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HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL  
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**Written statement\* submitted by International Educational Development (IED), Inc.,  
a non-governmental organization on the Roster**

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is  
circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[20 May 2008]

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\* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the  
submitting non-governmental organization(s).

## **The World Food Crisis<sup>1</sup>**

1. Economist and humanitarian Amartya Sen once said, “Starvation is the characteristic of some people not having enough food to eat. It is not the characteristic of there being not enough food to eat.”<sup>2</sup> Current estimates indicate are that over 850 million people are starving or undernourished. Every five seconds a child under ten years of age dies of hunger or malnutrition.<sup>3</sup> What is worse, as reported by David Stringer of the Associated Press, the World Bank says food prices have increased over 80 percent in the past three years.<sup>4</sup> At present the price of basic food commodities has put survival beyond the reach of hundreds of millions of people. We must act with urgency and intelligence in order to reduce hunger and end abuses affecting the right to food.

2. According to Jean Ziegler, the Council’s former Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, upholding the right to food is not only a compassionate and humanistic act, it is the requirement of every government. Furthermore, he said, “In a world overflowing with riches, it is an outrageous scandal that more than 826 million people suffer hunger and malnutrition and that every year 36 million die of starvation and related causes. We must take urgent action now.”<sup>5</sup> It is imperative that this issue not slide for another 7 years until 2015—the year the UN Millennium Goals state that hunger should be cut in half.

3. The realization of the right to food requires simultaneous efforts on the realization of the right to water and sanitation, as well as efforts to realize the Convention on Biological Diversity under the UN Environment Programme (UNEP). In providing the majority of food for the world’s growing needs, agriculture accounts for 70 percent of all freshwater used by humans.<sup>6</sup> To meet hunger’s demands, it is critical that access to an adequate amount of water is ensured for the continuation of agricultural production and its increasing needs.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, satisfying the world’s hunger in the future will require an increase in food production by 67 percent in developing countries between 2000 and 2030.<sup>8</sup>

4. While agricultural endeavors expand to balance swelling needs, it is important that biodiversity in crops and plants be protected and promoted to ensure future sustainability and to repair past damages. Steps towards action must be hastened, but those actions must also be beneficial to long and short term goals. The underlying role of food is the nourishment it provides. Although hunger must be ended quickly, safeguards against foods low in nutrients should be enacted. If nutrients are hindered due to unwholesome means of production, the focus of problems will shift from grave levels of hunger to epidemics of malnutrition.

5. When considering methods related to ending hunger it is crucial to bear in mind long term sustainability. Specifically, in regards to genetically modified foods, the

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<sup>1</sup> The Association of Humanitarian Lawyers (AHL) also shares the views expressed in this statement. We would like to thank AHL’s researcher Jacob Marx for his work on this statement.

<sup>2</sup> Found in *Water: a Shared Responsibility*; the UN World Water Development Report 2, 2005, p. 242

<sup>3</sup> C. Golay & M. Özden, *The Right to Food* (CETIM 2006)

<sup>4</sup> Found in SF Gate, 4/23/2008: (<http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2008/04/23/MNS910A0EM.DTL&hw=may+india+food+crisis&sn=002&sc=516>).

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.righttofood.org/>

<sup>6</sup> The UN World Water Development Report 2, 2006

<sup>7</sup> Please see our statement A/HRC/7/NGO/29 in this regard.

<sup>8</sup> The UN World Water Development Report 2, 2006

manipulation of plant DNA can lead to irreversible modifications in species diversity and genetic diversity within a species.<sup>9</sup> Executive Secretary of the Convention on Biological Diversity Ahmed Djoghlaif warns that relying on a small variety of crops elevates the inherent risks of crop specific afflictions such as those seen in the potato blight of 1840's Ireland. Furthermore, he says, "The dramatic rise in crop prices is a symptom of the unprecedented loss in agricultural biodiversity and certainly a reflection of its far-reaching impacts on humankind."<sup>10</sup> Without an array of species, which thrive and suffer in different conditions, changes in the environment and climate pose a legitimate threat to both peoples relying on first-hand agricultural production for an adequate amount of food and those whose access to food depends on purchasing an adequate amount of food.

6. In observing the Convention on Biological Diversity during these efforts to end hunger, the sustainable use of agriculture and its components, the fair and equitable sharing of benefits arising from genetic resources, and the conservation of biological diversity will be ensured. Breeding programs, as reported in the UN World Water Development Report 2, have greatly improved many crops, having (1) decreased requirements for water during growth; (2) increased root systems; (3) increased harvest index; and, (4) having allowed the better physiological adaptation of plants. The possibly false benefits from genetically modifying crops should be explicitly weighed as traditional methods like cross-breeding have yielded better and more sustainable results.

7. Incorporating the right to water will be crucial in providing sustainable water use for agriculture. Raising the efficiency of current supplies of water will be the fastest way to guarantee adequate amounts for agriculture, as well as for safe drinking water and sanitation. Means to do this include the adoption of water-use reductions technologies and new and better water management systems. For instance, water can be saved through on-site reuses by way of technologies, for example, that reuse sink water to flush toilets. Re-use technologies such as these can be further utilized in developing nations where water-shortages and hunger predominately persist, and can be molded to fit specific needs. However, the health risks posed by reusing water should be taken into consideration to ensure adequate means for sanitizing water. Other technologies that need development or further implementation are those that use precipitation as a water source for uses such as irrigation and water storage. Moreover, if safe drinking water is readily available for agricultural workers, productivity levels will increase and diseases that inhibit workers will decrease.

8. Overall, excessive reliance on groundwater and precipitation has limited our scope on the access to water. Investigative reporter Daniel indicated that China's huge increase in agriculture has led to water tables dropping in many places by as much as 5 feet a year.<sup>11</sup> Groundwater should not be viewed as a primary or sustainable resource. The efforts of Libya to develop a sustainable alternative approach through the desalination of sea water or brackish water is especially laudable – desalinated water has provided fresh water to

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<sup>9</sup> PBS: "Harvest of Fear." 2001. Nova/Frontline Special Report.

<sup>10</sup> At the opening session of Ninth Meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (Bonn, Germany 19 May 2008)

<sup>11</sup> Daniel Pepper. 5/9/2008. "Depleted Ground Water threatens Food Chain." *San Francisco Chronicle* (<http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2008/05/09/MNGMV7TFN.DTL&hw=china+ground+water+foot+drop&sn=001&sc=1000>)

particularly arid land. This method requires advanced technologies and currently, global practices of desalination lag behind demands. The UN World Water Development Report 2 informs that the Middle East largely incorporates desalination in their water collection methods, making up 50 percent of the worlds total desalination practices. North America accounts for only 16 percent; Europe for 13 percent, Asia for 11 percent, Africa for 5 percent, the Caribbean 3 percent, and Australia and South America combine for around 2 percent.<sup>12</sup> Such numbers showcase a substantial “under use” of alternative methods for water collection.

9. If States do not invest in such technologies, advancements will suffer and breakthroughs capable of solving the water, and in turn food, crisis will be forever unreachable. Investments must include those domestic and foreign, creating a global industry producing sustainable water and an international safety net where the nations of each region have the ability of helping themselves as well as their neighbors in times of need. Every nation should be capable of ensuring its own water supplies for the purpose of irrigating agricultural land, but the appropriate time and money must be put in first.

10. Furthermore, beyond investing to ensure long term sustainability, aid must be the catalyst for immediate change. Solving the food crisis depends on financial support and relief (debt forgiveness, low interest loans, and monetary gifts), material support (farming/irrigation equipment, desalination technologies, and practical, sustainable seeds), and personnel support (watershed managers, water data managers, and agricultural experts). A combination of these, of the utmost quality and reverence, will ensure relief to those who need it most.

11. The Council, its new Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food and its new Independent Expert on the right to water and sanitation, should play a strong role in evaluating best practices and exposing serious problems that will hinder progress toward the goal of a hunger-free world. Issues to be addressed include subsidies, genetically-modified crops, the need for biodiversity, the downside of plant-based fuels, and, as we have stressed here, the interrelationship of food and water. Although long term goals must be kept in mind when realizing the right to food and providing hunger relief, at the present there needs to be concerted and immediate action to ensure, on an emergency basis, adequate food for all the world’s people because of the millions who are at great risk of death or severe malnutrition. We urge the Council to stress that States must put hunger relief at the top of the list of priorities: the right to life cannot be realized without adequate food and water.

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<sup>12</sup> The UN World Water Development Report 2, 2006, p. 150.