

A Food Battle Won

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In an Italian city last Saturday a room full of people rose to their feet and applauded for five long minutes. No, it wasn't the opening of the "La Scala" operatic season. It was the closing session of the heretofore unremarkable Committee on World Food Security (CFS) of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN (FAO).

What had happened to spark off such enthusiasm? In late 2007 a dramatic hike in food prices and the resulting riots in cities throughout the world had revealed the imperative necessity of revisiting the rules of the global food game. Now, almost two years later, FAO's 191 member governments had just adopted, by acclamation, a proposed reform of the CFS. A stodgy talk shop for the past 30 odd years, the CFS had been retooled to act as an authoritative global policy forum deliberating on food issues in the name of defending the world population's Right to Food. The geo-political and economic interests surrounding the negotiations were monumental, with the agrifood corporations and the stringent defenders of free trade among the most muscular contenders. They were pushing for an alternative scenario, a Global Partnership for Food, Agriculture and Nutrition in which – in the absence of any clear governance mechanism – decisions risked being taken by the usual suspects : the G8 (dressed up for the occasion as a G20) channelling funds through the World Bank with financial and corporative operators perpetuating their uncontrolled cavorting.

But they hadn't won the battle of the CFS. Led with passion and sagacity by the Permanent Representative of Argentina to FAO acting as CFS Bureau Chair, the nine month negotiation process had taken the unusual step of opening up, beyond the Bureau, to all of FAO's member governments and to other concerned stakeholders, including civil society. Organizations of small-scale food producers of the south and NGOs made a fundamental contribution, facilitated by a global mechanism they have built up over the past decade under the banner of food sovereignty. Meeting after meeting views were exchanged, misunderstandings sorted out, compromises crafted. In the end, the majority of the participants, from the G77 to the EU, felt a sense of ownership of the core proposal. The CFS should be based in the UN system in which, despite all its defects, the one country-one vote rule prevails. It should have the authority to formulate and approve a global strategic framework for attaining food strategy. Governments would commit themselves to translating this framework into national action plans with the participation of stakeholders, and would be held accountable for the results. For the first time in the history of the UN system, representatives of small-scale food producers and other civil society organizations, along with private sector associations and other stakeholders, would be full participants and not just observers of the intergovernmental process. When the US delegation arrived with last-minute alternative text seeking to redimension the CFS as a platform for exchanging « good practices » they were voted out of order. A conciliatory speech just before the final vote by the new US Ambassador to the Rome-based UN agencies, an Obama nominee, gave a clear indication that the message had been taken on board.

The ground gained has to be defended. The new CFS has been made to work. The FAO World Summit on Food Security and the parallel civil society forum to be held in Rome in mid November will provide an important occasion for further reflection and action. But in the meantime the governments, small farmers, pastoralists, artisanal fishworkers, indigenous peoples and others present in the FAO meeting room last Saturday have had the luxury of celebrating a moment of victory and of solidarity.

For the history of the CFS negotiations and the final documents see <http://www.fao.org/economic/cfs09-home>. The positions of small-scale food producers and NGOs and plans for the November civil society forum are available on www.foodsovereignty.org. For the full story of civil society interaction with the United Nations system on food and agriculture issues see Nora McKeon, *The United Nations and Civil Society : Legitimizing Global Governance- Whose Voice ?* (ZED Books/UNRISD : 2009).