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World hunger and the Obama administration's priorities

David Andrews | Oct. 24, 2012 Eco Catholic

I recently attended in Rome the annual two-week meetings of the Committee on World Food Security (Oct. 8-22) at the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.

The Committee on World Food Security was set up in 1974 as an intergovernmental body to serve as a forum for review of food security policies, and in 2009, underwent a reform process to ensure that the voices of other stakeholders were heard in the global debate on food security and nutrition.

The vision of the reformed committee is to be the most inclusive international and intergovernmental platform for all stakeholders to work together in a coordinated way to ensure food security and nutrition for all. The reform of the Committee on World Food Security also sought to address short-term crises but also long-term structural issues.

I serve on the coordinating committee of the civil society mechanism, the vehicle through which participating non -governmental organizations, such as Food & Water Watch, and social movements, such as the Indigenous Environmental Network, operate. Civil society organizations have voice but no vote, which remains a sole right of governments.

Last year civil society had a voice for the first time in the 38 years of the meetings of the Committee on World Food Security. I attended that assembly, and asked for and received a meeting with Ertharin Cousin, at the time the American ambassador to the Food and Agriculture Organization (she?s now head of the United Nations World Food Program).

Cousin had also arranged for the entire American delegation of civil society representatives ? five of us in total, representing ActionAid USA, WhyHunger, Oxfam America, Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy and Food & Water Watch ? to meet with her entire staff during the early days of the meetings.

Her staff included more than 20 persons, whom we met with for a good hour. We also had occasional meetings with staffers for the American embassy during the committee?s two-week span of activity.

After a positive experience with the embassy at last year?s meetings, I expected a similar positive experience this year. It was not to be.

A new ambassador, David Lane, had been appointed in May to replace Cousin. He had been an executive director of the non-profit organization ONE and dealt with food and nutrition security. As an NGO leader, I expected some openness on Lane?s part to meeting with us, as shown by Cousin, who previously worked for the NGO Feeding America.

Surprisingly, openness was not the case.

I wrote to the embassy staff early ahead of time, in July, asking for meetings in October with the ambassador

and the staff. I was put off and told to request an appointment in September. I did just that, renewing my request again in September. And in October. And every day in the time during which the Committee on World Food Security was meeting.

There was a hint of a scheduled meeting at one point late in the period of the meetings, but none ensued. This despite the fact that there were a dozen American civil society participants attending, as more academics participated this year. They included Tufts University and the College of the Atlantic; social movement representatives included The Indigenous Environmental Network.

More Americans to meet with, but no meeting ensued with civil society. Ambassador Lane did invite the private sector to meet with him, at a dinner reception at his residence, but no American civil society members were invited.

Even with only a few feet separating civil society meeting space in the Malaysia room from the U.S. embassy space in the Cuba room, no arrangements could be made.

Such a short distance to traverse, yet no dinner, no dialogue.

Disturbing messages from the Obama administration on world hunger ? civil society doesn?t count, only the private sector does.

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

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