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Global governance of food security

by David Andrews

Eco Catholic

The Committee on World Food Security (CFS) met in Rome from Oct. 17-22 at the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations. One hundred and twenty countries of the world belong to the FAO. This was the 37th annual meeting of the committee.

It was the first time that civil society (nongovernmental organizations and grassroots organizations) had a voice at the meeting.

I went on behalf of Food & Water Watch and as a member of the Food Sovereignty Alliance of the United States. Civil society members like myself couldn't vote, but we could speak through our civil society representation.

CFS is billed as the foremost inclusive international and intergovernmental platform for all stakeholders to work together to ensure food security and nutrition for all. It aspires to be a forum for global food governance. It is the arena for setting food policy for the world.

During this 37th session, the committee tackled important food security issues, including food price volatility, investment in smallholder agriculture and gender, food security and nutrition, though not always adequately. Early every morning, those of us participating in the civil society sector met to hash out strategy plans and a division of labor in preparation for the thematic round tables and more comprehensive plenary sessions each day.

In an earlier report on land grabs, I wrote about how suspicious civil society was at the leadership of the United States government on the land investment discussions that took place the week before the Committee on Food Security.

By Oct. 17, the day I arrived, those discussions had been conducted in part. Civil society members expressed to me that they were happy with the manner in which the United States conducted the discussions on land investments and expressed the hope that the United States would continue to lead that committee and would keep the positions already arrived at through the negotiations. The U.S. government had successfully removed the suspicions of civil society and showed civil society that it could be an honest broker.

I was able to deliver that message directly to U.S. Ambassador Ertharin Cousin and much of her staff. At the FAO, a small civil society delegation from the United States met with the ambassador and 21 people on her staff to talk about the policy of the United States relative to food security concerns. We had a very thorough conversation. I was able to deliver the message that civil society wanted the United States to continue its leadership of the negotiations on land investment. Ambassador Cousin told us that the United States would likely continue in that role.

In addition to meeting with the ambassador to FAO from the United States, I took the occasion of being in Rome to meet as well with embassy staff from the United States Embassy to the Vatican.

Kim Penland is the political and economic chief of the embassy. Ambassador Miguel Diaz was traveling. Kim and I talked about the past advocacy of the U.S. Embassy under Ambassador Nicholson on genetically engineered seeds. I questioned whether that agenda would continue to be brought to the Vatican from the United States.

Ms. Penland thought that the policy focus would be food security, and so we discussed the meetings going on at FAO and other discussions taking place in the United States about the food security policies being developed under the state department's program called "Feed the Future." I indicated how the United States' food security agenda was being hampered by the current economic crisis and the political changes that took place in the last election. The changes in the politics of Washington have altered the prior direction of the administration so that it is now more corporate friendly than it appeared to be previously.

Civil society walked out of the Committee on Food Security before the conclusion of the meetings on Oct. 22. The facilitator of the plenary meeting began in an increasingly dictatorial fashion to ignore the hands that were raised by civil society, to ignore their interventions on serious issues and their right to be heard. More glaringly than at any previous time, efficiency and the quest to conclude business rendered the newly empowered civil society powerless. So they chose to exercise the only power they had, which was to walk out of the Committee on Food Security meeting and to issue a public protest over the way they were treated.

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