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Meeting of the Food Aid Committee

Under the chairmanship of Mr Hiroshi Oka of Japan, the Food Aid Committee held its 99th Session in London on 9 December 2008. Members examined the current global food situation, the latest position regarding food emergencies and, during two days of constructive informal discussions, considered what the focus should be of a possible new convention and how to further enhance the effectiveness of the current Food Aid Convention (FAC) and the Committee's role.

Members noted the sharp falls in international prices of grains and other foods after the surges seen earlier in 2008, including steep declines in transportation costs. However, they recognised that the deteriorating global financial and economic conditions had posed new problems for vulnerable people in several developing countries, with prices remaining volatile and, in many food markets, staying high, reflecting significant local shortages. While the World Food Programme (WFP) reported a record level of donor support in 2008, with a doubling of funding compared to a year ago, resources need to be mobilized urgently to deal with several complex food emergencies, notably in the Horn of Africa, Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Zimbabwe.

Several FAC members outlined recent policy developments, including those aimed at further improving the quality of the food aid provided and ensuring that it was targeted to meet the needs of those who were most vulnerable. There was recognition that the approach often needed to be multi-faceted, for example to also assist with improving agricultural productivity. Members expressed their support for the multilateral initiatives stemming from the July G-8 summit in Japan and the UN High-Level Task Force (HLTF) on the Global Food Security Crisis, in particular the Global Partnership for Agriculture and Food (GPAF), tasked with ensuring that there would be continued high-level policy attention to global food security issues.

Despite the enormous challenges posed by the surges in food prices in 2007 and early 2008, members of the Convention reported that the total amount of food aid provided in 2007/08 had reached 7m. tons*. While somewhat less than in the previous year, this exceeded their combined minimum obligations. Considerable additional budgetary resources had been made available by governments in order to meet their FAC commitments. While it was too early to assess the amount to be provided in response to food aid needs in the current (2008/09) year, several donors reported on progress made to date.

* Wheat equivalent, including estimated tonnage of value contributions

During two days of informal meetings preceding the formal Session, members of the Food Aid Committee exchanged views on the objectives and structure of a possible new convention on food aid, although any formal negotiations would have to take into account the outcome of the WTO Doha Round. It was also recognised that there was room for improvement in the operation of the Committee within the current FAC, especially in the area of information sharing and donor coordination. Moreover, members agreed to further examine how the FAC's effectiveness could be enhanced by expanding the list of eligible products and by reviewing certain Rules of Procedure, for example those covering donations of fortified products and micronutrients. The Committee therefore agreed to hold further informal discussions in early 2009. Meanwhile, it was agreed, in principle, that the Food Aid Convention, 1999 should be extended for another year with effect from 1 July 2009. The participation at recent sessions of government observers from several potential new donor members was welcomed by the Committee.

Note for editors: Under the Food Aid Convention, 1999, donors pledge to provide annually specified minimum amounts or values of food aid to developing countries in the form of grains and other food products. The objective of the Convention is to contribute to world food security and to improve the ability of the international community to respond to emergency food situations and other food needs of developing countries, ensuring that food aid is directed to the alleviation of poverty and hunger of the most vulnerable groups.

The Food Aid Convention is administered by the International Grains Council (IGC), whose Secretariat services the Food Aid Committee. For more background information on the role and activities of the Food Aid Committee, please see the IGC website at www.igc.org.uk, or contact the IGC Secretariat.