

Address of the President of the Republic of Croatia Stjepan Mesić at the FAO Global Food Safety Summit, Rome, June 3, 2008

Mr. Secretary General,
Mr. Director-General,
Distinguished Presidents, Prime Ministers and Ministers,
Distinguished representatives of intergovernmental and
nongovernmental organizations,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Let me greet all of you who have assembled here in a moment which is neither simple nor pleasant, to use the mildest possible terms, for our world. Above all I welcome the very initiative of convening this summit as well as the efforts made recently within the scope of a number of other initiatives - whether by the United Nations and other global organizations or by individual countries and their regional associations.

I have come to Rome as a head of state but also as an ordinary man - a man inspired by the deep and sincere hope that our meeting, and our ideas and views presented here will provide the so much needed and crucial impulse for the resolution of the extremely serious crisis facing us.

The Republic of Croatia, which I have headed for more than eight years, is also faced with the consequences of growing food prices. My country is affected even more than the majority of other European countries because Croatian citizens - in comparison with those countries - on the average spend much

more on food while their standard of living is lower. The prices of wheat, fruit and vegetables have increased drastically this year as compared with the same period last year. If we add to this the growing fuel cost and the consequences of the global financial crisis - and include some mistakes of our own doing - it is obvious that the average Croatian citizen is faced with the problem of surviving and ensuring the basic existential conditions.

Therefore, the consequences of the crisis are clear and - as matters stand now - we shall have to bear with them for quite a few years to come. I am sure of that. But what I am not so sure of is that we are all aware of the true causes of the global food crisis, notwithstanding the huge volume of data and analyses with which we have recently been swamped.

Of course, there are several direct, interconnected and inter-conditioned triggers of the crisis. We know them, and they certainly include the higher prices of energy sources, the already unquestionable consequences of climate changes, speculations in the money markets, enhanced food requirements in developing countries, and the transformation of food into fuel.

All this is more or less known and the talk of the day. However, today and now, in this body of the global organization, of the nations united for peace, and before the world public, we must loudly and clearly add another point - all these causes are not the whole story.

We must reject all false convictions that we are victims of the moment, of circumstances beyond our control. Anything else

would imply avoiding the truth, a blow in the face of all those who are starving today. Hunger is not only an unpleasant feeling in the stomach - the hunger facing our world today is the trampling of basic human rights, the theft of fundamental human dignity. This hunger is offensively unnecessary. And, most of all, it is deeply unjust.

The key word is: responsibility. But it is not enough to utter the word - responsibility must also be recognized. We must admit responsibility, we must accept it!

We must admit the fact that we have reached the present situation because of decades of mistaken understanding of global development, because of a truly brazen imposition of unacceptable models on other communities and ways of life, because of unfair rules of international trade and the hypocrisy of international financial institutions, because of favouring big business at the expense of ordinary people. In a nutshell, we are where we are because of the chronic lack of international justice and solidarity, which has finally and on a global scale affected the only material item which makes us all equal and all vulnerable – and that is food.

Have we ever asked ourselves why has Mexico, the homeland of maize, become dependent on maize import? Why is the Republic of the Philippines, after having full warehouses of rice only twenty years ago, now the leading rice importer in the world? And why have most countries worldwide awaited this crisis without any stocks of staple foodstuffs?

I am not raising these questions in order to call anyone to task or to point a finger at anyone. I am doing it because I am afraid

that we could remain captives of the vortex of old illusions and well-known mistakes while attempting to deal with the problem at hand.

The triple global crisis which has affected us - the financial crisis, the energy crisis and the food crisis - is the red light flashing a clear warning: something is rotten in the global economy. It is warning us that the structural upsets due to past trade and financial practices are too serious and too deep for sustaining the current state for a long time.

Therefore, I am inviting you to face the truth boldly and critically, to turn to the renewal of the global economy on the basis of equality and solidarity, in harmony with the principles of mutual appreciation and social sensitivity, ready to renounce all the illusions of the obviously discredited market dogmas. Let us have the courage to admit the failure of expectations that our system will by itself bring, sooner or later, a better tomorrow for all, and that the problems occurring in its functioning are merely accidental or passable.

I would like this meeting to mark the beginning of serious and concerted efforts to find an answer to the challenge of the global food crisis. I would also like it to be the long deferred beginning of our tackling meaningful and radical changes in the global economy.

An old Chinese proverb says: “The best time to plant the tree was twenty years ago. The second best time is today!”

Thank you!