

Who speaks for peasants? Civil society, social movements and the global governance of food and agriculture

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Abstract

This article features excerpts from The United Nations and Civil Society: Legitimizing Global Governance - Whose Voice? by Nora McKeon (UNRISD with Zed Books, London, 2009)¹.

This work emerged from a research project of the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD), UN World Summits and Civil Society Engagement, which looked at the way and extent to which different civil society actors have used the opportunities created by United Nations summits and related processes to advance their networking activities and advocacy impacts².

Interface spaces with international intergovernmental institutions constitute important terrains for confrontation between social movements and the defenders of the neoliberal agenda that has dominated the world community's discourse and action over the past three decades. These spaces are shared among a variety of social movements and a broad range of NGOs and other civil society organizations. Some institutions, like the WTO and the G8, are clearly illegitimate as global governance forums in terms of their undemocratic and non-transparent procedures, and contested in terms of the measures they propose. The stance of social movements in the case of these institutions is normally one of denunciation.³

The United Nations system constitutes a different kind of global space. Whatever its considerable weaknesses and limitations, the UN is the only international institution in which the "one country-one vote" rule holds, and the only one whose mandate and charter dedicate it to the defence of human rights and common goods. In the words of one long-time analyst of social movements and global governance, 'those hoping to bring about a more just, peaceful and equitable world must work at many levels not the least of which is within existing *global* institutions...to make the UN Charter and international legal instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights the key

¹ For further information, visit www.zedbooks.co.uk/book.asp?bookdetail=4306.

² For further information, visit www.unrisd.org/research/cssm/summits

³ While some NGOs hold that there is scope for reforming them and that dialogue and negotiation is in order.

principles around which our world is organized' (Smith 2008). The UN system offers terrains in which social movements may well find it opportune to move from denunciation to proposals and negotiation, and strategic alliances with NGOs and other civil society actors can play a strategic role in this regard. This article will examine experience in crafting such alliances in the key area of the global governance of food and agriculture.

The UN and civil society: who gets to the table?

The United Nations' perception of the world of civil society has evolved substantially since it was founded in 1945. The UN Charter specifically provided that 'the Economic and Social Council may make suitable arrangements for consultation with non-governmental organisations which are concerned with matters within its competence.'⁴ Although the Charter foresaw that such arrangements might be extended to national NGOs with the agreement of the concerned Members of the UN, in fact consultative status was confined to international NGOs (INGOs) for the first 50 years of the UN's life. The organisations on which this status was conferred at the outset were well-established non-profit, a-political international councils grouping people or associations which felt themselves to be families on the grounds of their professions, their academic fields, their beliefs, their activities, their experiences. The term 'NGO' remained dominant for four decades. It stretched uncomfortably over the years to cover new generations of national development, advocacy and solidarity NGOs in both the North and the South, and local people's associations in the "developing" world. One reason for the persistence of this terminology was undoubtedly institutional consecration. 'NGO' figured in the constitutions of the United Nations and its specialized agencies and procedures were in place for recognizing and dealing with such organizations. The term also tended to increase the comfort level of UN officials by delineating a parallel universe with which they themselves could communicate directly through their own professional or religious affiliations.

Increasingly, however, the category was contested by pieces of the universe it was expected to describe. Tensions developed between Northern and Southern NGOs as the latter sought to gain greater autonomy. People's organizations became impatient with the NGOs' habit of speaking (and fund-raising) on their behalf. Contrasts grew between the INGOs, to whom access to the United Nations had been reserved through the mechanism of consultative status, and the broader range of actors who began to show interest in the international arena. At the same time, within the United Nations the term was felt to be inadequate to comprehend the kinds of more complex roles and relations that were emerging in the early '90s. The terms that began to come into use to replace it were 'civil society' and 'civil society organizations', of which NGOs were assumed to be one important variety. The concept of civil society, of

⁴ Article 71 of the United Nations Charters, the result of determined lobbying by a group of US and international NGOs.

course, was not a new one. It had come into vogue in the West in the early modern period to describe the space that opened up between the household, government and the market place once all-invasive monarchies began to wane, in which people began to organize to pursue their interests and values. There was a neat correspondence in the fact that it was being elevated into global usage in the late twentieth century in a moment in which the state's role and its relation to the two other actors were once again undergoing redefinition. The end of the cold war was very much a part of the story, as regimes which had occupied all of the space up to the threshold of the home collapsed and Western powers and foundations rushed into Eastern Europe with recipes and resources to promote the growth of civil society. But so was structural adjustment in the developing world with its effect on the state's sphere of action, as well as the subsequent discovery on the part of the underwriters of the Washington consensus that markets cannot function in a social and governance vacuum.⁵

There was – and is – a considerable amount of confusion within UN circles as to just what is in and what is out of the civil society basket. The World Bank defines it as ‘the wide array of non-governmental and not-for-profit organizations that have a presence in public life, expressing the interests and values of their members or others, based on ethical, cultural, scientific, religious or philanthropic considerations.’⁶ But as late as 2003 the document establishing a UN Secretary-General's Panel of Eminent Persons to examine UN-civil society relations included the private sector in its terms of reference as falling within the category of civil society (United Nations 2004:74). However clearly the frontier may be drawn, there are ample areas of overlapping between civil society and the private sector. Small farmers' organizations pursue the economic interests of their members but, at the same time, promote social values and visions that go far beyond the profit motive. To compound confusion, institutional procedures have not kept pace with the changing terminology. Accreditation and consultative status continue to be accorded to ‘NGOs’ rather than CSOs. Private sector interests normally reach UN meeting rooms via business associations, which are formally non-profit NGOs, or through the delegations of member governments, which may include for-profit enterprises.

While the United Nations was still trying to digest the new terminology of “civil society”, the crowds hit the streets in Seattle in 1999 and the intergovernmental world discovered social movements. The UN's relationship with this social phenomenon is ambivalent in the extreme. On the one hand, social movements are feared because they threaten established bases and forms of international interaction. On the other, they are courted since the values they defend, the energy they mobilize and their capacity to attract young people seem to hold a key to the re-legitimation of the United Nations. Just what is meant by the term within the United Nations is far from clear. At times a superficial shorthand

⁵ See Higgott (2001). Kaldor (2003) presents a clear and succinct discussion of the development of the term ‘civil society’ and the breakdown of its composition.

⁶ World Bank, *Defining Civil Society*, <http://go.worldbank.org/4CE7Wo46Ko> (accessed on 30 July 2008).

operates and social movements are equated with noisy and sometimes violent anti-globalization advocates. At times it is used as a synonym for people's organizations – peasants, fisherfolk, workers, slum dwellers and others – as contrasted with NGOs. Or, again, it is understood to refer to phenomena of social change that include structured organizations but go beyond them, like the student and women's movements of the 1960s or, today, the conglomeration of various kinds of organizations and groups that populate Social Forums. In this latter sense social movements are equated with what a growing literature terms 'global civil society'⁷ or 'transnational advocacy networks'.⁸ But most UN staff are unfamiliar with the literature and encounter the phenomenon in the course of their work with the same cognitive preparation as the average citizen.

However it is defined, civil society interface with UN global policy forums took a giant step with the world summits of the 1990s, starting with the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in 1992. This was hardly the first time that non-governmental organizations participated in UN meetings, but the changing political context in the post cold war era of globalization helped to open up the space of international deliberations and offer a more visible and effective role to a wider variety of civil society organizations. The contribution of non-state actors to solving world problems was increasingly recognized in a paradigm of structural adjustment and redefinition of public/private spheres and responsibilities. As a study of NGOs, the United Nations and global governance conducted in the mid-1990s put it, 'NGOs are emerging as a special set of organisations that are private in their form but public in their purpose', particularly relevant to the 'low politics' issues that were rising on the international agenda (Weiss and Gordenker 1996:364). The world community looked to the summits as occasions to frame emerging global issues and mobilise political will to deal with them. They were expected to establish international standards and commitments which would guide national policy and to set in place monitoring mechanisms enforcing accountability. They represented an effort to sidestep the stifling institutional setting of UN deliberations and experiment with more effective approaches to global governance. A civil society presence was essential for all of this to happen.

NGOs, People's Organizations and the United Nations

Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) are voluntary, non-profit intermediary organizations. They provide services of various kinds to disadvantaged sectors of the population and conduct advocacy on issues that concern them. However, they have not been established by these sectors. They do not represent them and are not accountable to them. NGOs may relate to the UN system in various ways ranging from operational cooperation in

⁷ See, for example, Walzer (1995), Kaldor (2003), Keane (2003), Anheier et al (2001).

⁸ Keck and Sikkink (1998) and Marchetti and Pianta (2007).

humanitarian relief operations and/or development action to advocacy. NGOs often act as service-providers in UN programmes and are the category of CSOs with most presence in UN system policy forums.

People's organizations (POs), unlike NGOs, are established by and represent sectors of the population like small farmers, artisanal fisherfolk, slum dwellers and others. POs take a wide variety of forms and exist at various levels.

- **Community-based organizations (CBOs)** mobilize and represent local populations and directly address their immediate concerns. Examples include neighbourhood associations, water-users groups, women's credit associations. Over the past decade they have become widespread partners of UN programmes at the local level.

- **People's organization platforms** structured above the local community level have been built up by marginalized sectors of the population, over the past decade in particular, in order to defend their members' interests in policy and programme negotiations at national, regional and global levels. These platforms are not yet sufficiently recognized and engaged by the UN system in country programmes and projects and in global forums.

On their side, CSOs were attracted to the summits by the spaces they opened up, the opportunities they offered both to influence the substance of the discussions and the decision-making processes themselves, and to build their own networks and alliances. They achieved the first objective to varying degrees in different venues, and the second beyond expectations.⁹ But who - in fact - within the broad category of "civil society" - actually entered into the UN arena with the advent of the summits? The global meetings themselves were populated with organizations of all kinds, shooting holes in the studiously bureaucratic and state-controlled UN procedures for granting consultative status with ECOSOC. An ECOSOC review of consultative status procedures was launched in the aftermath of UNCED with a view to updating the rules to take account of a broader panoply of CSOs. It came to a hotly contested close in 1996 with a recommendation that extended the possibility of obtaining accreditation to regional and national NGOs. This measure broke the monopoly of Western-based international NGOs and opened the door to national associations of all regions including, in theory, people's organizations (United Nations 1996). Although it was expected to democratize access to UN policy forums, it has had less impact than had been foreseen since national organizations in the South most often lack the resources to attend international meetings. UN outreach to people's organizations, as distinct from NGOs, has been and continues to be marginal, due not only to deficiencies on the part of the UN but also to the reluctance of some well entrenched NGOs to share access to UN bodies with

⁹ See Foster and Anand (1999) for a detailed, careful and well-documented account of the interaction towards the end of the summit cycle, and Pianta (2005).

social movements.¹⁰ According to system-wide research undertaken in 2004-2005, five years after the close of the “summit decade”, only three of the twenty-four UN family agencies and programmes surveyed report strong success in reaching out to social movements and organizations.¹¹

Two of these agencies – the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) – operate in the area of food and agriculture. It is not a coincidence that this is a particularly fertile terrain for UN-social movement interface. The food and agriculture nexus of issues plays an exceedingly important role in the world policy arena. Food is perhaps the most basic human need. Agriculture provides a livelihood for most of the world’s population and the majority of the poor who have been the object of so much UN summit attention. The geopolitical and corporate interests that revolve around these issues are enormous, as demonstrated by the difficulties encountered during the WTO Doha Round negotiations and by the food crisis which erupted on the global scene in late 2007. For these reasons, the World Food Summit organized by FAO in 1996 and its follow-up have attracted considerable attention on the part of organizations representing social movements of the South, a category of civil society that has been underrepresented in most other summit processes.

FAO, in particular, has been the locus over the past 15 years of an innovative experiment in UN-civil society relations. This experience constitutes a laboratory for studying both terrains of conflict between NGOs and social movements, and ways in which such conflicts can be composed in common opposition to the neoliberal agenda. The history of this interaction and the lessons we can draw from it is the focus of this article.

Civil Society and the FAO World Food Summit (1996)

International attention to food and agriculture was low at the beginning of the 1990s when a new Director-General, the first from Africa, took office. The proposal to insert a high-level summit on food issues into the UN calendar of global conferences was a central piece in Jacques Diouf’s strategy to reinstate agriculture on the world’s agenda and FAO on the global institutional map. As phrased in the resolution adopted unanimously by the FAO Conference on 31 October 1995, the Summit was expected to ‘serve as a forum at the highest political level to marshal the global consensus and commitment needed to redress a most basic problem of humankind - food insecurity’ and ‘establish a policy framework and adopt a Plan of Action for implementation by governments, international institutions and all sectors of civil society’. The resolution ‘stressed the importance of ensuring a process which involved all stakeholders’ and authorised the Director-General to invite to the Summit and to

¹⁰ Some International NGOs in consultative status with ECOSOC were among the opponents of the 1996 resolution opening up accreditation to national NGOs.

¹¹ Reported on in McKeon (2009).

preparatory meetings 'observers from relevant non-governmental organizations and private-sector associations' (FAO 1995).

Like other summits, the WFS constituted an important occasion for various sectors of civil society coming at the issues under examination from different angles to build a practice of networking and joint planning. The process was not easy or automatic. Certain dynamics emerged with particular force in the arena of the WFS and the parallel NGO Forum, in addition to the well-documented confrontation between northern and southern organizations. One of these was the tension between international NGOs and the emerging variegated universe of local and national groups and regional and global networks concerned in one way or another with food security issues. The most powerful voices in planning and running the NGO Forum were undoubtedly those of this emerging civil society world. A second area of conflict was that between the non-profits and the private sector business associations, which are technically classified as non-profit NGOs within the UN system but in fact most often represent the for-profit interests of their members. This kind of tension was particularly strong in the WFS-NGO Forum process because of the power of multinationals in the agri-food chain and the impact they have on small producers, consumers and the environment, and business associations were excluded from the 1996 civil society forum. A third important civil society dynamic that began to take shape during the preparatory process was that between NGOs, which had heretofore tended to position themselves as spokespersons for the rural poor and the marginalized, and the people's organizations that were emerging in a context of globalization and liberalization and questioned the right of others to speak on their behalf. A prime example of the latter was the newly established global peasants organization, Via Campesina.¹² The fact that this dynamic was so evident in the context of the 1996 forum was due to the very particular efforts which the organizers made to ensure that people's organizations were involved and played a protagonist role.

Core participation in the NGO Forum was limited to 600 delegates, 50 per cent of whom represented local or national organizations of peasants, women and indigenous peoples from the South. The number of delegates from the North was fixed in function of how many could be funded to come from the South. This was the only NGO forum held in parallel to a world summit which adopted procedures of this kind to ensure balanced civil society participation. It was the prerogative of the delegates to debate and finalize the Forum's statement, entitled 'Profit for few or food for all?'¹³. The statement built its case 'first and foremost on the basic human Right to Food', an important affirmation in a period in which a rights-based approach was beginning to move on from the political field to tackle the less charted domain of economic and social rights. Civil society's analysis of the causes of hunger highlighted globalisation of the world economy and lack of accountability of multinational corporations

¹² Established in 1993. See Demarais (2007).

¹³ Available at www.twinside.org.sg/title/pro-cn

resulting in unemployment and destruction of rural economies. Industrialised agriculture, supported by subsidises and generating dumping practices, was seen to be ‘destroying traditional farming, poisoning the planet...and making people dependent on food they are unable to produce’. Structural adjustment and debt repayment imposed by the international community reinforced the tendency of national governments to fashion policies that neglected family farmers and vulnerable people.

The NGO Forum proposed an alternative model based on decentralisation, rather than concentration, of wealth and power. The impact of international agricultural trade on food security was a key concern, following the 1994 establishment of the World Trade Organization. The Forum statement maintained that, far from offering the solution to food insecurity, international agricultural trade constituted a good part of the problem. A new term introduced by Via Campesina, that of ‘food sovereignty’, made its way into the text of the statement¹⁴. Not widely understood or used in civil society circles at the time, it was destined to emerge over the following years as the paradigm that civil society opposed to the neo-liberal Washington consensus. The food sovereignty imperative was coupled with the instrument of international law to introduce two of the most innovative proposals put forward by the NGOs. The voluntary Code of Conduct on the Right to Food would call on national governments fulfill their responsibility of implementing policies that ensure access by their citizens to safe, adequate, nutritious food supplies. The Global Sustainable Food Security Convention aimed at building an international framework which would support governments in their efforts to do so. A number of the actions proposed were constituent elements of the alternative platform on which a far broader coalition of civil society organizations and social movements is working a decade later.

A final aspect of the NGO Forum that merits underlining was the careful attention paid to the actors of food security. The report of the forum included a paragraph distinguishing among the roles and responsibilities of different actors: governments, international institutions, private sector and multinational corporations, cooperation and solidarity NGOs. Pride of place went to organizations of peasants, women, indigenous peoples, fisherfolk, herders, consumers, considered to be the ‘key actors in any food security strategy’ (Italian Committee for the NGO Forum on Food Security 1997:18–19). The Forum process generated heightened attention to the need to go beyond the usual NGO circles and give priority to the involvement of people’s organizations and social movements. This commitment tended to remain in the domain of rhetoric, however, for a series of reasons ranging from cultural and methodological to political. It constituted perhaps the most important bone of contention within the NGO world in follow-up to the Forum, even more so than differing views on specific issues, although these too were not lacking. Several years were to go by before the people’s organizations themselves gained

¹⁴ ‘Each nation must have the right to food sovereignty to achieve the level of food sufficiency and nutritional quality it considers appropriate without suffering retaliation of any kind’.

sufficient strength to impose their protagonism on a largely ambivalent NGO universe at the time of the civil society Forum for Food Sovereignty of 2002.

The World Food Summit: five years later (2002)

The WFS Plan of Action did not foresee a ‘+5’ event as did other summit processes. But during the first years following the summit it became increasingly clear that progress towards the Summit goal of halving the number of the world’s hungry by 2015 was distressingly unsatisfactory. The September 2000 session of the FAO Committee on World Food Security, responsible for monitoring follow-up to the WFS, had before it the first report on implementation of the WFS commitments. The figures showed that ‘in the majority of the developing countries, especially in Africa, the food security situation has deteriorated and the number of the undernourished has risen’ (FAO 2000:1). The Director-General consequently proposed that the FAO Conference host a high level forum to review progress on the fifth anniversary of the WFS, in November 2001.¹⁵

On the civil society side, the period since the WFS had seen a radicalization of positions on food and agriculture issues in reaction to trends such as intensified liberalization of agricultural trade attendant on the adoption of the WTO Agreement on Agriculture, increasingly aggressive marketing of biotechnology, and continued reluctance of governments to take action on politically charged issues like agrarian reform. At the global level, the first World Social Forum held in Porto Alegre in January 2001 was an affirmation of civil society’s felt need and maturity for “an open meeting place for reflective thinking, democratic debate of ideas, formulation of proposals, free exchange of experiences and interlinking for effective action, by groups and movements of civil society that are opposed to neoliberalism.” (World Social Forum 2002).

People’s organizations related to food and agriculture had made particular progress in strengthening their networks and their lobbying capacity. Via Campesina had continued to build its position as the major international movement seeking to coordinate peasant organizations of small and middle-scale producers, agricultural workers, rural women and indigenous communities from all regions. The visionary and politically adept peasant movement in West Africa had established an autonomous subregional network in June 2000.¹⁶ In 1997, the first ever world-wide federation of fisherfolk was formed, the World Forum of Fish Harvesters and Fishworkers, followed in October 2000 by the World Forum of Fisher Peoples. Indigenous peoples’

¹⁵ The summit was subsequently postponed until June 2002 at the request of the Italian government, headed by Silvio Berlusconi, following the G8 meeting in Genoa marked by the death of a demonstrator and widespread accusations of police brutality.

¹⁶ The Network of Farmers’ and Agricultural Producers’ Organisations of West Africa (ROPPA) groups national peasant platforms in 12 West African countries, for a total of some 45 million farmers, and is now reaching out to the other three English-speaking members of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).

battles, originally situated on human rights territory, were moving slowly to other areas more closely related to food and agriculture, such as genetic resources and access to land¹⁷. Agricultural workers had their trade unions behind them¹⁸, although their highly hierarchical organizational mode differed considerably from that of other social movements. Under these circumstances, it was understandable that divergences within the civil society universe had deepened. The people's organization-NGO divide did not by any means coincide with a neat categorization of more and less radical positions. The issue was more one of forms of legitimacy, with people's organizations increasingly contesting the right of NGOs to conduct lobbying 'on behalf of' sectors of the world's population from which they had received no mandate and to which they were in no way accountable. Underlying the legitimacy question, in the best of circumstances, was a contrast in approaches to defining positions and building consensus. People's organizations often invested time and resources in laborious grassroots consultation¹⁹ while NGOs could take a stand at the drop of a telephone conference with the help of in-house or hired expertise.

The first meeting of a civil society planning group for the parallel conference to the World Food Summit: *five years later* took place in March 2000¹. The participants, some 25 in all, came from organizations representing indigenous peoples, rural women, farmers, development NGOs, and thematic and regional networks. The group proposed to focus civil society attention on a limited number of issues on which they believed governments had to take action if they were serious about ending hunger. These were identified in the following terms in a *Call for Action and Mobilisation at the World Food Summit: five years later* which was widely distributed through civil society networks over the following weeks:

In 1996 NGOs/CSOs formulated principles and concepts of food security – such as food sovereignty – that are now beginning to be accepted by some official policy makers. Today we want to go one step further and present successful demonstrations and alternative proposals. We have identified five strategic issues on which to focus because we feel they are the keys to attaining world food security:

- *Right to Food – in relationship to international arrangements (e.g. trade) and domestic social policies.*
- *Food Sovereignty – the right of the people of each country to determine their own food policy.*

¹⁷ The weakest component of the food and agriculture-related social movements, in addition to indigenous peoples, continued to be the pastoralists.

¹⁸ In particular, on the global scene, the International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations (IUF).

¹⁹ Depending on their capacity and the degree of internal democracy.

- Agricultural Production Models – *agro-ecological, organic and other sustainable alternatives to the current industrial model.*
- Access to Resources – *land, forests, water, credit and genetic resources; land reform and security of tenure.*
- Democracy – *International mechanisms should aim to support economic, social and political processes of democratization at the country level. (IPC 2001).*

The civil society strategy involved marrying the NGOs' technical expertise with the decentralized outreach of regional networks and the legitimacy of organizations representing major constituencies of rural producers. The organizations present at the meeting agreed to establish a mechanism that came to be known as the International Civil Society Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty (IPC), composed of focal points for the regions, for major social constituencies and for key themes. It defined its role as one of mobilization and facilitation, not representation. Over the succeeding months the IPC organized a series of regional consultations which strengthened regional networking and made it possible to contextualize, in very different situations, the strategic issues that had been identified globally. An international consultation of indigenous peoples, judged to be the weakest of the constituencies, brought together participants from 28 countries in all regions to build up a common platform on food security and sovereignty issues. Through these meetings the IPC built strong roots in the regions, with an accent on organisations representing rural producers of various kinds.

The WFS:*fyl* took place from 10 to 13 June 2002. The extent and level of participation was a disappointment for FAO. Most of the rich country leaders were absent, a significant void given the fact that – as the FAO round-up press release reported – ‘OECD countries provide a billion dollars a day in support to their own agriculture sector, six times more than all development assistance’ (FAO 2002). The Declaration adopted on the opening day was an uninspiring reaffirmation of the WFS commitments, with no more teeth in it than the original version. The only new initiative it contained, a product in good part of determined NGO lobbying, was an invitation to FAO to establish ‘an intergovernmental Working Group, with the participation of stakeholders to elaborate a set of voluntary guidelines to support Member States’ efforts to achieve the progressive realisation of the right to adequate food in the context of national food security’. On the down side, the Declaration plugged the outcome of the WTO Doha Conference, ‘especially the commitments regarding the reform of the international agricultural trading system’, and pledged to help developing countries, ‘particularly their food producers, to make informed choices about and to have access to, the necessary scientific and technical knowledge related to new technologies targeted at poverty and hunger reduction.’ The only mention of food producers in the entire text was thus linked to diffusion of biotechnology!

570 participants were accredited to the plenary sessions of the parallel civil society Forum For Food Sovereignty with the right to participate in the Forum's decision-making processes. They had been selected through the IPC network on the basis of the regional preparation process and respected criteria ensuring balance by regions, type of organisation, and gender. A far larger number of people were accredited to gain access to the building, where they could attend seminars in the afternoon and witness what was happening in the morning plenary sessions through an enormous video screen. The dynamics of the civil society forum were characterized above all by the dominance of people's organizations, particularly the numerous and well-organized delegations of Via Campesina members from Latin America, Asia and Europe. The style of Via Campesina advocacy, as compared with the mode of debate in the 1996 Forum, was overwhelming. Key positions - like those of food sovereignty as the alternative civil society paradigm and 'WTO out of agriculture' as the necessary precondition for finding acceptable solutions to the governance of world trade - were defended uncompromisingly. In plenary sessions the disciplined behaviour of the Via Campesina delegates multiplied their already significant numbers, as they burst into rhythmic chants to underline their points or carried thousands of signed postcards attacking the WTO up to the head table to deliver them to FAO officials. Alongside of the habitual debate, Via Campesina brought the dimension of the 'mistica', moving representations of the social and spiritual dimensions of the struggles in which peasant communities are engaged and of the bonds that link them with nature.

The reactions of other civil society actors to this formidable presence were varied. Via Campesina's positions were supported by a number of NGOs that shared its views, were working closely with peasant movements in Asia and Latin America, and advocated a protagonist role for social organizations in civil society decision-making processes on food and agriculture issues.²⁰ At the other extreme, Via Campesina's massive entrance onto the scene was contested by those organizations whose hegemony in world forums dealing with food and agriculture was directly threatened by the emergence of this new style of rural social organization. Chief among these was the International Federation of Agricultural Producers (IFAP), which had claimed for decades to represent the interests of the farmers of the world but had tended to privilege the larger, market-oriented producers, although it was making efforts to reach out to smallholders in the South.²¹ The trade unions also, with their highly hierarchical style of representation of workers' interests, found it difficult to countenance the horizontal approach that had characterized the preparation for the forum, in which national trade union members allied with peasant organizations and others to develop positions on a national/regional basis.

²⁰ These included, for example, Food First, Pesticides Action Network-Asia and the Pacific, IBON Foundation, and Crocevia.

²¹ See Edelman (2003).

In between these two extremes were several categories of organizations. One was the broader world of NGOs. The dynamics which had already operated at the 1996 Forum came to a head in 2002. Many NGOs felt marginalized by the language of a forum which constantly reiterated the hegemonic role of people's organizations, ill at ease with some of the positions adopted by the plenary, and/or repelled by what they felt was an undemocratic piloting of the decision-making process. Within the broad category of NGOs, however, a range of positions could be found, with some organizations adamantly defensive of their traditional roles and others more sensitive to the process of change underway. In any event, the Western-based NGOs which generally tended to dominate global forums were a minority in the Forum for Food Sovereignty, given the quota procedures, and many of the major actors did not bother to come since they were not admitted as plenary delegates with voting rights.

Another category of the marginalized – however inadvertently – were people's organizations other than Via Campesina. Africa at that time was largely absent from the Via Campesina network although dialogue with members of the West African network, ROPPA, had begun several years earlier. The African small farmers organizations, weakly structured and hampered by a language divide, felt unable to defend their specificities and their positions in the debate. The fact that they were investing in an interface with the state-promoted New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) initiative was disapproved by their counterparts in the other regions. NEPAD was denounced in the final Political Statement in the same breath as the FTAA (Free Trade Area of the Americas) in contradiction to the position of the people's organizations directly concerned.²² In their self-evaluation at the end of the forum, the African farmers organizations criticized the advocacy style of Via Campesina for not allowing space for others to represent themselves. Above all, however, they critiqued their own weaknesses and ineptness and took the experience as a stimulus to build the strength of their networks and their lobbying capacity. Representatives of indigenous peoples' organizations were more numerous than in 1996 and they were allocated space to present their distinctive views and life styles in several seminars. Their participation in forum decision making was minimal, however, a reflection of the scarce or poor relations between peasant and indigenous peoples' organizations existing in the real world outside the forum walls. The same could be said for fisherfolks' organizations, while pastoral peoples continued to be practically absent.

Evaluations of the impact of the 2002 Forum on the construction of a strong autonomous civil society movement in defence of food sovereignty clearly vary according to the viewpoint from which they are formulated. A representative of one of the IPC members whose power was threatened by the emerging dynamic stated his view, during a round-up evaluation of the forum held the day after it closed, that 'the meeting results were high-jacked. My organisation's membership cannot relate to the political stances taken. It was more of a

²² Who valued NEPAD as a proposal which at least had been born in Africa and who used it as an opportunity to network and to gain official recognition as interlocutors in policy discussions.

political event for social movements than a dialogue and consensus on critical issues.²³ In contrast, the forum's president, Sarojeni Regnam, judged that

Our real success was in mobilising the participation and involvement of the peoples' movements... They shaped and gave direction and clarity to the proceedings. Hunger and malnutrition, struggles and human rights violations were no longer just academic exercises of reeling off of data and statistics, but the reality of the everyday lives of people articulated by the leaders of the peoples' movements living these realities. (IPC 2002b: 9)

In any event, it would be a mistake to judge the forum in isolation. Seen as a moment in a process, it would probably be difficult to imagine a smoother transition to the emergence of people's organizations and social movements as the main protagonists in crafting the advocacy platform on food and agriculture issues. When the forum closed the IPC was left with the difficult parallel task of managing relations and communication among disparate civil society components of the network, on the one hand, and the interface with intergovernmental institutions, on the other.

The Forum adopted two documents, the Political Statement of the NGO/CSO Forum for Food Sovereignty, 'Food Sovereignty: A Right for All' and an Action Agenda. The Statement²⁴ was delivered on 13 June to the plenary of the official Summit. It rejected out of hand the official Declaration of the WFS:*fyl* which, in the Forum's view, offered only 'more of the same failed medicine'. In contraposition to the dominant paradigm, the Forum proclaimed the concept of Food Sovereignty, defined in the following terms, as the umbrella under which policies and actions to end hunger should be placed:

Food Sovereignty is the RIGHT of peoples, communities and countries to define their own agricultural, labour, fishing, food and land policies which are ecologically, socially, economically and culturally appropriate to their unique circumstances. It includes the true right to food and to produce food, which means that all people have the right to safe, nutritious and culturally appropriate food and to food-producing resources and the ability to sustain themselves and their societies. (IPC 2002a)

²³ Personal notes on the meeting.

²⁴ Available at www.foodsovereignty.org.

A key aspect of this concept was the application of a rights-based approach, implying in particular 'the primacy of people's and community's rights to food and food production over trade concerns'. The Statement came down clearly on the side of removing agriculture from the WTO and promoting the adoption of a Convention on Food Sovereignty which would 'enshrine the principles of Food Sovereignty in international law and institute food sovereignty as the principal policy framework for addressing food and agriculture'. This was a defeat for those CSOs who felt there was scope for reform of the WTO and some of these, including some members of the IPC, concluded regretfully that the Forum process did not offer room for their analyses and strategies.

A novelty of the 2002 Forum as compared with its 1996 predecessor was the adoption of a detailed Action Agenda aimed at translating into practice the principles enunciated in the Statement.²⁵ The plan incorporated the outcomes of the regional meetings and other proposals that had emerged from the discussions in plenary and the workshops. It was a first effort to move from principles to action although there was insufficient time during the Forum to prepare a coherent strategic document. Nonetheless, the fact that the Forum did adopt a document of this nature undoubtedly conferred a legitimizing mandate on the IPC, called upon to carry it forward.

A negotiated FAO-civil society relationship

The Director-General of FAO was highly impressed with the dynamism of the civil society forum and invited the IPC to meet with him in order to plan for the future. Civil society expectations were high. Assessing the results of interaction with the United Nations at the close of a year which had witnessed the Monterrey Summit on Financing Development, the World Food Summit:*fyl* and the World Summit on Sustainable Development, the authoritative ETC Group concluded that 'NGOs and social movements who were embroiled in the summits must end ... the pitiful pageant of pep rallies that have pacified CSOs since 1972 – and develop a tough love strategy for our intergovernmental work' (ETC Group 2003:1). Within the desolate overall panorama, however,

one area of progress in 2002 (perhaps the only area) was in the changing of the structural relationship between civil society and FAO as a result of the World Food Summit. Along with an extensive list of substantial issues and demands, the NGO/CSO Forum at the Food Summit produced an equally extensive list of technical and institutional proposals intended to strengthen the participation of social movements in intergovernmental

²⁵ The four substantive pillars of the Plan are: a rights-based approach to food security and food sovereignty, local peoples' access to and management of resources; mainstreaming family-based farming and agroecological approaches; and trade and food sovereignty. A fifth section deals with access to international institutions.

committees and to create new spaces for national organizations and minority groups to interact with the FAO Secretariat and governments. Many of the proposed changes seem incredibly modest. Collectively, however, they amount to a major structural adjustment in the way in which a major UN agency will relate to civil society (ETC Group 2003:4-5).

The IPC's preparatory effort for the meeting with the Director-General involved an iterative process of communication. It was necessary to clarify aspects of the network's functions on which a common understanding had not been reached during the heated discussions at the forum. Basic principles to be respected in the relationship between civil society and intergovernmental organizations had to be defined. The Action Agenda needed to be transformed into a more strategic and operational proposal. The communications were cumbersome and time-consuming, a practical illustration of the rhythm required for meaningful consultation to take place involving social organizations which, in their turn, have to respect their own internal consultation practices. In the end, the document was finalized and adopted only on the eve of the meeting with the Director-General. Recognizing that direct and systematic involvement with social movements and CSOs was a relatively new departure for FAO, the paper started off by carefully defining what the IPC was and was not.

The IPC advances principles, themes and values developed during the NGO/CSO Forum for Food Sovereignty in June, 2002. ...which was based on principles of self-organisation and autonomy of civil society. For these reasons, the IPC is not centralized. Nor does it claim to represent organizations attending NGO/CSO fora. Instead, the IPC acts to enable discussions among NGOs, CSOs and social movements, as well as to facilitate dialogue with FAO. Each NGO/CSO, and all the diverse constituent groups they represent (fisherfolk, Indigenous Peoples, peasants/smallholder farmers, waged workers, and so on) continues to speak for itself and to manage its own relationship with FAO and its Members. (IPC 2002c:3)

On its side, in preparing for the meeting FAO took the important decision to adopt the four pillars of the NGO/CSO Forum's Action Plan as the point of departure, and to document how FAO's current and planned activities related to these issues, rather than insisting that the dialogue be based on the official outcome of the WFS and the WFS:*fyl*.

The meeting took place on 1 November 2002. At its close it was agreed to set out the main lines of future relations between FAO and the IPC in a formal Exchange of Letters, which was signed by both parties in early 2003. In this document, FAO acknowledged the principles of civil society autonomy and right

to self-organization – the first time that such a commitment had been registered in writing in a negotiated UN-civil society document - and pledged to take steps to enhance the institutional environment for relations with civil society. On its part, the IPC acknowledged its responsibility to ensure broad outreach to people's organizations and social movements in all regions and facilitate their participation in policy dialogue. The Letter further established a framework for a programme of work in the four IPC priority areas: the right to food, agro-ecological approaches to food production, local access to and control of natural resources, and agricultural trade and food sovereignty. The following section will document how this agreement has been implemented and what impact it has had in both its substantive and institutional dimensions.

Impact on development discourse and institutional interaction: opening up political space for social movements

Since 2003 the IPC has facilitated the participation of over 2000 representatives of small food producers and Indigenous Peoples in FAO's regional conferences, technical committees and global negotiation processes for treaties and conventions. So doing, it has opened FAO up to voices which were previously absent from its policy forums. This has involved not just mobilizing resources for travel, but also diffusing documentation, conducting training on the issues concerned, supporting the formulation of people's movement position papers and, on some occasions, organizing parallel civil society forums. Out of the many issues and events in which the IPC has been involved, three can be selected to illustrate the impact that it has had on development discourse and civil society access to policy space within FAO.²⁶ The first concerns implementation of the concept of the Right to Food. The official Declaration of the WFS:*fyf* invited FAO to elaborate voluntary guidelines to support member states' efforts to achieve the progressive realisation of the right to adequate food. The very inclusion of this provision in the Declaration was, to a good degree, the product of determined civil society lobbying. The civil society stakeholders organised themselves effectively to influence the political process of the intergovernmental working group established within the Committee on World Food Security to formulate the guidelines. FIAN International, a specialized NGO which acted as IPC focal point for the right to food, took the leadership role. Some 40 CSOs were mobilised to attend some or all of the sessions. The CSO participants organised strategy meetings, designated their spokespersons keeping geographic and gender balance in mind, and functioned as an effective lobbying mechanism during and between the sessions. Without any doubt, they were better prepared than many or most of the governments. Point after point, as the negotiations proceeded, they managed to get their views incorporated into the text.

²⁶ A fuller account is provided in McKeon (2009).

The final text, adopted by the FAO Conference in 2004, strengthens the legal interpretation of the right to food by extending it beyond simple access to food to include access of individuals and groups to productive resources. It reiterates the obligation of states to respect, protect and fulfil their citizens' right to food. It underlines that governments need to have a national strategy to do so and describes the necessary elements of such a strategy. It sets standards for use of food aid and prohibits use of food as a weapon in conflicts. It addresses governments' responsibilities for the impacts of their policies on other countries. Although the guidelines are voluntary, they provide valuable support to governments that are interested in implementing the right to food and a powerful lobbying instrument for civil society actors in countries where the government is less proactive. Five years later the right to food concept as operationalized in the FAO voluntary guidelines is serving as a Trojan horse in the battle against the neoliberal agenda in the context of the world community's efforts to redesign global governance of food and agriculture.

What were the major success factors in the process of promoting a paradigm shift within FAO around the concept of the right to food? One was related to the subject matter itself. Human rights is classed among the 'soft' issues on which civil society agendas can most easily be advanced, although this case is borderline since the right under negotiation was an economic one. Another factor was the consensus regarding the positive value of human rights discourse within the civil society community. There were no major disagreements on substance and strategy as there have been in the case of other issues like international trade and the WTO. A third was the galvanizing effect of the fact that a specific policy negotiation process was in place. This gave focus to the civil society efforts, directing them towards having an impact on a particular product to be produced within a given time-frame. A fourth 'plus' was the willingness of a serious and well-resourced NGO to take the issue up and provide leadership, since the voluntary guidelines process was at the heart of its 'core business'. The quality of this leadership was a fifth success factor. FIAN performed its focal point task in a democratic and transparent fashion, providing effective coordination without excessive centralisation. Good use was made of internet communications, taking care to post messages not only in English but in Spanish and French as well. A special effort was made to reach out to and involve the IPC regional network and people's organization membership. Meetings during the working group sessions were conducted with respect for the contributions of each member of the group and with a view to teasing out consensus and building team work. A sixth, related factor was the intellectual excellence of the civil society input and the effectiveness of the strategy which the group evolved for identifying key points and using the spaces accorded to CSOs by the intergovernmental working group to get them across. A seventh factor was the good relations and virtuous alliances that developed between the CSOs and the FAO secretariat, the Chair of the intergovernmental working group, and key 'like-minded governments'. This factor facilitated a solution to a problem that persistently dogs civil society lobby efforts, that of resource mobilization. Throughout the guidelines process the civil society

stakeholders were able to count on the necessary resources to bring participants from developing countries and to help cover communication costs.

A second illustration of the impact of the IPC, this time a conflictual one, is provided by the 2003 issue of the FAO flagship publication, the *State of Food and Agriculture (SOFA)*. The thematic focus of this issue was the use of biotechnology in agriculture, strongly opposed by CSOs and social movements. Civil society reaction to the release of the publication on 17 May 2004, which they felt validated the use of biotechnology as a solution to the problem of hunger, was immediate. The IPC network was alerted and action taken to prepare and post an open letter to the Director-General of FAO (IPC 2004). The letter criticised both the process and the content of the 2003 *SOFA*. Regarding process, civil society organisations felt that ‘FAO has breached its commitment to consult and maintain an open dialogue with smallholder farmers’ organizations and civil society’. In fact, the Exchange of Letters between FAO and the IPC foresaw the establishment of a joint FAO-IPC working group on the impact of biotechnology on agrarian and food production systems. Instead, the content of the *SOFA* issue had been prepared by the FAO secretariat without consultation with civil society although, the open letter maintained, ‘there appears to have been extensive discussion with industry’. Regarding the content of the report, the CSOs found that although the document ‘struggles to appear neutral, it is highly biased and ignores available evidence of the adverse ecological, economic and health impacts of genetically engineered crops.’ By 16 June more than 850 CSOs and 650 individuals had signed the letter, which was delivered by hand to the Deputy Director-General of FAO by the international coordinator of the IPC.

The *SOFA* incident sparked off extremely interesting discussions within FAO. The fact that a prestige publication taking a controversial position on a delicate topic with a preface signed by the Director-General could reach publication without whistles being blown raised issues of process and quality control. The eventuality that corporate interests might weigh on FAO normative activities was preoccupying. The question of whether or not FAO was empowered to have a position on a given issue other than that adopted by its member governments was subject to debate. If it was so empowered, should this position be based on neutral scientific weighing of the facts? Or should FAO itself act as a stakeholder on behalf of the world’s hungry as it had opted to do during the negotiations on the application of the right to food?

The Director-General met with a delegation of the IPC on 14 October 2004. He expressed his unhappiness with the process by which the *SOFA* issue had been prepared and reiterated his own view that biotechnology would not solve the problem of hunger. The *SOFA*, he indicated, was to be considered a technical report prepared by an expert committee and not an FAO policy paper. He committed FAO to facilitating the preparation and publication of a civil society report presenting other views on biotechnology. In the end, dedicated support was not made available and without it the IPC was unable to muster a substantive input on the theme. On this occasion as on others, the people’s

organizations and the IPC mechanism as a whole proved more effective in mobilizing a far-reaching and credible denunciation than in following through rapidly to document alternative positions. All told, however, the incident constituted a salutary shake-up of the 'neutral scientific-technical' identity often adopted by the secretariats of intergovernmental agencies. Seeking stakeholder contributions has now become a standard procedure in the preparation of *SOFA*. The clash contributed to clarifying the issues involved in cooperation between FAO and civil society although it did not solve them on a corporate basis. They remain to be addressed for a qualitative step to be taken towards the adoption of transparent and reasonably resourced procedures for stakeholder participation throughout the range of FAO's scientific work.²⁷

The third illustration we will examine is the International Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (ICARRD) held in Porto Alegre from 7 to 10 March 2006. This meeting proved to be a particularly significant terrain for experimentation with civil society participation in FAO global policy forums. The issue was a top priority for rural people's organizations and social movements. The IPC was able to use to good advantage the synergies its membership afforded between strong rural people's movements and NGOs with expertise in agrarian reform issues. An alliance was established with the sponsoring Brazilian government, which counted on the IPC to facilitate its communication with radical Brazilian social movements. Relations between the IPC and the FAO secretariat office responsible for the conference were facilitated by the support of the Brazilian government and the institutional basis for cooperation that had been built up since the WFS:*fyl*, in particular the IPC-FAO Exchange of Letters. The head of the secretariat was an experienced, intelligent and diplomatically skilful person who sincerely believed in the added value of civil society input, particularly by rural stakeholders. Finally, the resource problem was addressed by obtaining the assistance of FAO's sister organization, IFAD, which was then well advanced in developing its own innovative interface with rural peoples' organizations, many of which were IPC members.

In the run-up to the conference, the IPC declined an invitation to participate in the official Steering Committee in order to avoid co-optation. It decided instead to organize a parallel autonomous civil society conference which would have meaningful and well-defined opportunities to interact with the official conference.²⁸ In the end, the IPC obtained for CSOs the right to prepare one of

²⁷ UN secretariats often complain if CSOs seek to have their expenses covered when they are provided with an occasion to contribute to the preparation of documents or publications. This objection ignores the resource situation of all but the big, well-heeled NGOs. Providing adequate resources to people's organisations to participate in such exercises can be a win-win proposition which helps the people's organisations to systematise their experience and positions and provides UN institutions with invaluable input to which they would not otherwise have access.

²⁸ Two other actors did join the Steering Committee – the NGO Action Aid International and the IFAD-based International Land Coalition, a hybrid body which counts the World Bank and FAO among its members along with CSO networks. The IPC let it be known, however, that it would strongly contest the conference if civil society actors other than the people's organizations,

the basic issue papers and several case studies, to name one of the speakers at the inaugural ceremony, and to engage in dialogue on an equal footing with governments in roundtable discussions, with seven civil society representatives pitted against seven ministers or other high government officials in what they dubbed 'gladiator style'. The conclusions of the parallel civil society forum were presented to the conference and included in its report.

The people's organizations and social movements had a meaningful impact on the final statement of the official conference itself, which holds that 'rural development policies, including those on agrarian reforms, should be more focused on the poor and their organizations, socially-driven, participatory, and respectful of gender equality, in the context of economic, social and environmentally sound sustainable development' (FAO 2006a: para. 28). The conference rescued the issue of agrarian reform from the oblivion into which it had fallen in the decades following the 1979 World Conference on Agricultural Reform and Rural Development (WCARRD) and linked it to the emerging theme of the right to food. For CSOs the marginalization of World Bank-promoted market-assisted land reform, free trade and export-oriented agriculture as recipes for development was an important political victory.²⁹ Powerful FAO members, like the United States and the European Union, were less satisfied and have done their best to slow pedal follow-up. But the conference has stimulated a number of Southern governments and intergovernmental organizations to seek FAO's technical assistance in applying the principles enunciated by ICARRD to their particular contexts, with stakeholder participation.³⁰ In terms of opening up meaningful political space for civil society, the conference set a new standard for FAO, which, however, has not yet been recognized as corporate practice.

The Global Food Crisis: a Political Opportunity for Civil Society?

In late 2007, five and a half years after the WFS:*fyl* and the parallel civil society forum the 'world food crisis' erupted in the media, catching public attention due to the clamorous riots in low-income countries and the fact that even consumers in the industrialized North were feeling the pinch. The social movements and CSOs tracking food and agriculture issues were expecting it. Thanks to a decade of progressively solid networking since the 1996 World Food Summit, they were

which are the primary direct protagonists of agrarian reform, were allowed to 'represent' civil society in the Steering Committee. Instead, a transparent practice of holding meetings between the FAO secretariat, the IPC and other interested CSOs prior to each meeting of the Steering Committee was established, and the minutes were posted on the International Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (ICARRD) web site.

²⁹ On agrarian reform, Via Campesina and ICARRD, see Borras (2008).

³⁰ The African Union is currently developing continental guiding principles for land reform with technical and financial support from FAO, including for consultation with the African regional farmers' networks.

far better prepared than before to take advantage of what could prove to be an important political opportunity to address both the paradigmatic and the institutional aspects of world food governance. Already at its 2005 annual meeting, in the run-up to the WTO Hong Kong Ministerial, IPC members had taken good note of the renewed centrality of food and agriculture as a world problem area. The UN system – and FAO in particular – appeared indeed to constitute the only alternative to the WTO/Bretton Woods institutions as a multilateral locus for addressing these issues according to a logic in which human rights and equity take precedence over liberalizing markets.

By the time of the IPC's 2007 meeting, the trends that had continued to dominate over the intervening months seemed to corroborate this analysis. Powerful member government which had tended to ignore FAO as an international forum over past years had returned in force to bring their interests to bear on the decision-making processes of the organization. The World Bank was dedicating its 2008 annual report to the theme of agriculture and development for the first time in almost a quarter of a century. The Gates and Rockefeller Foundations had joined hands to form an Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA). A Global Donor Platform for Rural Development was reaching out to bring together OECD bilateral aid programmes, the EU and UN family multilateral funders with a vision of 'achieving increased development assistance impact and more effective investment in rural development and agriculture'.³¹

In the IPC's analysis, the strategy of the OECD countries and agrifood corporations for addressing the food crisis was to de-route attention from structural and political issues towards renewed faith in the two planks of the dominant paradigm. The capacity of markets to generate development for all was being refurbished through 'aid for trade' discourse and by promoting bilateral trade agreements as a tool to jump start the stalled WTO Doha round. Technology as a tool to generate food for all was being reinvented through the "new green revolution" with its accent on technology transfer – including a strong push for GMOs – which would reinforce the control of agrifood business over the food chain at all levels. With the crisis of the WTO, the situation had become more acute and the offensive of the pro-liberalization interests more aggressive. If the WTO were to be discredited as a world trade forum, would agricultural trade oversight be brought to FAO? Not if the pro-liberalization forces had a say in the matter. On the contrary, the role they envisaged for FAO was a reduced one, privileging global information analysis and diffusion activities at the expense of presence in the regions and capacity to provide policy advice and technical support for developing country members. The IPC felt this vision was only part of an overall strategy for reform of the UN system which would tend towards reinforcing the power of the central UN secretariat and the New York-based intergovernmental bodies, 'demoting' the autonomous

³¹ www.donorplatform.org.

technical agencies to the status of technical advisory bodies and further enhancing the role of the 'more effective' Bretton Woods institutions.

In such a context IPC members felt it was even more important than ever to take a systemic approach to strategizing about global food governance. And, more than ever, rural people's organizations and social movements needed the kind of analytic support which the IPC could provide. It was to be expected that space for lobbying within the institutions would be progressively reduced the stronger the conflict became. Hence it was important to achieve an effective balance between mobilizing outside the institutions and maintaining hard-won political space inside. The success of mobilization, clearly, depended not only on numbers but also on capacity to formulate alternatives.

The need for a systemic approach was confirmed on 29 April 2008 when UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon announced that he would lead a task force to address the current global food crisis. Made up of 23 UN specialized agencies, funds and programmes, the World Bank, the IMF and the WTO, the High Level Task Force on the Global Food Crisis (HLTF) is coordinated by a small secretariat based in Geneva and Rome. In mid July 2008 the HLTF released a Comprehensive Framework for Action (CFA), a draft of which had already received the endorsement of the G8 in its 8 July 2008 'Statement on Global Food Security'. The CFA is light on governance discourse. The HLTF is 'not envisaged as a permanent fixture.' It will aim at 'catalyzing and supporting the CFA's overall objective of improving food and nutrition security and resilience in a sustainable way'. To do so, it 'will work at global, regional and country levels to track progress...[and] will address some of the underlying policy issues at the global level (trade, export subsidies and restrictions, biofuels etc.).' Accountability of this mechanism to governments is close to inexistent. All that is envisaged is 'regular consultation'...through 'high-level briefings with the General Assembly, ECOSOC and UN regional groups, governing bodies and management committees of individual UN system agencies'(UN High Level Task Force 2008).

The OECD countries hit the drawing board as soon as the CFA was released to sketch in the missing pieces. Who should be the members and the 'owners' of the 'Global Partnership for Food Security' that the HLTF was expected to facilitate? How would the essential component of international policy coordination be exercised and what role could be foreseen in this context for the existing Committee on World Food Security housed by the FAO? Who should be responsible for naming and supervising the international group of experts on food security that both the HLTF and the G8 were calling for and, again, what would be the role of FAO in this exercise? And what about the aid component, beyond the emergency assistance channeled through the World Food Programme that was receiving immediate priority? Was it best to favour the World Bank, which had jumped the gun by announcing the creation of a \$ 1.2 billion fast track facility for the food crisis on 29 May? Or was IFAD, the international fund with a special mandate to address rural poverty and rural development, a better bet? There was no doubt that the OECD countries would

have their say in determining the responses to these open questions. How the developing countries most affected by the food crisis were going to get a word in edgeways was less evident.

In framing their own analysis of causes and remedies of the food crisis the people's organisations, social movements and NGOs associated with the IPC were well aware of the fact that the stall in the WTO process had combined with the mediatic food crisis to produce an un hoped-for political opportunity to challenge the dominant neo-liberal paradigm. ³² 'No More "Failures-as-Usual"!' was the title of a civil society statement drafted by IPC members and signed onto by some 900 CSOs in the run-up to the a High Level Conference on World Food Security organized by FAO in June 2008 (IPC 2008). Small farmers organisations trace the roots of the current crisis to three decades of wrong policies.

For over 30 years policy makers, national governments and international institutions like the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organization pushed the fundamental restructuring of national economies while chanting the mantra of liberalisation, privatisation and deregulation. In agriculture this led to dramatic shifts from production for domestic consumption to production for export... Many developing countries that used to be self-sufficient in basic grains are now net importers of food. The restructuring of agriculture also facilitated the corporatisation of agriculture. While peasants and small-scale farmers have been systematically driven from the land in the North and the South, corporations increased their control over the food chain... Agriculture has moved away from its primary function – that of feeding humans. Today, less than half of the world's grains are eaten by humans. Instead, grains are used primarily to feed animals, and more recently they are being converted into agro-fuels to feed cars... Agriculture and food policies are now controlled only by a faceless international market. National polices designed to ensure the viability of small-scale farmers and an adequate supply of culturally appropriate food through support for domestic agriculture have been replaced by the voracious demands of the 'market' (La Via Campesina 2008).

More than 100 CSOs from 5 continents attended the civil society forum held in parallel to an FAO High Level Conference called in June 2008 to seek solutions to the food crisis. For the first time, environmental NGOs were present in force, thanks to the strong links between the food crisis and environmental issues like climate change and agrofuels. The participants advocated a paradigm shift towards food sovereignty and small scale sustainable food production which,

³² Among the many lucid documents on the food crisis emanating from civil society organisations are GRAIN (2008), Guzman (2008), Polaski (2008), Bello (2008).

unlike industrial agriculture, can feed the world while making a positive contribution to 'cooling' the climate. Regarding global governance, civil society called for a fundamental restructuring of the multilateral organisations involved in food and agriculture under the auspices of a UN commission that would reach beyond the 'failed institutions whose negligence and neoliberal policies created the crisis' to include strong representation of 'those we must feed and those who must feed us'.

Over the past year, developing country dissatisfaction with G-8 promoted proposals for the creation of a "Global Partnership for Food Security" in whose crafting they had not been involved has provided impetus for a more transparent and inclusive effort to revisit the global governance of food and agriculture by reforming the FAO-based Committee on World Food Security (CFS). Under the leadership of the current chair of the CFS, the Permanent Representative to FAO of Argentina, and with strong support from Brazil and other governments a "Contact Group" open to representatives of civil society has been established to prepare a proposal for a reformed CFS that will be put to the next session of the Committee in mid October 2009. The IPC is playing a significant role in this process, alongside of major international NGOs like OXFAM and Action Aid which cannot but recognize the legitimacy of the IPC to channel the positions of the people's organizations and social movements that compose it. If the civil society positions, shared by some governments, win out the CFS will become an authoritative intergovernmental policy forum with a vision based on eradication of hunger and universal attainment of the right to food. It will have a recognized function of monitoring the progress of national governments towards this goal and assessing the impact on food security of other intergovernmental institutions. Participation will be opened to civil society with particular attention to organizations representing small food producers and poor urban consumers. A High Level Panel of Experts tasked with providing substantive support to the CFS will include not only academics but also civil society experts feeding in the knowledge-based expertise accumulated by peasant producers, indigenous peoples and CSOs that work with them. Links will be built between the global policy forum and regional and national forums which will be encouraged to adopt an inclusive approach to stakeholder participation in developing and implementing policy frameworks and action plans. The stakes of the negotiation, a synthesis of what social movements and civil society have been advocating since 1996, could hardly be higher.

By Way of Conclusion

What does the experience of civil society engagement with FAO have to teach us about the openings and the obstacles to interface, on both sides of the fence, and about the conditions under which virtuous alliances between social movements and civil society can be built? What characteristics distinguish the IPC from other global advocacy initiatives and what impact have these characteristics had on its effectiveness?

The IPC today

The IPC is an autonomous, self-managed global mechanism grouping some 45 people's movements and NGOs involved with at least 800 organizations throughout the world. Its membership includes constituency focal points (organizations representing small farmers, fisher folk, pastoralists, Indigenous Peoples, agricultural workers); regional focal points (people's movement or NGO networks based in the various regions responsible for diffusion of information and consultation in specific geographic areas); and thematic focal points (NGO networks with particular expertise on priority issues). It is not a centralized structure and does not claim to represent its members. It does not aspire to constitute an all-inclusive civil society interface with FAO and other institutions, but is rather a space for self-selected CSOs which identify with the food sovereignty agenda adopted at the 2002 forum. The IPC serves as a mechanism for information and training on issues regarding food sovereignty. It promotes forums in which people's movements and CSOs involved in food and agriculture issues can debate, articulate their positions and build their relationships at national, regional and global levels. It facilitates dialogue and debate between civil society actors, governments and other stakeholders at all levels.

The IPC does not have a formal statute or legal identity. It has, however, adopted an agreed consultation and decision-making procedure, including an annual meeting. It periodically establishes working groups to collect information and develop positions on specific themes. Such groups currently exist on agrarian reform, agricultural biodiversity/models of production in a context of climate change, artisanal fisheries, food sovereignty in conflict situations, and global governance of food and agriculture. A minimal IPC liaison office based in Rome acts as the international secretariat of the network.

There is no doubt but that FAO has been strongly affected by its interaction with civil society and social movements in the thirteen years since the World Food Summit. Since 1996 practices of civil society participation in FAO's policy formulation and governance have advanced considerably, although they have not been formally institutionalised. Significant civil society successes have been scored in introducing paradigmatic change and formulating mechanisms to apply new concepts, as in the case of the right to food, or rehabilitate existing ones like agrarian reform. Links between national, regional and global policy spaces have been built up by social actors like the West African small farmers' movement promoting family farming (see McKeon et al. 2004; McKeon 2008), South American and Asian artisanal fisherfolk fighting against corporate overexploitation of the seas³³, and pastoralists defending the animal genetic

³³ Artisanal small-scale fisheries was introduced as an agenda item on the agenda of the FAO Committee on Fisheries in 2005 and 2007 thanks to civil society lobbying and alliances with the secretariat and 'like-minded governments'. This mounting momentum led to a Global

resources on which their livelihoods depend³⁴. The level of debate has deepened on basic questions that have dogged FAO from its foundation: the lack of political will on the part of powerful member governments to address the problems inscribed in the organization's mission and the ambiguity of the technical-political divide that bedevils the secretariat. The very fact that the walls of the organization were shaken from the ground floor up by civil society outrage on an occasion such as that of the release of the allegedly pro-GMO 2003 *State of Food and Agriculture* was, in itself, an important sign of the de-impermeabilisation of FAO. The defensive reaction of some Western governments – traditional proponents of civil society participation in public affairs as a key component of democracy – who now question the priority of FAO's civil society liaison and advocacy work (FAO 2006b:para. 48). could be taken as a disturbing sign of 'backlash'. On the other hand, it could be read as a promising symptom of heightened recognition of the political character of FAO governance, itself a result both of the increased political significance of food and agriculture issues on the world scene and of the greater capacity of civil society actors to question the neoliberal agenda.

The qualitative leap in FAO's engagement with non-state actors can be attributed in no insignificant measure to its entering into negotiation with the autonomous, people's organization-dominated mechanism that emerged from the two summits of 1996 and 2002. Success factors on the civil society side have included the IPC's skill in defending its autonomy and in validating its legitimacy by effectively bringing the voices of Southern peoples' organizations to policy forums to which they had previously had no access. On the FAO side they have included the secretariat's recognition of civil society's autonomy and right to self-organization, willingness to valorize the IPC's efforts to involve organizations of the rural poor in policy dialogue, and engagement to facilitate their access to political space in which to defend their agendas. These success factors, however, have not been institutionalized and the FAO-civil society relation is very much a work in progress, constantly open to questioning by hostile senior secretariat members³⁵ or member governments. The outcome of the current negotiations regarding the reform of the Committee on World Food Security could have an important effect of institutionalizing much of what has been achieved over the past years.

Conference on Smallscale Fisheries in October 2008 with the two international federations of artisanal fisherfolk represented in the planning committee. This process has been facilitated by the IPC.

³⁴ The IPC mobilized resources to bring a delegation of pastoralist representatives from 14 countries to the First International Technical Conference on Animal Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture organized by FAO in September 2007 and provided them with the support they needed to be able to make their views known.

³⁵ As has transpired over the past few years.

Assessment of the experience of interface by the IPC itself provides a number of insights.³⁶ During a self-evaluation exercise conducted in 2005 members judged that the IPC had effectively built links between social movements and FAO and had opened up spaces for people's organisations independently of the big NGOs which tend to dominate the scene. The IPC was judged to have succeeded in maintaining its autonomy and to have contributed to the articulation of food sovereignty as an alternative paradigm to neoliberalism. On the weak side, it lacked effective mechanisms of communication and exchange, the key level of regional work did not receive enough support, dependence on FAO's help to mobilize funds was a problem. A fundamental lesson was that, at the outset, the IPC had underestimated the difficulty of changing FAO and had overestimated its own capacity for action and that of the people's organisations that compose it. The latter, experience had demonstrated, simply did not have time and resources to invest in interface with FAO above and beyond the activities in which they are already engaged following their own agendas and the evolution of the situations in which they are grounded. This had become clear in the incident of the *SOFA* issue on biotechnology. The accent, it was determined, should be shifted more decisively away from FAO's agenda towards the struggles and negotiations in which the social movements themselves are directly engaged. From that starting point the IPC should identify a few political priorities on which to interface with FAO and other institutions, seeking to open spaces and exploit contradictions within the intergovernmental system. If it tried to cover the entire FAO scene, on the contrary, it would inevitably be dispersive and ineffective and would risk co-optation.

The civil society consultation held in parallel to the FAO High Level Conference in June 2008, in the midst of the food crisis, offered an occasion to take the analysis a step further following three years of efforts to apply the insights that had emerged from the earlier self-evaluation. The fact that the IPC functions not as a hierarchical, representative organization but as an autonomous facilitating mechanism was confirmed to be a fundamental success factor. 'Each sector can speak for itself, with no forced consensus as in other UN processes'. At the same time, the IPC is not a neutral space. 'The political statement of food sovereignty is what we have in common. This allows us to develop common strategies while respecting the voice of each component.' Although civil society interaction with FAO predated the creation of the IPC, members judged that the advent of this mechanism has enabled them to move beyond particular technical questions and tackle systemic policy issues.³⁷ The new global political space it has opened up for people's organizations has proved important for all, but particularly so for weaker movements like indigenous peoples and pastoralists and those who are not part of a bigger family. The global mobilization and advocacy capacity of

³⁶ These considerations are based on notes taken during the IPC annual meetings and a collective interview conducted in June 2008.

³⁷ Limitations in NGO effectiveness in impacting on the United Nations has been attributed in part to the tendency to take sectoral, non-systemic approaches to the United Nations. See Juan Somoza in UNRISD (1997:4).

the IPC is felt to be reflected in the broad diffusion of the sign-on letters it has launched, the recognition it has received from international institutions like FAO, and the success it has obtained on issues like the right to food and agrarian reform. But the greatest strength of the IPC is felt to lie in its capacity to network, synergize and support the separate struggles of its members in the regions and in the manifold policy forums in which they are on the front line of the battle for food sovereignty.

Diversity is a recurring term. In terms of the quality of analysis conducted within the IPC the high points are judged to come from bringing together the different regions and rural producer constituencies. 'Then we get interesting analysis that's not taking place anywhere else'. This diversity has also stimulated virtuous behaviour changes. NGOs have learned to put their expertise at the service of people's organizations. Indigenous peoples have understood the importance of learning from the struggles of other sectors like pastoralists. Strong organizations, like Via Campesina, cite the IPC as a space which has helped it learn to listen.

The weaknesses of the IPC are felt, to some degree, to be the mirror image of its strengths. 'We are a very flat and heterogeneous coalition. Decision-making is difficult. The IPC can't be top-heavy, and a flat coalition needs resources of communication, facilitation, alliance building.' And resource mobilization has not been an area of success. The political opportunity offered by the food crisis and the need to move beyond FAO and take a more systemic view make it urgent to address these organizational issues. 'We can't ask the people's organisations to do more than what they are already doing. We have to avoid creating a "technical corps" that's not controlled by the people's organisations. But we also need to avoid the mistake we are making now of being less effective than we should be'. The very fact that the overall context has become more politically charged is viewed as a result to which the IPC itself has contributed, through its contestation of the dominant neoliberal paradigm. It constitutes a stimulus to strengthen and sharpen the IPC's capacity for action. There are, however, no illusions about the power of opposing interests and the restriction of political space within global institutions that is likely to apply while the battle is on.

Organizationally, the IPC does not fit neatly into the categories described in social movement literature dealing with transnational mobilization. Following the terminology proposed by Tarrow (Tarrow 2005:167), it is not a short-term coalition. But neither is it a federation or an issue-based campaign, although it does contribute to campaigns conducted by its members and by other broader coalitions. Perhaps the description that comes closest to capturing its nature is Marchetti's and Pianta's suggestion that transnational networks 'provide political innovation in terms of conceptualisation, organisational forms, communication, political skills, and concrete projects to the broader archipelago of social movements' (Marchetti and Pianta 2007:3). The major innovation of the IPC as compared with experiences documented in existing literature is its identity as a horizontal mechanism which has made a deliberate and successful

effort to reach out to people's organizations in the South – peasant farmers, artisanal fisherfolk, indigenous peoples, pastoralists and agricultural workers – and to place them at the centre of reflection and decision making. The IPC is a rare, if not unique, example of an autonomous global civil society advocacy mechanism in which political direction rests with these organizations rather than with the NGOs which, often with the best of intentions, normally dominate decision-making processes in transnational collective action. In this sense, it responds to the concerns about asymmetries and power within networks expressed by Sikkink (in Khagram et al 2002) and illustrates the experimentation with 'novel forms of transnational links involving popular organisations from the south' which, according to Marchetti and Pianta, is attracting interest as awareness of risks of asymmetry increases (Marchetti and Pianta 2007). On the down side, it also confirms the consideration that "efforts to enhance representation and deliberation will slow down networks and make it more difficult for them to respond quickly to global problems and crises" (Khagram et al, 2002:312).

In the world of social movements alternative practices of building horizontal links among local spaces and struggles are relatively well developed, as the regional and world social forums illustrate. Researchers in disciplines ranging from anthropology to geography and ecology have documented and analysed such geographies of resistance.³⁸ There is also a rich literature on the topic of transnational civil society networks and their vertical interactions with international institutions.³⁹ The experience of bringing networked local resistance and alternatives to bear decisively on global forums in which 'hard' policies are decided, however, is far from conclusive. As an attentive observer of these dynamics put it several years ago:

Presently there is a political gap from the local to the global which is only partially being filled in by the stretch from local networks to planetary social movements, international NGOs or global civil society. This is not merely an institutional hiatus but as much a programmatic hiatus and a hiatus of political imagination (Pieterse 2000:199).⁴⁰

³⁸ See, for example, Goodman and Watts (1997); Webster and Engberg-Pedersen (2002); Pile and Keith (1997); Gills (2000); Escobar (2001).

³⁹ In addition to the authors cited above, two particularly stimulating thinkers, coming at the issue of bringing linked local experiences to bear on the global scene from very different perspectives, are Saskia Sassen (2008) with her conceptualization of 'the world's third spaces', and Jan Douwe van der Ploeg (2005) with his theorization of opposition to the re-patterning of the social and natural worlds under globalization, which he terms the 'Empire', by a 'newly emerging peasantry' in Europe characterized in the first instance by its autonomy.

⁴⁰ Italics in original.

The itinerary of the IPC is a significant example of work-in-progress to span this hiatus. The fact that the IPC groups major regional and global networks of small-scale rural producers, mandated to speak for a good proportion of the world's poor⁴¹, gives it a more compelling legitimacy than that of other civil society actors, based rather on the values they defend, the cogency of their arguments, the effectiveness of the services they provide. It also gives it far more political punch in the South, since in many cases these organizations represent the majority of the electorate. This is illustrated by the successful efforts of people's organizations to bring food sovereignty concerns to bear on their governments' policies in countries ranging from Mali and Senegal in West Africa to Bolivia and Venezuela in Latin America and Nepal in Asia. In contrast with Tarrow's reading (2005:159), networking of this nature places strong emphasis on building South-South links among actors who have similar claims and not only reaching upward to international forums. Government accountability at national and regional levels in the South is likely to be a prerequisite to building accountable global governance. If this is the case, the IPC, with its focus on networking the struggles of Southern rural peoples' organizations and social movements and giving them voice in global arenas, is on the front line of the battle.

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⁴¹ ROPPA's 12 national peasant farmer platforms represent some 45 million farmers, the majority of the population of these West African countries.

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