

End to
Global Hunger
Requires
Collaboration
in Food
Governance

Commentary by Christine Campeau, EAA Food Campaign Coordinator

Saturday 22 October 2011 marked the closing of the 37th session on the Committee on World Food Security (CFS-37) - the key multilateral and intergovernmental arena for the governance of agriculture and food policies. Several important issues were tackled throughout the week, including the draft Voluntary Guidelines on responsible tenure of land, forests and fisheries, food price volatility, agricultural investment and the development of a Global Strategic Framework. Members of the Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance (EAA) were present at these discussions, and the following underlines their experiences and concerns.

The efforts to transform the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) into a democratic and legitimate system of global food governance are to be commended. An open space has been created for civil society and social movements to engage in this process, and members of the EAA are committed to making our contribution. Significant amounts of time and energy have been invested through the Civil Society Mechanism (CSM) in thematic working groups, preparing statements, and negotiating with governments on the pressing issues that are of great concern to us all. An example of the teamwork between governments and civil society was demonstrated during the development of the Voluntary Guidelines on responsible tenure of land, forests and fisheries. As a result, 74% of the text was adopted during the 37th session. We encourage governments to not reopen the agreed text and to conclude the final 26% of the text quickly.

The overall collaboration with all the stakeholders involved has been quite good, some would even say "historic". Henk Jochemsen, Director of Prisma, remarked that there was quite an openness to giving civil society the floor during the sessions that he attended; however, it seemed clear that civil society representatives were marginalized from the most sensitive issues. "It is obvious this is still a developing process and struggles among interests and powers remain. Civil society needs to be included and be recognized as a serious partner in this process", stated Jochemsen. Obviously this collaboration is still in its relatively early days and trust needs to be developed among all actors involved. However, many civil society representatives have expressed disappointment that several major glitches took place during the CFS-37. For one, the previously agreed speaking order between governments and civil society actors was not fully respected during the round table discussions. It is unclear if this was due to a miscommunication of the process with the rapporteurs leading the sessions or a deliberate attempt to sideline civil society.

"Despite prior agreement and the CFS's responsibility to address any policy issues that impact food security, such as biofuels, trade and food reserves, the CFS failed to address some of the main root causes of food price volatility," stated

Gisele Henriques, CIDSE. Henriques further explained that this frustration escalated to a protest during the final negotiation session in which some civil society representatives walked out of the discussion.

"It was apparent in the final sessions that the original aim of the session was co-opted by the G20 agenda since the final agreed decisions did more to reinforce the G20 Action Plan than to address the root causes of food price volatility," explained Carol Thiessen from the Canadian Foodgrains Bank.

Clearly, better communication is required to ensure that the relationship among governments, multilateral institutions and civil society is respected and strengthened. The EAA, as observers of and active participants in this process, will continue to call for civil society participation to be enhanced so that the common goal of eradicating global hunger can be achieved.

Stineke Oenema of ICCO, who serves as Western European member of the Coordination Committee of the CSM, observed that "the CFS is enormously important, particularly in the current environment of systemic and persistent food crisis. The arrangements made for civil society participation are groundbreaking. But inclusion and acknowledgement of civil society participants and their views need to be strengthened for the entire process to benefit."

Fortunately, a number of governments do realize the potential benefits of the effective participation of food producers and those most affected by food insecurity in discussions on policy coherence and coordination at all levels – national, regional and international. They need to be involved in drafting the policy responses to food insecurity so that they can assure and monitor the implementation of those initiatives at national and local levels.

The possibility of additional cooperation between decision makers and civil society organizations and communities will be available through the drafting of the Global Strategic Framework (GSF), which lies at the heart of the CFS reform. The relevance of the GSF will be greatly enhanced by extensive consultation with civil society actors and social movements in the drafting process, in particular through forums planned by the FAO in early 2012.

CFS-37 has begun – but only begun - to develop the collaboration among all actors necessary to find effective, just and sustainable solutions to food insecurity. Adequate funding needs to be allocated to the CSM so that it can continue to facilitate this mutually beneficial relationship. And we must all re-commit to building trust and strengthening our collaboration to achieve our common vision of ending global hunger and malnutrition. ■