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Global hunger, global advocacy

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For the past 39 years the Committee on World Food Security has met in Rome at the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. Its theme has been world hunger, and typically begins with World Food Day.

For the past two years, the FAO has had a new approach to global hunger, widening the Committee on World Food Security from just diplomats and ?experts,? to include citizen participation, from the voices of non-governmental organizations to social movements consisting of farmers, fisher-folk, private businesses pastoralists and ordinary people.

The participation by global citizens has introduced a new and creative dynamic to these meetings. Citizens participate fully in their own organizational structures, while the committee meeting remains an intergovernmental event. Governments alone retain the right to vote, but citizen participants do have the right to speak.

But formal votes are not often taken, as the goal is to operate by consensus. Speakers rely on their moral and intellectual strength to carry their convictions, and through dialogue and debate convince ? or fail to convince ? governments of their positions on the solutions to world hunger.

During my two years of participation, it is evident civil society feels somewhat encouraged that their participation can make a difference, even while lacking voting power.

This year I went as the only American member of the coordinating committee of the civil society mechanism. As such, it was important for me to have the opportunity to meet with my government in order to dialogue how civil society sees the way forward in securing the end of hunger in the world.

It also appeared to me that the U.S. government would be eager to consult with representatives of civil society as to their solutions; respectful dialogue seemed a reasonable goal for both sides, I believed. As reported in an earlier article for *NCR* [1], that dialogue did not occur this year ? I sought it, the government did not respond.

But I believe it remains important for the government to communicate with the American public, as it is an obligation for the government to be responsive to its citizens. Just what does go on during these days in Rome? How seriously does the world community take the issue of world hunger? Does it both prepare for *and* act from these meetings?

I think it important to write about these matters, particularly because there appears to be an enormous gulf between Rome and Washington, D.C., and between the U.S. government and its citizens when it comes to ending hunger.

The U.S. government in Rome often presents a narrower perspective than the full range of its policy, often leaving out the more progressive features on food. While it speaks about employing agricultural workers as part

of an agricultural supply chain (processing chickpeas in Ethiopia, for example), it fails to mention its advocacy of food hubs and targeted policy for small farmers in a regional and localized food system structure.

The Committee on World Food Security in Rome includes many governments and many civil society participants. During its weeklong meeting, there are close to 500 people meeting in a plenary session at any one time at the FAO. In addition, civil society participants come from around the world, many of whom involved with social movements in their home countries.

The meetings in each?s native lands involve much by way of consultation with their own organizations, such as La Via Campesina [2] or Roppa [3] (West African Farmers Organization) and Action Aid International [4], and their positions on global hunger come from grassroots communications. The same is true for the non-governmental organizations like Oxfam [5] and Food & Water Watch [6], which work assiduously to develop and articulate positions related to a range of global hunger issues.

When in Rome, the various networks strive to consolidate consensus through intensive dialogue, arriving for the CFS, representing millions of people from every continent, with seemingly endless days of preparation in order to be thorough and comprehensive in their overview.

It has been surprising to me that the U.S. Mission to the UN Agencies in Rome [7], which includes the Food and Agriculture Organization, the World Food Program, and the International Fund for Agriculture Development, is not well known or present in the U.S.

Certainly the positions America takes in Rome at these meetings is not reflected in the media at home. The U.S. exercises powerful influence at the FAO, but for many decades that activity has not been well reported on in the U.S. news. When is the last time that you saw an article on the Committee on World Food Security in the New York Times or the Washington Post or even in the International Herald Tribune? How often have you seen a program on world hunger on CNN or Fox News?

The activity of the U.S. on this world stage is not well known or appreciated, and yet it has a powerful presence as a major donor to the FAO.

Even though the conservative Canadian government?s policies trend more Tea Party than progressive, its officials work side by side with the U.S. in Rome. Some civil society members call their partnership ?bad cop, good cop,? with the Canadian representative usually giving a sarcastic or ugly characterization of a policy position that the U.S. supports but in language that is less conflict-laden.

Occasionally, the U.S. representative says something downright silly, such as ?Organic agriculture is unsustainable? ? a statement that immediately gained the ire of civil society supporters of agro-ecology and caused twenty small farmer representatives to roll their eyes in disdain. That was in 2011.

In 2012 the United States challenged the consensus process itself, a bedrock of the agreed-upon procedure, where governments decided that once a position was reached they would go forward and not backward; that once a consensus was reached it remained ascribed to as a completed position.

This happened with one text entitled ?The Global Strategic Framework.? Governments had agreed that one statement about food sovereignty would remain in the text but as a bracketed item, meaning that they agreed it was a disputed issue, and not a matter of consensus.

The United States changed its mind and wanted language about food sovereignty totally removed from the document, not just left in brackets as an unsettled matter. This represented a challenge to the ?go forward, not backward? process. To change the process would leave the U.S. isolated in its reversal.

The Group of 70 (mostly developing countries) plus China called attention to this change in position and called for a halt in the proceedings to discuss amongst themselves what their response to this breach in business comportment would mean to them. The process of discussion was halted while the Group of 70 caucused.

During that caucus time the U.S. government met with representatives of civil society, two representing the U.S., to explain their stance. A meeting was held; the results were inconclusive.

Out of this maneuvering came the removal of the words ?food security? from the text. Civil society decided enough good remained in the text concerning the ?right to food? as the basis for international food policy, even without ?food security? included. Given the text?s dynamic and alterable nature, the words could be added in future versions.

That position was accepted, and the Framework was adopted ? a milestone achievement in the eyes of civil society.

Here is what the civil society press statement [8] said:

> We welcome the adoption on October 17, 2012, of the first version of the Global Strategic Framework for Food Security and Nutrition (GSF). The GSF, as the overarching framework, will be the primary global reference for coordination and coherence in decision-making on food and agricultural issues. It is an important achievement of the Committee on World Food Security (CFS). We as social movements and civil society organizations participated intensively in its elaboration.
>
> The GSF constitutes a step forward in promoting a new model of governance on food, agriculture, and nutrition. This document is built upon the human rights approach, women?s rights and the recognition of the central role of smallholder farmers, agricultural and food workers, artisanal fisher folks, pastoralists, Indigenous Peoples, landless people, women and youth to food and nutrition security.
>
> The GSF also recognizes that formal employment of rural workers and assurance of minimum living wages are key for food security and nutrition. The document mentions the potential of agro-ecology and provides important guidance on nutrition based on the Right to Food Guidelines. It also reaffirms the strong commitment of States to the implementation of the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Lands, Fisheries and Forests, including through agrarian reform.
>
> The GSF negotiations reached an important consensus on human rights-based monitoring and accountability, which implies that States, intergovernmental institutions and the private sector are held accountable for their actions and omissions regarding their obligations under international human rights law.
>
> Several issues that are important to civil society are not addressed in the current version of the GSF in particular Food Sovereignty. We affirm our commitment to ensure that the new paradigm for food security policy will be based on food sovereignty.

> We expect countries and all actors to fully support the implementation on the GFS on all levels. We will contribute to make use of this important tool for our initiatives and struggles at local, national and international level.
>
> As the GSF is a flexible and living document we call upon governments to maintain the spirit of the CFS reform, which commits us all to a participatory, inclusive and transparent process.

Note: this article will be followed by one on the human right to food.

[David Andrews is the senior representative for Food & Water Watch, a nonprofit organization that advocates for safe, accessible and sustainably produced food and water.]

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