

FOOD SOVEREIGNTY AS A CONDITION TO DEVELOPMENT

**World Summit on Food Security
FAO, Rome 16 – 18 of November 2009**

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The New Constitution of the Republic of Ecuador rests on two main premises, which become mandates to the people of my country. The first one is the Mandate of Good Livelihood, which does not imply simply the good life, but the life with dignity that guarantees each Ecuadorian access to basic needs as adequate nutrition, education, health, and access to work. This connects to the Mandate of Food Sovereignty, more ample than the concept of food security. The latter implies only the existence of enough food, but the former requires that people has access to food as a condition for wellbeing and adequate nutrition. But access is guaranteed only by the generation of sufficient income to secure food.

Despite the efforts realized in the past two and a half years, Ecuador still has more than sixty per cent of the population under the line of poverty, with still forty percent of those living under absolute poverty. Paradoxically, in spite of its richness in natural resources and being the generator of about half of total exports income, the rural sector accounts for about eighty percent of total poverty in the country. Following Nobel Prize Economist Amartya Sen, poverty has to do with entitlement and deprivation: if individuals are not entitled to hold secure access to dignified conditions of work, they will not be able to meet the basic needs required to secure good livelihood conditions.

In order to comply with the constitutional mandates, deep structural change is required to correct the perverse effects prevailing in the country's rural sector. With agriculture being the dominant activity in the rural economy, land as the main means of production for crops is the factor that together with human labor determines the social outcome in which livelihood evolves. If 65% of the land is owned by just 2% of the landholders, while 62% of the tenants only hold about 6% of the land, we can readily see that there is high inequality in the structure of land tenure, as reflected by a land Gini coefficient of 0.81. If this information is coupled with the fact that about half of the total arable land in the country, not accounting for natural forests and reserve areas, is underexploited and/or not cultivated, it seems clear that changing the social structure of Ecuador's rural sector goes through a deep transformation of the land tenancy structure.

To accomplish this task, a full programme has been designed to redistribute 2.5 million hectares in the lapse of the next four years. But this effort would be vane if it was conceived only as a process of land distribution. It is also required to grant access to rural peoples of the means of production to elicit adequate cultivation and harvesting of the land. To this purpose the Government of Ecuador has focused agricultural policy as a programme of rural development giving priority to

the transfer of technology to smallholder, peasant agriculture. Seeds, soil conservation and improvement, irrigation, productive inputs and market support should be provided adequately. With this objective the state bank for agriculture is redirecting its credit to benefit peasant family farming to support land redistribution, and a rural extension programme is being re-launched after its dismantling more than twenty years ago as a consequence of the adherence of the country's agricultural policy to the Washington Consensus. About 1.5 billion US dollars are the estimated requirements to develop this programme through the next four years.

The L'Aquila commitment by the G-8 plus adopted earlier this year, to put 20 billion dollars to reduce world hunger by 2015 becomes relevant to the type of programs as the one planned in my country. But it will only be effective if at least two aspects are considered as required in the decision of the use of this fund. On the one hand, it is mandatory that the financial resources coming from this commitment be put at disposition of programs designed by the societies that are to overcome hunger and malnutrition in terms of food sovereignty, and not as donations in the form of food relief and donor countries transfers of agricultural surpluses under the name of food security.

On the other hand, it is necessary that international trade relations are duly revised. It becomes impossible to achieve sovereignty in food by eradicating poverty in the world, if asymmetric relations prevail in trade between developed and developing countries. In agriculture, the existence of unfair conditions between North and South are great impediment to overcome poverty. If the existence of agricultural supports in the form of subsidies and trade barriers are maintained by developed countries, the conditions of the world economy will remain unchanged and a new announced effort to reduce hunger and poverty will become the repetition of promises that have not been kept for many years counted to now.