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# Oleg Kobiakov: Fao Motto “FIAT PANIS” (Let there be breads) is no hot air

While humanity is mastering nanotechnology, fine-tuning artificial intelligence and dreaming of colonizing the planet of Mars, a shameful phenomenon called Hunger remains the bitter fate of 730 million. Another 2 billion inhabitants of the planet are deprived of permanent access to sufficient amount of safe and nutritious food products. What is the reason for such a blatant injustice? And what should humanity do?

Oleg Kobiakov, Director of the FAO Office for Liaison with the Russian Federation, provided an insight in an interview for BM.Moscow Foresight on how FAO addresses and handles these issues.

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- Hunger and malnutrition are global problems that are as large-scale as they are difficult to solve, at least within the tight time frame set for us by the Agenda 2030 adopted by the UN General Assembly and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set out in it. It is unlikely we would completely eliminate hunger (SDG-2) over the remaining five years.

The main reason why millions of people around the world are victims of malnutrition, which manifests itself in a triad of burdens – undernourishment, overweight, and micronutrient and vitamin deficiencies – is the economic inaccessibility, or in


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simple words, the high prices on nutritious foods.

Healthy nutrition is not available to poverty-stricken people living below the poverty line (set at US$ 2.15 per person per day at purchasing power parity (PPP) determined in 2017). The cost of food backet exceeds the average food bill in most countries of the Global South: over two thirds of people living in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia cannot afford a healthy diet.

Physical and economic unavailability of food does not provide adequate nutrition for more than 3 billion people, leads to significant collateral costs in the form of additional health care spending, and not to forget that it adversely affects the filling of national budgets.

By 2030, global health costs related to mortality and non-communicable diseases could exceed US$ 1.3 trillion per year due to malnutrition.


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*- FAO stands for the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. What role does your Organization play in solving these problems?*

- It is important to take into account that in addition to the branches and sub-sectors of the "classical" agricultural industry, the FAO portfolio includes such areas of intellectual capital application as the use of land, soil and water resources; rural development; commodities and trade; nutrition and food security.

The demand for FAO as a knowledge organization has now grown noticeably. Technical publications, specialized reports and methodological manuals of FAO, based on the developments of its specialists, as well as the research and experience of hundreds of scientific institutions and practitioners cooperating with it, are available on the Organization's website on the Internet in open access.


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*- What FAO counts as its most flagship successes?*

- We can go through the pages of our chronicle. In 1952, the International Plant Protection Convention (IPPC) was adopted, to which 182 countries are now parties. In 1961, FAO and the UN General Assembly established the World Food Programme, currently known as WFP, which became the largest humanitarian aid agency of the UN.

In 1963, Codex Alimentarius appears, setting the international standards for food safety. Created jointly by FAO and the World Health Organization (WHO), the Codex is a collection of international standards, guidelines and established practices that ensure food safety and legality of trade worldwide.

In 1994, FAO and the World Organization for Animal Health developed a global programme to eradicate rinderpest. The goal was achieved in 2011.

In 2001, the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources was adopted, which ensures access to plant genetic materials and fair distribution of benefits from their use.

In 2002, FAO, together with other organizations, eradicated onchocerciasis, or river blindness, saving millions of people in Africa from this incurable disease.

Finally, FAO, in fact, has initiated the SDGs in their current form: at the World Food Summit it convened in 1996, the strategic task was set for the first time to radically halve the number of hungry people around the world.

*- This year, FAO celebrates 80 years since its creation. What is the reason that Russia, as the legal successor of the USSR, which was one of the founding fathers of FAO, actually became a full member of your Organization only in 2006?*

- History, as the textbook expression says, does not know the subjunctive mood. But history also does not know the algorithm of development that follows a straight line and is always heading upward.

In November 1989, an article in the *Moskovskiye Novosti* weekly revealed the reasons why the delegates representing the USSR during the FAO founding conference in Quebec, Canada, refused to sign the FAO Constitution. The argument amounted to the following: the “forces of imperialism” were planning to occupy key positions in the Organization (which they actually did) and would then take advantage to use it in their interests.


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In an article published in the *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* on 12 October 2005, the former Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia Alexander Yakovenko explained that FAO membership implied the provision of a significant amount of agricultural statistics, which had traditionally been kept secret in the Soviet Union.

Nevertheless, even when the USSR was not a member of FAO, the Secretariat organized study tours to the country for representatives of developing countries. For example, the subject of the trip in September-October 1967 was "The behavior of fish depending on fishing methods and tactics."

By the mid-1980s, especially after the start of perestroika and the advent of new political thinking in Soviet foreign policy, it had become increasingly obvious how absurd it was that the world's largest agricultural, forestry and fishing country, a member of the UN Security Council and all specialized UN agencies, remained outside the framework of the intergovernmental organization with the global mandate for agriculture and food.

On 13 April 2006, the Russian Federation became a full member of FAO, and the Russian tricolor was hoisted on the flagpole at the FAO headquarters in Rome next to Capitol Hill. It took almost 60 years to make this seemingly simple step forward.


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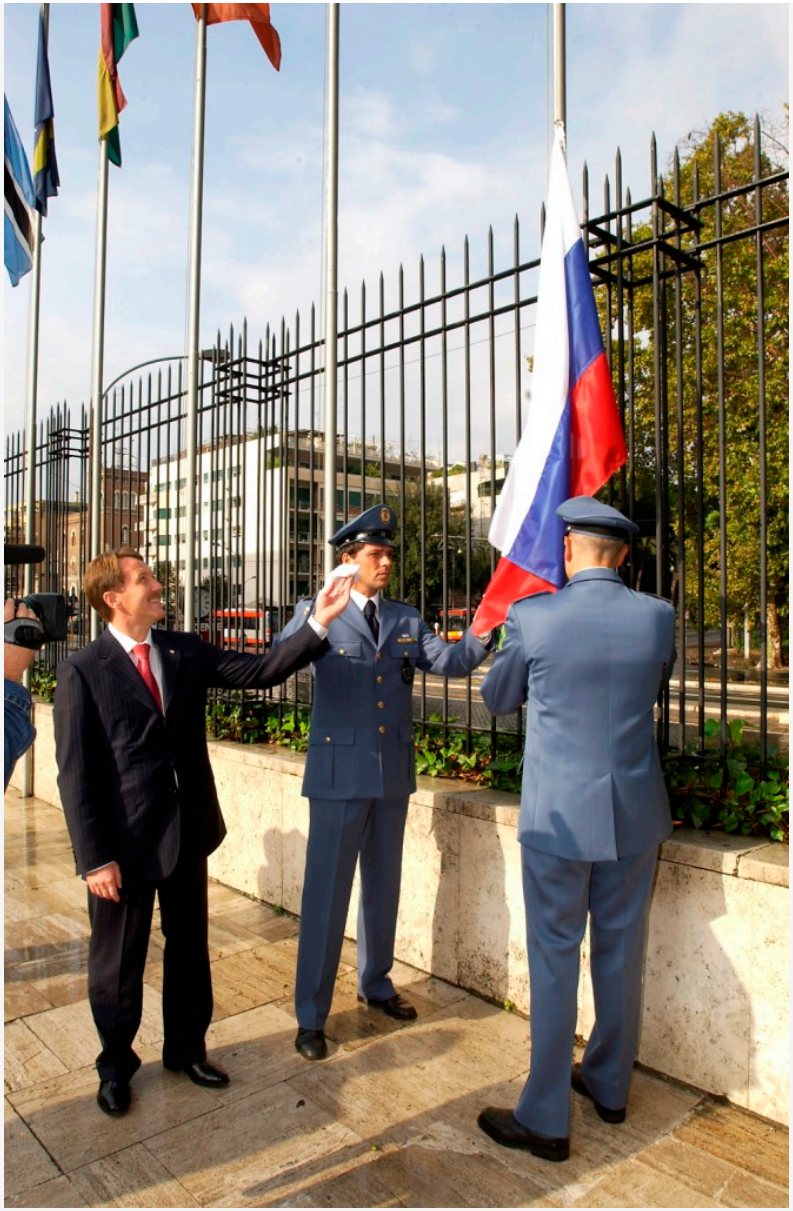


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*- To what extent is Russia involved in the implementation of FAO programs?*

- In addition to the annual mandatory contribution to the FAO budget, Russia makes one-time earmarked contributions as official development assistance to finance FAO-implemented projects aimed at emergency relief and technical assistance for the development of the agricultural sector in third countries.

Russia made a significant USD 10 million contribution to the operation to fight the desert locust outbreak in Africa in 2020. Russia has twice allocated funds to support and restore the agricultural sector of the Syrian Arab Republic (SAR), with the total contribution exceeding USD 12 million.

No less significant was the financing (USD 6 million) of the programme to support the school meal system in Armenia, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan.

Among the iconic intellectual and technical programs, we include the project under the auspices of Rospotrebnadzor aimed at enhancing competencies to combat antimicrobial resistance, or AMR, in five countries in the “near abroad”: Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

The USD 3.3 million project was successfully completed on 31 December 2024. Negotiations are currently underway to launch its second stage, with the budget more than doubling and Uzbekistan and Mongolia joining as new participants.

The FAO Moscow Office has in its portfolio and oversees over ten specialized activity areas. These include, for instance, the efforts to reduce food loss and waste.

FAO consistently advocates against illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing that causes considerable damage to marine bioresources. The annual volume of this poaching reaches 26 million tonnes (in monetary terms, this is almost USD 24 billion).

Russia is the key partner in eliminating this practice, especially in the Pacific Ocean, which is why FAO welcomes the signing and ratification of the 2011 Agreement on Port State Measures to combat IUU fishing by the Russian government.

Over the 10 years of the work of the FAO Moscow Office, Russia's total voluntary contribution to FAO projects has exceeded 40 million US dollars.


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*- Not so long ago, Russia supplied 200,000 tons of wheat to six African countries, free of charge, as humanitarian aid. How do you assess this decision from the point of view of ensuring food security?*

- Our Office has compared these volumes with the grain balances of the beneficiary countries. Although wheat is not a staple food there, which would be the pulses, it is an important element of the diet in these countries The Russian wheat supply covered from 6% to 23% of the annual demand for this product in the recipient countries, which is a substantial share.

*- How wide is the geography of the FAO Office's activities?*

- The territorial scope of the FAO Moscow Office goes beyond Russian borders: it ensures the interaction between FAO and the Eurasian Economic Commission, working relations with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and strengthens ties with BRICS member countries.

BRICS countries are increasingly influencing the state of affairs in the agricultural sector and food security on a global scale. We maintain contacts with each country chairing the association, previously with Russia and currently with Brazil.

Our Office represented FAO in almost a dozen events held during the Russian BRICS Chairmanship in 2024.

*- What does the FAO, in general, and the Moscow FAO Liaison office, in particular, see it as their mission?*

- To put it in a nutshell, FAO was originally created in 1945 to solve a simple and at the same time extremely difficult task in the post-war world: to feed people and not let them starve to death.

Today, FAO sees its mission as contributing to the emergence of agri–food systems that guarantee every inhabitant of the planet – without exceptions and restrictions – free access to sufficient amounts of nutritious and safe food.

By 2050, the world's population will be close to 10 billion. To feed all earthlings, it will be necessary to increase food production by at least 50-60% from the current level. At the same time, it will be necessary to produce more and better with less investment and inputs, because production resources – arable land, blue fields – are steadily declining due to urbanization and the effects of global warming.

What is the prerequisite to achieve this goal? First of all, we need to strengthen international cooperation, introduce advanced


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high–tech approaches and the most recent innovations, and put the agri-food sector on the path of sustainable development.

At FAO, we like to quote the dictum of the creator of the Green revolution, Nobel Peace Prize laureate Norman Borlaug: “We cannot build on empty stomachs.” This mantra is no less significant than the Latin motto inscribed on our logo: ***Fiat panis*** (meaning “Let there be bread”). As well as the current FAO motto: "Four Betters" – better production, better nutrition, a better environment, and a better life, leaving no one behind.

*- How would you rate the content of Moscow residents’ food basket? To what extent, in your opinion, do the Muscovites enjoy guaranteed food security?*

- In the Soviet Union, according to legends, food distribution was carried out according to the scheme: first, all food supplies were delivered specifically to Moscow, and then customers from the regions would bring it to their destinations in neighboring cities and towns. There is only a fraction of a joke in this joke. Today, in my opinion, food supply of our metropolis is impeccable. Why? Simply because all food groups are available in abundance and even in excess, and moreover, they are in all price categories to meet paying capacity. Muscovites can be envied. Yet, compared to earlier times, today the provision of food for both Muscovites and residents of other regions is at an appropriate satisfactory level.


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