

Interactive Dialogue following the report of the Special Rapporteur on the right to food (A/HRC/13/33)

Thank you Mr. President.

The United States considers combating global hunger and improving global food security to be a top priority. The Rome Principles of Sustainable Food Security, unanimously adopted by 193 countries at the November 2009 World Summit on Food Security, pay particular attention to the needs of the world's rural poor, including women and small-holder farmers. The U.S. has incorporated the Rome Principles of Sustainable Food Security as the foundation for U.S. investment in agriculture and food security in developing countries.

As an initial matter, we read the report as making policy recommendations, rather than legally mandatory or binding interpretations. That understanding of the report is particularly applicable in the case of countries, such as the United States, that have not ratified the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. We also note that the report makes recommendations to private firms. Recognizing that international human rights law generally applies to governmental action, it may be more useful for recommendations to focus likewise on governments and their role in promoting food security.

The United States thanks the Special Rapporteur on the right to food for his report. However, we disagree with many of the report's findings and fundamentally disagree with the conclusion that a significantly higher level of governmental control over prices and labor markets would enhance food security. Increasingly, the private sector is embracing the concept and practice of sustainable supply chains combining partnerships among private firms and nongovernmental organizations that scrutinize and certify fair labor practices and environmental stewardship. These partnerships permit continuous improvement and let consumers and processors exercise choices for sustainable products in the market place.

If adopted, many of the report's recommendations could result in higher food prices without significantly contributing to removing the underlying causes of food insecurity. As 2008's global food price crisis demonstrated, rising food prices can have devastating impacts on the poor in both urban and rural areas.

Economic growth and development – including agricultural development – are essential to achieving livelihood security and promoting food security among the poor in developing countries. The report rightly notes that much agricultural labor in developing countries is part of the informal sector, and thus operates under the regulatory radar. It further suggests that attempts at regulation should not increase the incentives for informal employment in the agricultural sector. National efforts to establish minimum wages can take into account the particular characteristics and circumstances of each country. Policy instruments such as improved technology, education and improved nutrition/health status may also be a means to increase the productivity (and subsequent wage rates) of agricultural labor.

Much can and needs to be done to improve the effectiveness of agricultural markets in developing countries. Through our Global Hunger and Food Security Initiative, the United States will invest in expanding market information for producers and enterprises. Greater access to market information will increase the ability of small-scale agricultural producers to participate in formal and higher-value markets. Information-sharing tools, such as sending market information via mobile phones, enable agricultural producers to negotiate better prices with buyers, match producers with new and distant markets, and help farmers in planning their production and harvest.

We share the Special Rapporteur's support for farmer cooperatives and other producer organizations. The United States has long supported the Perishable Agricultural Commodities Act, along with other fair trade programs. Producer organizations and commercial commodity exchanges can serve as conduits of market information, increasing price transparency between remote buyers and sellers. However, we would not encourage government authority over producer marketing boards. As the report notes, such government-run marketing boards have a long history of market distortion with limited benefit for small producers.

The report also raises very interesting issues about competition policy and enforcement, including collaboration among players, monopoly issues and antitrust jurisdiction. These are very complex issues, a number of which are currently being studied within our own government through hearings jointly sponsored by the U.S. Department of Justice and U.S. Department of Agriculture, and require careful thought. I thank you Mr. President.