Report on Breakout Session by CUTS International

Improving Food Security in the Face of Climate Change

11 May 2010, Geneva, Switzerland

CUTS International organized a breakout session titled "Improving Food Security in the Face of Climate Change" during the second UNCTAD Public Symposium held in Geneva, Switzerland on 10-11 May 2010. Breakout session was moderated by Pradeep S. Mehta, Secretary-General CUTS International.

Isabel Mazzei, Senior Policy Advisor, OXFAM International in Geneva made a presentation on "Food security: learning from the 2007-08 food crisis". According to her the food crisis of 2007-8 that saw the highest food prices increase since 1970s was not due to the lack of food, but because of the lack of purchasing power of the poor. Moreover, the world food system – consisting of the actors dealing with food production, transformation and trade, as well as the national and international rules and policies that set the framework for their actions – are functioning in a way that does not provide food for all.

To ensure food security, actions both at the national and international level are needed. At the national level, critical need is to invest more and wisely in agriculture. Globally, several actions are needed including: developing effective and coherent global policies and regulations to address the trans-boundary causes of food insecurity e.g., climate change, natural resources management, trade in food, agricultural subsidies, speculation and price volatility, market concentration, land out-sourcing, and management of food stocks; ensuring the provision of co-ordinated policy, technical, and financial assistance in support of regional and country-led processes; and strengthening the WTO as an institution to build greater confidence in its ability to achieve fairer trade rules for developing countries.

The presentation by Jonathan Hepburn, Agriculture Programme Officer, ICTSD, was on "Climate change: challenges for food security". While supporting several points by the earlier presenter, he outlined the possible impact of climate change on agriculture and food security. This impact will come through changes in agricultural productivity and extreme weather events that will result in more pests and diseases in crops. Hence climate change is expected to add further pressure on food security that is already under pressure due to increasing populations and changing food habits as a result of economic growth in developing countries.

The solution to food security challenge may lie in increasing production and trade. In fact, agriculture in developing countries has great potential to address both food security and climate change. Reformed land practices can lead to more production and productivity, and will also be good for climate change adaptation and mitigation. At the same time, systemic reform of global agriculture trade is needed to discipline the subsidization by developed countries.

Third presentation was by Massimiliano Riva, Trade and Capacity Development Specialist, UNDP Geneva who talked about "Aligning climate change, food security, and trade policies". He pointed out that the number of malnourished in the world has started increasing again after a decreasing trend for past several years. This must be addressed by aligning agriculture, trade and climate change policies. In fact, both the WTO and UN Framework Convention on Climate Change have similar objectives related to sustainable development and the UN Millennium Development Goals 2, 7 and 8 address all the three issues.

Both climate change and trade policies can impact each other as well as agriculture and food security. Trade policies can be critical in providing incentives and disincentives for investment in agriculture. Similarly, climate change policies can improve or distort trade flows and investments. Therefore countries should avoid conflicts, promote coherence, enhance coordination, measure impacts, and pool resources.

Samuel Gayi, Chief of the Commodities Branch Research and Analysis Section, Special Unit on Commodities, UNCTAD made a number of points as a commentator. According to him, substantial increase in agricultural production, productivity, and investment was needed. Lack of investment and dumping of subsidized food by OECD countries saw African countries becoming net food-importers in 1980s while they were net food-exporting till 1970s. Agriculture can also contribute to climate change mitigation if policies to promote carbon sequestration and reduce emissions were adopted. Bio-technology too can play a role though this remains controversial.

Several points were raised in the ensuing discussion. These included:

- The most important issue is soil. Focussing on enhancing soil fertility will help poor farmers, improve food security, and contribute to climate change mitigation. Similarly, organic agriculture is good for food security, trade, and climate.
- Top priority should be to promote sustainable agriculture.
- African countries cannot be asked to ensure food security through increasing their food imports as they already have large trade deficits, adverse terms of trade, and very limited foreign exchange reserves.
- African countries should immediately implement the commitment under NEPAD to invest at least 10% of their GDP on agriculture. This can help in re-gaining the competitive advantage that they have lost in the last few decades.
- Urgent priority should be to deal with food security which is a life and death issue for a very large number of people right now.
- Policy coherence and coordinated processes across trade, food security and climate change are needed.

Pradeep S. Mehta in his concluding remarks emphasised two main points. One, a large part of action agenda related to the three issues is national. While global dimension is important, countries should move forward with actions at the national level. Two, the

issues are complex and require in-depth discussions among all stakeholders. He also invited all to be imaginative and try to think out-of-the-box to deal with the formidable challenges related to food security and climate change.