.”

There was little expectation that the conference would accomplish much. ActionAid’s food rights coordinator, Francisco Sarmiento, called the draft declaration preceding the summit “just a rehash of old platitudes.” And Oxfam predicted the conference might be just “a waste of time and money.”

Such was the desperation of event organizers to salvage something from the imminent wreck of the summit that Jacques Diouf, the general director of the FAO, led a 24-hour hunger strike in Rome the weekend before the gathering to “raise awareness” of the plight of the hungry.

The results of the summit confirmed the worst

expectations. Its final declaration, which was adopted Monday, dropped any mention of an aid proposal for farmers in poor countries which would have requested an increase to \$44 billion a year.

The meek response of world leaders to the issue of hunger stands in stark contrast to the threat of chronic hunger and famine confronting hundreds of millions.

The international humanitarian organization, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF, Doctors Without Borders) issued a report last week detailing the failure of wealthy nations to alleviate hunger in the developing world.

“Funding by rich countries to combat malnutrition has remained flat for seven years,” the report notes. “This barely accounts for three percent of the funds needed to reduce the 3.5 to 5 million annual deaths of children under five attributed to malnutrition.”

“This report documents the fact that nutrition interventions that have been proven to reduce deaths remain catastrophically underfunded,” said Stéphane Doyon, co-author of the MSF report.

In analyzing the funding flows of the main international donors, the MSF makes the point that of the billions of dollars that are labelled “development food aid and food security” or “emergency food aid,” “less than two percent is being spent on interventions targeted specifically at reducing childhood malnutrition. Moreover, existing funds are being wasted through inefficient practices, such as the US government policy of shipping in-kind food aid overseas, which costs an estimated US\$600 million

more than purchasing food aid locally.”

Leaders from many of the world’s poorer countries were in attendance, among them Libya’s Muammar Gaddafi, Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, Lula Da Silva from Brazil, and Bangladeshi Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina.

This year, the only G8 leader attending the summit was Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi. The nominal chair of the event, he missed its first day to contend with charges of corruption and tax fraud in Milan.

Diouf bemoaned the lack of interest in this year’s summit as a sign that the issue of food security has a low priority on the world’s agenda. “Unfortunately, such interest seems to be waning as other issues are coming to the forefront of the international agenda, although all the heavy clouds which led to the previous crisis are again accumulating in the skies,” he said. “The absence of key heads of state today is a clear indication of what I just said.”

The summit was addressed by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon. Monday speeches from both Pope Benedict XVI and Berlusconi condemned the greed of speculators which caused the record rise in food prices last year.

Last year, after record increases in global food prices resulted in rioting in over 12 countries, notably Bangladesh, Mexico, Haiti and Egypt, a special “High-Level” summit was called in Rome to address the threat to global stability.

Even though there was significant attendance from G8 government leaders at the earlier conference, the commitment of funds fell far short of what was required. Only \$20 billion over a three year period was pledged.

This amount of money is a tiny fraction of the tens of trillions of dollars the world’s major powers have doled out to prop up their finance industries whose speculation in commodities has contributed enormously to world hunger and helped set the stage for the current economic crisis.

The author recommends:

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