

UN General Assembly on The Global Food Crisis and the Right to Food  
Statement by Mr. Henry Saragih, General Coordinator of La Via Campesina

Mr. Secretary General of the United Nations, Mr. President of the United Nations General Assembly, Chair of the High-Level Task Force on Food Security, Mr. Olivier de Schutter, UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I welcome this Interactive Thematic Dialogue in our global effort in responding to the food crisis. Our dialogue in this chamber is of particular importance for those of us who believe that humankind has the courage and ability to make global governance work for all. Indeed, the food crisis gives us all an opportunity to do something without delay. The food crisis poses a massive threat to humankind. Every day, significant parts of society around the world suffer directly or indirectly because of the food crisis. La Via Campesina, an international peasant movement, has been working to address the situation globally, with our members in 70 countries—this figure includes over 200 million members worldwide. Given the nature of our movement, undoubtedly the situation of peasants was put high on our agenda.

The role of the United Nations in making human rights mechanisms work is particularly important in this respect. I follow carefully how UN Special Rapporteur has progressively shifted the focus of the food crisis from a development-centered model to a rights based concept: a global food crisis is a threat to the right to adequate food. It was thus a historic moment when Mr. Olivier De Schutter emphasized this in the UN Human Rights Council's session on the food crisis on May 22, 2008. Mr. Olivier de Schutter further outlined this situation in a more elaborate way in the report to UN Human Rights Council, titled "Building Resilience: a human rights framework for world food and nutrition security" (A/HRC/9/23, 8 September 2008).

I also welcome the initiative of UN Human Rights Council in adopting the resolution on the right to food (agenda item 3, A/HRC/10/L.25, 20 March 2009) which has two significant points:

Acknowledges the work undertaken by the Advisory Committee on the right to food; Requests the Advisory Committee to undertake a study on discrimination in the context of the right to food, including identification of good practices of anti-discriminatory policies and strategies, and to report on it to the thirteenth session of the Human Rights Council;

The three developments of these mandates include:

1. State obligation in fulfillment of the right to food
2. Rights and rights holder in the framework of the right to food
3. Requirements for a sustainable agriculture and household economy

In light of the Special Rapporteur's mandate and the work of the Advisory Committee, I would like to emphasize two points: First, efforts on institutionalizing the right to food. The mandate of the right to food as a thematic mechanism has been of particular importance in setting the standard for all national

member states of United Nations. The number of member states who have adopted this standard into their own national mechanisms has increased. Mr. de Schutter recognizes this state obligation aspect in his speech today.

State obligation is instrumental in discussing the rights holder. At the national level, the rights holder is the citizen, including small farming households and rural agriculture workers—all of whom Mr. de Schutter refers to as being “food insecure”. This part of society has been particularly important in providing food in a more sustainable way, as the experience of La Via Campesina shows. In a country where the right to food is institutionalized, the state carries the burden of protection in searching for policy options and developing the right.

If the right to food is institutionalized through proper mechanisms, both under a legal and political framework, then, I believe, those who are “food insecure” would be empowered in responding to the food crisis. This, in the longer term, builds resilience and momentum.

Second, making the right to food work in international governance. Though it is not an easy and clear-cut situation, the result of the thematic mandate of the right to food, shifts the directions of the United Nations role on this issue. As we witness today, the right to food has been developing a set of standard which in turn has been adopted by many intergovernmental organizations as a policy option and legal framework. The significant issue for us today is how to build a responsive way of governing. The study, recommendation, and all forms of deliberation on the right to food took a long time to become the framework for international governance. Crisis often happens when we let what we allow the foreseeable to happen--this was a case of bad governing practice. These two emphases, I believe, would make our efforts in responding to the food crisis more meaningful – not only in the long term, but also in the short term.

Ladies and Gentlemen, allow me to further explain how the right to food should become a framework for all. As a thematic mechanism of the UN Human Rights Council, the right to food repeatedly addresses the issue of discrimination in its mandate. It is well recorded that peasants are discriminated regarding access to land, water, and natural resources. In regard to monitoring the right to food, the report of the Intergovernmental Plenary Session of IAASTD (International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science, and Technology for Development) in 2008 acknowledged that for the past 60 years, indigenous and traditional peasant and agricultural systems have been heavily discriminated against. Moreover, discrimination could take place where justice systems favored the literate, the collaterally and socially advantaged, and others. All these social structures often work against peasants.

Therefore, I personally urge all of us to pay particular attention to the specific vulnerability of peasants to violations on the right to adequate food, and of human rights in general. The mechanisms for the right to food, in particular, could have a prominent role in leading intergovernmental agencies in the UN system in identifying potential gaps and entitlements on the rights of peasants, and how to address these gaps. I am honored to share with all of you that La Via Campesina has been working to transform the experiences of peasants through the promotion of the Declaration on the Rights of Peasants. The

Declaration was adopted at a Via Campesina International Conference on Rights of Peasants in Jakarta in 2008. I would like to present this proposal to encourage a discussion for new, sustainable and just food systems for all. This declaration could be one of the efforts to institutionalize the right to food. Further research and deliberation regarding this matter from various promoters of the right to food will be a significant response to the world food crisis. We feel this would be a powerful approach toward protecting and to promoting the rights of peasants, including our right to food, against violations by states and transnational corporations (TN Cs?). This will be a new approach to combat hunger and malnutrition—as well as addressing the problem of poverty and unemployment.

Honorable participants of Interactive Thematic Dialogue, this April 17, we, peasants, small farmers, small producers and landless people, will commemorate the International Day of the Peasants' Struggle. Since 1996, April 17 is a monumental day for peasants all over the world to remember and continue the daily struggle to protect our rights. On the same day 13 years ago, 19 peasants were killed at Eldorado de Carajas, Brazil, because they were defending their rights and their communities.

The same violations of peasants' human rights exist today. The current food crisis shows us the widespread and systemic violations of the rights of peasants. Peasants suffer violent oppression as a daily experience: We are increasingly and violently expelled from our lands and alienated from our sources of livelihood. We cannot earn an income that allows us to live in dignity. We are increasingly prohibited from maintaining, preserving, exchanging and growing our own seeds, and our agricultural knowledge is therefore disappearing and we are being forced to buy seeds from TN Cs? in order to increase their profits. Many peasants all over the world are being criminalized because they are fighting for their rights, especially for access to land and productive resources. In fact, there have been an increasing number of cases as large TN Cs? seek to control more land and impose industrial food and agrofuel production. These cases were reiterated once again by various social movements, even the FAO in 2003.

Distinguished delegates, therefore, a policy change regarding food and agriculture is fundamental to cope with the current crisis. As a matter of fact, we have enough food in the world, but the question is: who controls our food? People's access to healthy and adequate food is currently curtailed by TNC's monopolistic power over the food system.

It is urgent that the FAO, the United Nations and Member States adopt policies based on food sovereignty. We have deliberated the concept of food sovereignty in the FAO World Food Summit (1996), in a fashion that also predicted the future and inevitable danger of global food crisis under the practice of food security— food security which only makes sure that people are fed, is not necessarily concerned with how food is produced, who produces it, and where it comes from. We also denounce green revolution practices, monoculture, and export-oriented agriculture practices which is promoted by the current food and agriculture regime. This mode of production and these practices have been damaging to our environment and planet. We support sustainable agriculture (agroecology) based on family-farming for people's food sovereignty and to cool down the planet. Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally-appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and

sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems. It puts the aspirations and needs of those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations. Food sovereignty prioritizes local and national economies and markets, empowers peasant and family farmer-driven agriculture, artisan-style fishing, pastoralist-led grazing, and protects food production, distribution and consumption based on environmental, social and economic sustainability. It also means genuine agrarian reform through redistribution of land towards landless and peasants as well as access to other productive resources, access and control over seeds by peasants and small farmers, and the promotion of family-based sustainable agriculture. Therefore, food sovereignty will reassure stabilization and protection of domestic markets through import control and state market intervention mechanisms. Consequently, policy should contribute to the effort of rebuilding national food economies, as the policy would create jobs, ensure national food sufficiency, and address the problem of poverty.

We have occupied and reclaimed millions of hectares of land all over the world; our members act directly to change the root of the problem. Many of our members are landless, or own a very small part of land; that is why even if food is available in the market we cannot reach it because of lack of purchasing power. Meanwhile, the right to land and territory is closely related to our ability to produce food and provide income for our family. A number of human rights mechanisms mentioned this in particular, especially in relation to the right to food. Guideline 8 paragraph 10 of the FAO Voluntary Guidelines on the Right to Food emphasize the need to promote and protect the security of land tenure, especially with respect to women and poor and disadvantaged segments of society, through legislation that protects the full and equal right to own land and other property, including the right to inherit; and it recommends advancing land reform to enhance access for the poor and for women. The mandate of International Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (2006) reiterated the importance of agrarian reform in the realization of basic human rights and people's food sovereignty.

The current battle of food and agriculture is not between the developed and developing countries, as is always echoed in the multilateral forum of the WTO. We challenge that notion, as our members—peasants, small farmers and small producers—from Europe and the US are also suffering from the food, climate, and financial crises. This is the battle of modes of production, as is mentioned by La Via Campesina. For example, we use minimal external inputs: we use local seeds preserved by people and our community in seed banks, we plant polycultures, we use compost, bokashi, or fertilizer made from cattle's manure, our agriculture is mostly labor-intensive (not capital-intensive), and produced for local communities and markets. We create this in our villages one by one in order to exemplify how food sovereignty comes into practice. These villages are found from the fishery village in northern shore of Java to Andean Mountain, from the fertile lands of Africa to Europe.

This effort, little by little, is now substantially showing outcomes. The fall of Doha Round in 2006, is part of our struggle to keep 'WTO Out of Agriculture' since 1995. The current global meltdown in food and financial system is a good opportunity to raise our alternatives that have been voiced in various forum.

Finally, in light of these two crises, there is an urgent need to regulate the international markets. We

echo the opinion of Jean Ziegler, member of the Advisory Committee of the UN Human Rights Council, saying explicitly that agricultural liberalization and export subsidies is one of the long term causes of the current food crisis. The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), states that member states must respect, protect, promote and fulfill the right to food. The decisions taken in the WTO, IMF or the World Bank, should not be in conflict with the this human rights mechanism and member states ability to fully comply with their obligations under the right to food. The human rights approach is necessary to provide for a holistic notion of food sovereignty. In other words, efforts to combat the current food crisis will not be solved by economic solutions alone. A human rights approach will help us identify the socio-economic and cultural problems of the people—those who are most vulnerable. WTO negotiations should not violate people's rights!

We are fighting at the international level for measures to be implemented to stabilize volatile prices both for farmers and consumers. International food reserves have to be built up as well as intervention mechanisms to stabilize prices on the international markets at a reasonable level. Exporting countries have to accept international rules that control the quantities they can bring to the market. Furthermore, countries should have the freedom to control imports in order to protect domestic food production. The influence of TNCs has to be limited and the international trade in staple foods has to be brought to a necessary minimum level. As much as possible domestic production should fulfill internal demand. This is the only way to protect peasants, small producers and consumers against the current sudden price fluctuations that result from the international market.

We are promoting food sovereignty as an alternative concept and practice for a more just and sustainable food and agriculture system, and this supports a human rights approach, particularly with regard to the right to food. The right to food can be realized if states promote food sovereignty. Food sovereignty will guarantee the realization and protection of the rights of peasants. This will contribute to the institutionalization and the realization of the right to food. Without food sovereignty, states cannot protect their people's right to access food.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I do hope that this short speech shed light upon the current policies of Member States and our potential collective response to the international food crisis. We need radical actions and fundamental solutions. If we are to combat the food crisis, those actions and solutions must be based on human rights, and therefore, the rights of peasants. I want to reassure that we are in this together.

Globalise the hope, globalise the struggle!