

EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

BATTLING POVERTY AND PROMOTING DEVELOPMENT THROUGH DECENTRALIZATION AND EMPOWERMENT

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Poverty as a problem has long been the central theme at many international forums and policy discussions. Its eradication has been the perennial promise of politicians and is the recurring passion of charitable foundations and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). The collective move to alleviate it by the 191 members of the United Nations in 2000 was considered historic. Their signing the “Millennium Declaration”^{1/} formalized and reaffirmed the global commitment to improve the quality of life of the world’s poor. The target is to halve their number by 2015.^{2/}

Extent of Poverty. The definition of poverty has traditionally been based on having to live on less than US\$1 per day. In the US, Columbia University’s Earth Institute has estimated that no less than one-sixth of the world’s total population, or roughly one billion people, are within the poverty bracket.^{3/} Similarly, almost 2.8 billion people or half of the world’s population are forced to survive on less than US\$2 a day.^{4/} A United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) report stated that some 18 million people a year, or 50,000 per day, die due to poverty-related causes.^{5/} Considering that women and children comprise the majority of these deaths, this mortality rate takes on a graver interpretation. The report further stated that yearly, more than 10 million young boys and girls die of hunger and preventable diseases. This translates to 30,000 deaths per day or one child dying every 3 seconds due to lack of food and medical care. Capping all these are the reports that 600 million children live in absolute poverty^{6/} and 800 million people go to bed hungry every day.^{7/}

In Sub-Saharan Africa where more than half a billion people live, no fewer than fifteen of every 100 children die before the age of five.^{8/} Malnutrition, which is one of the clear manifestations of the poverty-and-hunger twin malady, is indeed prevalent in the poor parts of the world. As of 1999, the highest proportion of undernourishment was registered by Sub-Saharan Africa at 34 per cent, followed by that of the Asia-Pacific Region at 20 per cent, Latin America and the Caribbean registered 11 per cent. Though the Near East and North African Region had a comparatively lower proportion of undernourished children at 9 per cent, the alarm must be sounded inasmuch as this was one percentage point higher than 7 years ago. In concrete figures, there was an increase of 7 million in the number of malnourished children in the region.^{9/}

Side by side with the discussions on the extent of poverty are the analysis of its causes and the formulation of strategies to alleviate it. Distilling the stacks of reports and the recommendations of experts, one word sticks out: **decentralization**. It has suddenly become the “abracadabra” that is supposed to open the doors to top-down-bottom-up

participation, devolution of functions and authority, and grass-roots empowerment that will give the beneficiaries a sense of ownership, involvement, and accomplishment.

Realizing the potentials of decentralization as a tool in cutting the tentacles of poverty and in empowering the local government units (LGUs) to make them the pillars of development that they should be, the United Nations Centre for Regional Development (UNCRD) and the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN/DESA) joined hands and took the lead in a far-reaching discussion of issues and experiences related to devolved governance. Held in Brisbane, Australia, the “International Conference on Engaging Communities” focused on how devolution can be made more potent and effective in realizing the eight critical parameters that will define the impact of the Millennium Declaration. The papers presented at the conference form the nucleus of the articles appearing in this Autumn Issue of the *Regional Development Dialogue (RDD)*. The journal has two sections, the first comprising papers by UN/DESA and UNCRD personnel while the second section is composed of UN/DESA-commissioned country papers.

The article by Olympios Katsiaouni, “Decentralization: Poverty Reduction, Empowerment, and Participation” constitutes an ideal opening chapter to the journal, being an introduction to the thematic concerns that confront the world at large. He presents a running account of how far the campaign to attain the MDGs has progressed, so far. One lament is that although the rest of the world has been experiencing encouraging success in its economic growth agenda, many countries in Africa have remained mired in poverty as evidenced by the doubling of the numbers of poor as compared to twenty years ago. Katsiaouni’s article also underscores the need for the developed countries of the Western world to fulfill their commitment to increase their overseas development assistance to 0.7 per cent of their gross national products (GNPs). It appears that so far, only five of the European Union (EU) countries have been able to honour their official development assistance (ODA) pledge.^{10/} In the same breath, it must be emphasized that in the arena of poverty eradication, money alone cannot win the battle. What is needed more, and needed urgently, is for the right policies towards sustainable development to be formulated by the recipient countries. There should be sufficient political will to effect structural changes in the governance systems so that equities can be distributed and grass-roots-level participation can be achieved.

Decentralization and Human Security. Although subject to various interpretations, human security is generally understood to mean protecting the vital core of all human lives in ways that enhance human freedoms and human fulfillment.^{11/} Thus, freedom from hunger and poverty, into which the next article delves extensively, is a component of human security in whose attainment decentralization plays a significant role. This is one of the principal messages, eloquently put, by Devyani Mani in her article, “Strengthening Decentralized Governance for Human Security.” The article seeks to broaden the understanding of the symbiosis between decentralized structures and the achievement of human security. Towards this purpose, noteworthy case experiences are presented for a better appreciation of ways in which decentralized governance can be strengthened and better practiced. Some successes are described, such as those gained against human trafficking and HIV/AIDS in Thailand where the central government actively enjoined the participation of LGUs and civil society. In Uganda, the delivery of basic health services

was made effective through the simultaneous devolution of administrative and financial functions. And in Sierra Leone, the peace and order situation was improved by harnessing the participation of the local governments in expanding the employment and livelihood opportunities for the insurgents. Mani concludes her article with an array of pipelined projects and activities which the Human Security Group at UNCRD has designed in order to make its approach to human security holistic and encompassing.

Civil Society Empowerment and Environmental Preservation. Given the continuing global population growth and the concomitant economic expansion, it is only a matter of time before the world truly experiences ecological problems that are equally as alarming as worsening poverty and haphazard urban development. One of these will be worsening environmental degradation, the signs of which are everywhere increasingly apparent. Kazunobu Onogawa *et al* ring the warning bells concerning the unabated increase in vehicle emissions and solid waste in their article “Engaging Civil Society in Promoting Environmentally Sustainable Cities in Asia — from the Perspective of Cleaner Transport and Improved Waste Management.” The article advocates a continuing effort to keep the air we breathe clean as it promotes the environmentally sustainable transport (EST) concept. Its focus is on the elimination of transport-related factors that contribute to air pollution. It also encourages the adoption of the 3R precepts that call for the reduction, reuse, and recycling of solid wastes. To cite successful examples, the authors enumerate the various techniques employed in waste management as practiced by selected Asian countries. They cite community-based composting in Bangladesh, the zero-waste campaign in Nepal, and the extended producers’ responsibility (EPR) concept in Japan and the Republic of Korea, wherein the manufacturers participate, as part of their corporate responsibility, in the reuse, recycling, and disposition of discarded products which carry their brand. The message is clear that the continuing effort to keep the ecology conducive to quality living is not a government burden alone. Private sector participation is required and civil society has a big role to play.

Empowerment and Disaster Mitigation. It is only proper that disaster mitigation be treated as a component of the general discussion on human security and poverty alleviation. Disasters in their many manifestations destroy and this destruction affects lives, property, and the economies. In 2004-2005, drought seriously affected China, earthquakes claimed lives in Pakistan, and a horrifying tsunami caused unquantifiable damage to lives and properties in Indonesia, India, Sri Lanka, and Thailand. Not too long ago, torrential rains caused mountain flooding in a southern province of the Philippines and completely inundated a village when mudslides buried houses and school buildings, together with people of all ages inside them.^{12/} The article “Community-Based Disaster Management: Empowering Communities to Cope with Disaster Risks” by Bishnu Hari Pandey and Kenji Okazaki puts into perspective the synergic relationship between disaster reduction and sustainable development. It underlines the need for communities to be trained and enabled to function effectively in the interrelated phases of prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery which lie at the core of disaster mitigation. Indeed, when disaster strikes, the impact is felt mostly at the community level where the poor are to be found. Yet, the communities are hardly given the chance to provide inputs that could be relevant and substantive to the formulation of approaches and the implementation of action plans. Thus, the authors advocate the adoption of a community-based disaster management (CBDM)

programme that has already been proven suitable and sustainable as evidenced by selected case studies described in the article.

The second section of this *RDD* is composed of six country papers, each with accompanying commentaries.

Poverty and Hunger. More than three decades have passed since the first World Food Summit Conference was held, in 1974, and yet still the threat of food shortages persist. The rhetoric that flowed and subsequently sparked the world community into action, including Henry Kissinger's pledge that no child would go to bed hungry by 1985¹³ has not helped much in bringing to a halt the recurring fear of imminent hunger. What seemed lacking in the formulated strategies was a concrete framework of action that would eliminate the hand-out mentality and instead convert the recipients into major players in the battle against hunger and famine. During the last 15 years, a shift, albeit gradual in approach, has resulted in the devolution of responsibility for, and authority over, development initiatives from the top government offices to the LGUs. This development has long been overdue because LGUs logically have more intimate knowledge of what is needed and how to achieve the necessary result. To exemplify what the synergy between LGU empowerment and people's participation can do, Josefa S. Edralin and Cristino M. Collado, in their article "Decentralized Governance and Food Security: Perceptions from Rural Local Governments and Communities in Bulacan Province, the Philippines," look at the way a provincial government in the Philippines took advantage of its empowerment to improve the delivery of basic services and, in the process, gave the provincial constituency a full sense of participation in socioeconomic initiatives. Their article revisits the impact of the *Local Government Code* that gives the LGUs a mandate to be at the forefront of local development. The authors train their focus on the success level of the province's food security campaign. To establish a more solid ground in validating the perceptions on how devolved governance benefited the provincial constituency, they conducted field surveys that captured the sentiments and perceptions of the local communities. The responses of the respondents are a story in themselves and are scattered throughout the article. In summarizing their findings, the authors emphasize that pragmatic devolution hinges on responsibility and authority going hand-in-hand. Similarly, the symbiotic relationship between carefully crafted development plans and adequate funding must not be overlooked if the people's expectations are to be met adequately. The policy recommendations they outline are attuned to the type of agriculture-based economy pertaining in the Philippines but may possibly find application in other countries at a similar stage of economic development.

Commenting, Ed. B. Prantilla echoes the positive promises that decentralization can bring in accelerating the delivery of development from the national to the local levels but at the same time, wisely points out the pitfalls of devolution that lurk along the wayside. The most vital being the level of governance capability and the operational ability that relate to raising enough revenue and providing the service levels that are demanded by their citizens — the same concern underscored by Edralin and Collado. Moreover, Prantilla's comment in more ways than one enhances the clarity of how food security can be achieved — or hampered — and where the quality of local governance and political leadership plays a role and makes a difference. He illustrates his point by making use of the experience of Mindanao where agro-development potentials abound but the level of economic advancement is parallel only to the quality of governance capability, the availability of manpower

and infrastructural support, the level of private sector participation and the extent to which the peace and order situation is maintained and armed conflict is prevented from inhibiting the development process.

Decentralization and Social Harmony. In his Indonesian study, Suprayoga Hadi reiterates the importance of empowered local governance in addressing area-specific domestic issues. The article, “Enhancing Local Governance through Decentralization Policy in Managing Conflict-Affected Regions in Eastern Indonesia,” underlines the value of equipping the local leadership with ample authority so as to improve social cohesion in troubled areas. Part of his thesis is that social conflict serves as a critical barrier in bringing development to the rural areas. He drives home his point by citing the regional disturbances that persist in the Maluku and Sulawesi regions. He advocates the transfer of the responsibility to maintain local law and order to the local governments as their knowledge of the root causes is more profound, not to mention the fact that they have the bigger self-motivation to make the effort successful. Other parts of the author’s thesis indicate that the root causes of conflict and social strife in his country are not confined to ethnicity and religious differences alone. To this, Geronimo M. Collado agrees and states in his comment that past experiences have shown that the frequency and magnitude of violent conflicts could likewise be ascribed to certain contributory destabilizing conditions that include pervasive poverty, socioeconomic disparities, deprivation of livelihood opportunities, and perceived injustice. Thus, following the line that poverty and economic disparities are among the exacerbating factors that feed on the regional conflicts, Hadi proposes a new framework of development. Called “Peace through Development” (PTD) both he and Collado share optimism that PTD could be the right vehicle through which stalled development in the conflict areas could now move on. Further in his comment, Collado draws up a list of suggestions and one that merits immediate action is the improvement of the justice system. Indeed, for it to be acceptable as the alternative to armed clashes in resolving social differences, the justice system must be perceived as fair and just and more importantly, accessible to all including, and especially, the marginalized poor. Not to be set aside is the importance of including the private sector as its involvement and active participation will provide a holistic dimension to the overall conflict resolution strategy.

Decentralization and Sociopolitical Restructuring. In Cambodia today, decentralization is still in its infancy. Begun only in 2002, and underway with the election of the *sangkat* (commune) councils, it is still feeling its way in its aspirations to enable citizenry to be more involved in designing and pursuing their social and economic destinies. To provide readers with a better appreciation of decentralization’s birth pangs in his war-torn country, Prum Sokha’s article gives a running update of the current poverty situation in Cambodia. His article, “Decentralization and Poverty Reduction in Cambodia: Experiences and Challenges” also outlines the economic goals that the Royal Government has been pursuing to reduce the numbers of poor. Central to this is the transformation of the “Rectangular Strategy” economic master plan from being a mere blueprint to increased agricultural productivity, human resource development, improved infrastructure, and wider participation of the private sector in the overall development strategy. High hopes are pinned on the empowered commune/*sangkat* councils to be the engines for national economic growth. The need must be emphasized, however, for these commune members to be given the appropriate training so as to be adequately equipped — particularly in the areas of

administrative and financial management.

In her comment, Eng Netra seconds the notion that devolving governance is one viable way to bring the grass-roots level communities into the mainstream of national affairs. At the same time, she acknowledges the present constraints and concurs with the author's identification of the barriers to decentralization's higher level of implementation. Uppermost among these is the pressing need to harmonize political and fiscal decentralization. There is a disjuncture between decentralization and deconcentration reforms and this too must be evened out side-by-side with the fine tuning of the guidelines and policies governing the interrelationship between and among the various agencies. Citing the results of past studies, Netra likewise argues for a clear definition of the accountability of the commune councils, the sources, and manner of raising revenues, and a well-formulated and acceptable set of guidelines on personnel and staff management.

Decentralization and Village-Level Development. Bringing the concept of decentralization to the micro-level is "Devolved Governance as a Tool in Accelerating Village Development in Fiji, Harnessing Local Potential: The Case of Na Vanua 'O Natewa." Its author, Ropate Qalo, proposes a "hybridized" decentralization designed to empower the villages scattered throughout the islands of Fiji. Taking into consideration his country's distinct geographical configuration and the fact that its political system is only three decades old, Qalo believes that one pragmatic way to narrow the development gap between the central government and the village communities is to equip the latter with the appropriate authority to chart their own economic development agenda. He sees this as a feasible approach in view of the fact that the majority of the country's 750,000 people^{14/} reside in villages scattered throughout the islands. Readers of Qalo's article gain an understanding of the peculiar setup in this country where the political structure ends with the *tikinas* or districts. Villages, to this day, are governed by village chieftains who are assisted by advisory councils.

In his comment, Biman C. Prasad agrees that in the Fijian context, decentralization could indeed narrow the sociopolitical gap between the decision-makers in Suva and the village communities. He argues strongly, however, for the crafting of well-defined development plans first before any actual devolution is effected so as to avoid a crisis of expectations between the newly-empowered leaders and the village residents. He also offers a listing of practical suggestions that if carried out could enhance the success of what could be the prototype of autonomous village affairs management in the island-countries of the Pacific.

Decentralization: The Subcontinent's Experience. India has a population that is only slightly smaller than China's and is the second country whose number of citizens exceeds one billion. For this reason, any demographic figure emanating from India makes the world take notice. For example, a report stated that the poor in India stood at 38.9 per cent in 1988 but had decreased to 26.1 per cent by 1999.^{15/} The reduction of 12.8 per cent translates to 128 million Indians who had risen above the poverty line. This tells us a lot about the strategies India has employed and is implementing to bring about this scale of poverty reduction. Background on India's past struggles to address its economic woes is provided by Vinod Vyasulu's article "Overcoming Constraints in Implementing Poverty Reduction Strategies through Decentralized Structures in India" which discusses the stages that the Indian model of decentralization has undergone and its impact on the various initiatives

designed to address poverty-related concerns. Likewise, the author presents, by way of examples, the concepts behind the series of 5-year national economic development plans and the launching of the Integrated Rural Development Programme (IDRP) which inaugurated a succession of livelihood opportunities for the rural communities. The author also provides an overview of India's experience of micro-credit which seems to be the usual example of village-level income-generating activity. By way of assessing the impact of devolved governance on anti-poverty programmes, he cites the positive experience of two Indian states that spearheaded the formal empowerment of villages through the creation of *panchayats*.

George B. Matthew, through his comment, further articulates the key points on decentralization and poverty reduction as treated in the article. In assessing the impact of devolution, however, he contends that the credit for the flourishing of decentralized governance should not be claimed by the present-day political groupings inasmuch as the idea of *panchayati raj* had been advocated for by the Balawantrai Mehta Committee as early as more than half a century ago. He likewise refuses to accept the notion that it was the foreign donors, as implied in the article, that revolutionized the concept of gender equality in India. The divergence of views by two academics on the same subject only illustrates the point that in a vast and complex social setting such as India's, there can be many perspectives on how socioeconomic concerns can be approached, treated, and evaluated. There is no arguing, however, that decentralization plays a significant role in enabling the local communities to develop and grow. Both the author and the commentator agree that the goal of truly empowering and capacitating the *panchayats* needs more than just money and financial support. Strong political will is also required.

In India's neighbour, Nepal, the experience on decentralized governance has been little different. "Poverty Reduction through Decentralization and Effective Local Governance in Nepal" tells the readers why. Its author, Bishwa Keshar Maskay, provides an account of the series of 5-year national economic development plans and how the programme to devolve governance that began with the onset of the Third Plan in 1964 fared. The decentralization experiment had a mixed experience that was made more difficult by the central government's failure to put the basic requirements in place. One important requisite that was necessary but was taken for granted was for the LGUs to be able to stand on their own and function independently. They could not and they did not — partly because of inadequate training and largely because of poor funding and weak resource base. The author, both in narrating the setbacks that Nepal experienced and in presenting his recommendations, offers a number of practical insights on how to make devolved governance work and its impact maximized. One lesson clearly learned can be paraphrased as "do not give a Mercedes Benz to a driver if he is only just beginning to learn to drive a Volkswagen." Baku Takahashi, in his comment, identifies what he considers to be serious gaps in the article's analysis of poverty reduction effects in Nepal today: intensifying unrest in many parts of the country; and the poor's continued lack of access to resources. While noting the author's correct identification of poverty as largely a rural phenomenon, Takahashi is struck by the lack of discussion on the land tenure situation within Nepal. He advocates an initiative called Leasehold Forestry (LHF) under the Community Forestry (CF) programme in Nepal as a valuable "best practice" which is empowering and benefiting the rural poor, though observing that the success of such initiatives remains dependent upon

questions of peace and order in the countryside.

Decentralization, Sustained Development, and Poverty Alleviation. Poverty is a human rights violation.^{16/} The right to live in dignity and be free from want is itself a fundamental right that is essential to the realization of all other human rights. Recognizing this, poverty alleviation through social and economic development is high on the state agenda of many developing economies. Towards this end, many governments have taken steps to make local institutions participants in developmental governance. Responsibilities are distributed and governance authority is devolved. Decentralization has become the toll gate on the local development highway.

But like a powerful vehicle that can speed up the journey, decentralization has a number of requisites that must be met. Ignoring them while focusing only on the targeted end-goals creates a crisis of expectations. Essential requisites to be met before embarking upon the decentralization path are:

(1) **Financial resources at the local level.** Success of decentralization is enhanced when local governments are able to, or are helped to, gain sufficient resources to fulfill the tasks mandated to or devolved to them. Nowadays, local governments obtain resources through transfers from central administration, local tax collection and donor contributions. Even when resources are available, it is important that local governments have the power to decide on what, and how, to use them. Without this, decentralization can only lead to poor responsiveness.^{17/}

(2) **Local human capacity.** This is highly dependent on a variety of elements that include support policy from the central government, capability training, and decision-making capacity. Literature reviews indicate that those governments that have used decentralization to full advantage are characterized by strong local human capacity. Such capacity need not precede decentralization reforms but can actually be built up while the reforms are undertaken.^{18/}

(3) **Political commitment at the national level.** Decentralization is more likely to succeed when there is a strong political commitment not only by the political leadership but more importantly, the central bureaucracy. Available information indicates that decentralization failures are common in a setting where local governments have to face strong resistance from the central leadership.^{19/} This resistance is exacerbated by political wrangling, vague policy guidelines, and unclear distribution of responsibilities.

Empowerment and Participation: Key to Sustained Development. The rhetoric on empowerment will remain empty unless it translates to development with equity for the rural communities. Along this line, it is imperative that the rural people now be regarded more as participants in the development process than as mere programme beneficiaries. This appears to be the best way for local governments to ensure the sustainability of their grass-roots level initiatives. In this regard, it is noteworthy to refer to the substantial deliberations on rural development that took place during the 26th Session of the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (FAO) Conference in 1991.^{20/} There is no arguing that to give the people full motivation to participate, there is a pressing need to:

- Heighten the awareness of the local communities, particularly the private sector and the NGOs, on what their roles are in development-oriented initiatives and what benefits they can expect;
- Create legal and policy frameworks that are conducive to people's participation;

- Strengthen the internal capacities of the people's organizations and community assemblies;
- Promote meaningful dialogues between central government agencies, development entities, and people's organizations;
- Introduce appropriate operational procedures that will motivate wider participation; and
- Institute a credible monitoring and evaluation system.

A decade from now, the true value of those 191 signatures affixed to the Millennium Declaration will be measured. It is hoped that the combined utility of the tools of poverty and hunger eradication will be maximized if only to enhance the quality of life of half of the world's population. Towards this goal, decentralization has opened the development gates. It is now up to the empowered local governments to continue marching forward with the local people beating the drum.

Everyone must always remember that a day without food is like a decade to a hungry stomach.

NOTES

- 1/ *UN Millennium Declaration*, Item 61(b), Provisional Agenda (Adopted during the 55th Session of the UN General Assembly) (New York, 2000).
- 2/ *Millennium Development Goals*. Available from <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/>; accessed 2006.
- 3/ Columbia University Earth Institute, "The Millennium Development Goals: Lessons, Opportunities and Challenges" (International Public Service Association (IPSA) Spring 2005 Conference).
- 4/ *Ibid.*
- 5/ United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), "The State of the World's Children" (Paris, 2004). Available from www.unicef.org/sowc04/; accessed 2006.
- 6/ Shaohu Chen and Martin Ravallion, "How Have the World's Poor Fared since the 1980s?" (World Bank Policy Research Paper) (Washington, DC, 2004).
- 7/ *Ibid.*
- 8/ International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD), "Findings," *Africa Region 73*. Also available at <http://econ.worldbank.org>
- 9/ United Nations, *Human Development Report, 2005*. Available from <http://hdr.org/reports/global/2005/>; accessed 2006.
- 10/ See: <http://www.unmillenniumproject.org/>; accessed 2006
- 11/ Report of the UN Secretary General, "In Larger Freedom: Towards Development, Security and Human Rights For All" (New York, 2005). Available from http://www.un.org/larger_freedom/contents.htm; accessed 2006.
- 12/ Asian Disaster Reduction Center (ADRC), *Natural Disasters Data Book* (Tokyo, 2004).
- 13/ Jean-Jacques Dethier, "Decentralization and Poverty Reduction: Exploring the Linkages" (Paper presented at the World Bank Workshop on Decentralization held in Washington, DC, 2004).
- 14/ Wikipedia: *Fiji*. Available from <http://en.wikipedia.org/Talk:Fiji>; accessed 2006.
- 15/ Shataksee Dhongdee, "Spatial Decomposition of Poverty in India" (Riverside CA: Department of Economics, University of California, 2003).
- 16/ See "The Human Rights to Freedom from Poverty". Available from <http://www.pdhre.org/rights/poverty.html>; accessed 2006.
- 17/ J. Jutting *et al.*, "Decentralization and Poverty in Developing Countries: Exploring the Impact" (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Working Paper Series; no. 236) (Paris, 2004).
- 18/ *Ibid.*
- 19/ *Ibid.*

20/ “Plan of Action for People’s Participation in Rural Development” (Conference of the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (FAO)) (26th session), Rome, 9-28 November 1991.