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Beating Rights Into Plowshare: Guaranteeing Food For All

Tuesday, January 29, 2008, 10:45 – 12:15 pm

Facilitator:

Maria Aguiar, Director of Global Programs, Grassroots International

Panelists:

Rafael Alegria, Coordinator, Global Campaign for Agrarian Reform (HONDURAS)

Wayne Roberts, Project Coordinator, Toronto Food Policy Council (CANADA)

Maria Aguiar opened the session by apologizing for having such a violent word as “beating” in the session title. She presented the session in talk show format, interviewing first Rafael and then Wayne.

Rafael Alegria: At the FAO’s World Conference on Food Security in 1996, we denounced food aid and the idea that one could diminish hunger by buying up the US’s excess products. We made a declaration of the right to food, and about food sovereignty. It is more comprehensive than the right to eat – in our land of small farmers, it is also the right to *produce* food. We also defended different cultures of food – peoples and governments should find their own policy, not have the World Bank’s policy imposed on them that food is a commodity and nothing more. The World Bank imposed laws with disastrous consequences – privatized land, industrial production methods. We said that food sovereignty also includes the right to produce in a sustainable way.

Though the plan in Rome had been to decrease poverty and hunger by 50% by 2014, hunger and poverty had *increased* in many areas of the world by 2005. There’s no lack of food; it’s how it is produced and distributed. It’s just a commodity. We say food and agriculture should not be in the free trade agenda: food is for life, not for business.

There is no right to food without access to land. When women or campesinos ask for access to land, police or paramilitaries come. Transnational corporations (TNCs) organize groups to attack them. Before, the struggle was with backward landowners, old guys in a sombrero on a horse. Now it’s big corporations – much more difficult.

But after 12 years, we have had an impact. The concept of food sovereignty has begun to catch on. Social organizing has increased. The public supports us as we hold up rights to healthy food and no genetically modified crops. Via Campesina is a worldwide movement: “We globalize the struggle, let’s globalize hope.”

MA: The Toronto Food Policy Council is an example of a northern country defending the right to food. Was that right central to your work?

Wayne Roberts: Canadians have an easier time using rights language than Americans. We've had our health system for sixty years, so the right to health care is as accepted as free speech. In 1991, Toronto signed a "Healthy City Charter," with the assumption that people's health would depend more on public policy than medical intervention, and then formed a food policy council.

Food banks were coming into being then. The first food bank in Toronto felt like a disgrace to the city – families were supposed to be supported by fair wages or public assistance. The food policy council's objective was to find alternatives to food banks. In the US, a food bank is charity. In Canada, food banks are advocacy organizations.

At the time, Toronto was amalgamating with surrounding communities. The resulting government had no policies, and we had a rare opportunity to help shape them. We got the city planners to declare culturally appropriate food to be a right. The Toronto Food Charter was adapted from the UN Charter.

MA: What does the future look like for the Toronto Food Policy Council?

WR: When any idea is under discussion, we add a food angle to it. Global warming, for instance, we define as a food system issue. One third of global warming comes from the food system, and one third of that is agriculture and fishing – the rest is distribution and waste – packaging, transport, open freezers in supermarkets.

RA: At the climate change conference in Bali, Via Campesina made clear our position – small-scale production is a good alternative. Don't use big machinery or chemicals.

Questions and answers

Q: What advocacy do you recommend at the global level?

RA: There must be global action, and awareness-raising about healthy foods, the need for access to land, sustainable production methods.

Q: What can get at the transnational corporations?

WR: The rising interest across the continent in local food. The vulnerability of large corporations is that they depend on a very small profit margin on a very large volume. They depend on the cheap food system. That's why the 2% or so of organic food is such a threat – it's people dropping out of that system.

RA: With these big corporations, we need pressure from below. We took to the streets with ears of Maya corn and stopped the introduction of genetically modified corn.

Seattle was very important – the first big struggle against the WTO. Social movements came together. If we work as a global movement, we can beat the WTO. It's in the intensive care unit now, and agriculture is the most controversial. We said "Agriculture and food are not commodities." Fisheries said, "WTO out of the Sea."

For more than 12,000 years campesinos have guarded the availability of food. We defend the small producers and local and regional markets. But now they want campesinos and indigenous people to compete with TNCs with huge subsidies. Large-scale industrial agriculture is for export crops. Small producers grow 55% of food consumed in-country.