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REPORT OF INFORMAL MEETING OF
INTERNATIONAL NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS

(Rome, 12 November 1991)

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I. INTRODUCTION

1. The Informal Meeting of Representatives of International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs) attending the 26th Session of the Conference as observers was convened on Tuesday, 12 November 1991. Following the proposal of the Ad Hoc Group of INGO Representatives to FAO residing in Rome, Ms. Francesca Ronchi Proja, Permanent Representative of the International Federation for Home Economics, was nominated Chairperson of the meeting. Ms. Lydie Rossini Van Hissenhoven, Permanent Representative of the International Council of Women, was named Vice Chairperson and presided over the afternoon session. This report is submitted for the attention of the Conference.
2. The informal meeting provided the opportunity for INGOs' views and suggestions on the activities and programmes of the Organization to be reported to the Conference. The Ad Hoc Group of INGO Representatives to FAO residing in Rome had been closely involved in preparing the meeting and selecting the three subjects for discussion: the International Conference on Nutrition, People's Participation in Rural Development, and Sustainable Development and Environment.
3. The Director of the Office of Inter-Agency Affairs informed the meeting of the proposals being put to the Conference in the 1992/93 Programme of Work and Budget regarding enhanced cooperation with NGOs, which had been identified as a priority for FAO. These proposals reflected a recognition of the value of NGO experience at grassroots level in reaching the rural poor and helping them to reinforce their own self-reliant strategies and organizations. At the same time, FAO also recognizes NGOs' capacity to sensitize public opinion and influence policy makers on development issues.
4. In structural terms, it was proposed to bring together the parts of FAO which have dealt with relations with INGOs (IAA) and with programmatic collaboration with national NGOs and NGO networks (FFHC/AD). In fact, FAO was a pioneer in the UN system in recognizing the importance of NGOs since the early sixties, when the Freedom from Hunger Campaign was established. Over the years FFHC/AD has built up networks of relations and concrete programmes of collaboration with NGOs in Africa, Asia and Latin America and the industrialized countries.
5. The outgoing Chairperson Giuseppina Pelà, representative of the International Federation of Agricultural Producers (IFAP), referred to the efforts of the INGO representatives residing in Rome in making this informal meeting more effective and meaningful and ensuring continuity from one Conference to the next. The activities of the Rome-based group during the last biennium were largely based on the recommendations made by the INGO meeting during the 1989 Conference. Meetings and discussions were held with various FAO units on subjects such as people's participation, WCAARD Progress Report, nutrition and environment. Joint statements were made at the COAG and Council sessions on subjects of common interest.
6. Ms. Francesca Ronchi Proja illustrated the procedures adopted for the meeting and pointed out that the report would be submitted to the Conference for consideration when the relevant subjects are discussed. The assistance provided by the FAO Secretariat to the Ad Hoc Group of INGO

Representatives residing in Rome was appreciated; without it the Group would not be able to carry out its activities with efficiency. Nevertheless she expressed the desirability of improved lines of communications on a more regular basis between INGOs and FAO, such as exist with other UN Agencies, where working groups with INGOs have been established on specific topics. The three subjects on the meeting's agenda were especially suitable for starting a more continuous dialogue.

II. INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON NUTRITION

7. The Assistant Director-General of the Economic and Social Policy Department introduced this agenda item. He indicated the scope of nutrition and diet-related problems throughout the world and briefed the meeting on the objectives and progress made in preparing for the ICN. He highlighted the "bottom-up" approach of the ICN, which would base its final results and recommendations on extensive country and regional level preparations. The encouraging response of member countries to the ICN in initiating multisectoral preparations at the country level was underlined. The need for meaningful NGO involvement at all levels of ICN preparations was also stressed. The meeting was informed of the substantive technical preparations under way, and apprised of the organizational arrangements of the ICN, as well as the regional/sub-regional meetings and the preparatory committee.

8. INGO Representatives expressed great interest in the ICN since most are involved in activities which cover one or more of the themes selected for the Conference. During the discussion, participants emphasized the need to:

- * enhance food security through increased food production, improved food processing, and expanded income generating opportunities;
- * ensure the quality and safety of food;
- * expand and improve levels of education and of nutrition education;
- * take account of consumer preferences for food;
- * improve market prices for food producers;
- * harmonize food safety standards and testing procedures;
- * guard against possible negative effects of food imports on traditional food habits;
- * enhance the role of communication and mass media;
- * focus on certain related health issues, such as the effects of AIDS on the rural population: depletion of its numbers, reduction of its activity, resulting in a threat to food security.

It was urged that more stress be given to the improvement of household food handling processes, including the selection, preparation and distribution of food within the family, and the related central role that women play in ensuring the nutritional well-being of families.

9. Participant INGOs were prepared in different ways to support and promote the ICN, and to actively participate in the implementation of the proposed Plan of Action. Support and participation could include:

- * promotional activities at national and international levels;
- * participation at national meetings and in the preparation of country papers;
- * participation in sub-regional and regional meetings;
- * providing inputs for the theme papers;
- * contribution to the Declaration and global Plan of Action;
- * participation in the Conference and in the implementation of the Plan of Action.

10. Limited funds are available to NGOs in general, but some may be able to contribute to the cost of helping people from developing countries to attend the ICN.

11. World Food Day provides an effective mechanism for promoting the ICN and its objectives. The 1992 theme for WFD is food and nutrition. The participants encouraged cooperation with WFD and the use of its worldwide NGO network for the promotion and follow-up of the ICN.

12. Efforts to link the ICN to the World Summit for Children were appreciated, and the International Year of the Family (1994) was also mentioned as a vehicle for implementation of ICN follow up.

13. INGO Representatives appreciated the intention of the ICN organizers to invite NGOs to participate in the ICN, as expressed in Doc. 91/27, para. 34 and 35. It was noted that a number of national NGOs have participated in the national committees. Clear indications are required on procedures for assuring NGO participation at the forthcoming sub-regional and regional meetings being organized by FAO and WHO, as well as at the Preparatory Committee meetings prior to the Conference and at the Conference itself. While realizing that the ICN is planned as a governmental Conference, the efforts, awareness and contributions of the NGOs will be very important in determining its success, especially that of its follow up. The INGO Representatives noted that the time available for preparations was getting short and urged that, in order for timely arrangements to be made for NGO participation, a small NGO/FAO/WHO working group be established as soon as possible.

14. The FAO Secretariat welcomed the interest expressed by the participants and appreciated and took note of the suggestions made concerning the themes of the Conference, for which technical inputs were requested. The proposals for NGO support were considered very useful for promoting the Conference and implementing its Plan of Action. The offer of several participants to use their information channels and newsletters to promote the ICN was accepted, and an information note was made available for this purpose. The intention of FAO to recommend the participation of NGOs in the forthcoming preparatory events and in the ICN was confirmed. The Secretariat welcomed the suggestion to set up an NGO/FAO/WHO working

group, including a range of relevant organizations, to advise on NGO participation in the ICN. This will be discussed in a preliminary way with the Rome-based INGO Group.

III. PEOPLE'S PARTICIPATION IN RURAL DEVELOPMENT

15. The Assistant Director-General, Economic and Social Policy Department of FAO thanked the INGO Representatives for the strong support they had given to FAO's initiatives to promote rural development through people's participation. He acknowledged that INGO Representatives had contributed in promoting and actively participating in the discussions on this subject in the Committee on Agriculture and the FAO Council in May and June 1989.

16. In each of the seven areas articulated in the Plan of Action on People's Participation in Rural Development submitted to the Conference (C 91/22), the important role of rural people's organizations was emphasized and suggestions were made to strengthen them as voluntary, self-reliant and democratic organizations. FAO would act as a catalyst and an advocate to encourage and assist Member Governments and NGOs in promoting participatory activities and would use the traditional instruments of development intervention, i.e. institution-building and exchange of experience as well as policy advice.

17. After the approval of the Plan, FAO intended to give it the widest possible publicity using existing NGO contacts and networks, including the INGOs represented in Rome. FAO would also continue to organize national workshops, seminars and fora on people's participation which bring together representatives of Government, promotional NGOs, rural people's organizations and FAO. FAO would also intensify its efforts with interested governments to encourage them to involve NGOs more directly in rural development projects.

18. INGO representatives expressed their support for the aims and Objectives of the Plan of Action as a necessary response to the worldwide demand for greater people's participation and self-determination. They stressed the importance of freedom of association as a basic pre-condition for people's participation, and of strengthening the internal capacities of people's organizations to make them more autonomous and self-reliant.

19. This was also true with regard to countries with economies in transition, where the international cooperative movement and its supporting structures could play an important facilitating role. The key function that international bodies such as the Joint Committee for the Promotion and Advancement of Cooperatives (COPAC) could perform in coordinating assistance to and strengthening the local capacities of farmer cooperative organizations at local, national, regional and international levels was emphasized.

20. The participants considered that the Plan would serve as a useful basis for defining FAO and government priorities and actions in this field, as well as encouraging NGO's participation. The meeting looked forward to the endorsement of the Plan by the FAO Conference and stressed the importance of giving it wide publicity. In this context, it would be useful to prepare a popular version of the Plan, following the model of the Plan of Action on Women in Development.

21. The participants stressed the promotion of dialogue between governments, NGOs and rural people's organizations. The cost-effectiveness to governments and donors of involving NGOs in the implementation of the Plan of Action activities was pointed out.

22. The importance of women's participation in rural development was particularly emphasized. In this context, the need to sensitize governments to women's rights and participation issues, especially concerning access to education, land and credit, was highlighted.

23. A preliminary discussion took place on the organizational and operational phases which should immediately follow the approval of the Plan by the Conference. Particular attention was paid to the need for monitoring and coordination as well as adequate allocation of resources.

24. The implementation of the Plan of Action should facilitate a more continuous cooperation between FAO and INGOs which have experience in promoting participatory activities.

25. In response to the interventions of INGO representatives, the ADG, ES, expressed his appreciation for their encouraging and favourable reaction to the Plan of Action. He expressed his hope that the adoption of the Plan by the Conference would mark a new phase of dialogue and partnership between FAO, Governments and NGOs in this vital area.

IV. SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND ENVIRONMENT

26. The Special Adviser to the Director-General/ADG for Environment and Sustainable Development introduced the subject, referring to Conference Resolution 3/89, the FAO/Netherlands Conference on Environment and Development and the den Bosch Declaration and Agenda for Action. He also introduced the International Cooperative Programme Framework for Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development (ICPF/SARD) recommended by the den Bosch Conference, to be considered by the 26th Session of the FAO Conference as contained in document C91/30, "FAO Activities on Environment and Sustainable Development". He indicated that the definition of sustainable development, as adopted by the FAO Council, included environmental concerns as one of the facets, along with economic feasibility, social acceptability and appropriate technology.

27. The participants complimented FAO on its initiative to promote the concept of Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development (SARD), in particular through the organization of the den Bosch Conference in collaboration with the Government of the Netherlands. A number of INGOs present at the meeting had sent representatives to the den Bosch Conference. The participants appreciated the multi-dimensional approach of the den Bosch Declaration and its Agenda for Action, agreed on the balanced definition of sustainable development and emphasized the linkages existing between socio-economic and ecological aspects of the environment and development interface.

28. It was highlighted that demographic growth will lead to 3 billion more inhabitants by year 2025 affecting particularly low-income countries. The importance of sustainable agriculture and the necessity to approach environmental problems through sustainable use of resources and local people's participation were emphasized. Appropriate technologies and

farming systems, alternative sources of energy and the diversification of rural incomes were considered essential for sustainable agriculture and for the protection of the environment. Sustainable development requires improvements in rural infrastructures, including health and education.

29. Trade barriers and protectionism imposed by high-income countries were not conducive to adjustments leading to SARD, and forced the low-income countries into further degradation and depletion of their natural resource base. Environmental issues are global concerns and must be addressed as such.

30. Farmers' and rural organizations were expected to play an important role in the implementation of SARD and NGOs would be able to collaborate with FAO in their various capacities, especially in the mobilization of local communities. Governments and international organizations should encourage the initiatives of local people, and facilitate their access to land, water and credit.

31. Participants highlighted the importance of training, involving women as well as men, information exchange and public awareness. The role of international organizations, especially FAO, in providing the right information for a better understanding of environmental conditions and the need for improved consumption patterns, sound use of inputs and sustainable use of natural resources, were also emphasized. The public must also be correctly informed when environmental disasters occur.

32. INGOs expressed satisfaction with the active participation of FAO in UNCED preparations. They provided information on their own activities, aimed at sensitizing public opinion through seminars, workshops and resolutions adopted for the preservation of the eco-system, and at mobilizing their constituencies for action in connection with UNCED. They endorsed the efforts which have been made to include sustainable agriculture as a main component of Agenda 21 and indicated their desire to collaborate with FAO in the area of sustainable development and agriculture.

33. The Special Adviser to the Director General/ADG for Environment and Sustainable Development appreciated the interest and awareness expressed by the INGOs, and their capacity to help ensure a more balanced perspective on sustainable development which includes not only environmental considerations, but also social justice, economic benefits and better terms of trade within and between countries. In particular, the views of farmers should be voiced more loudly in the UNCED forum. In thanking the participants for their interest in the subject and support for FAO's action, he agreed that ways should be found to improve exchange of information between the NGOs and FAO and to develop further cooperation.

V. MODALITIES FOR ENHANCED FAO/NGO COOPERATION

34. Participants expressed their appreciation for the priority assigned to NGO cooperation and the measures proposed in the 1992/93 Programme of Work and Budget to strengthen efforts in the area. The establishment of the new Office for External Relations and of an Organization-wide focal point for NGO collaboration was welcomed and would be followed with interest in the coming two year period.

35. The question of what mechanisms might be established in order to enhance FAO/NGO dialogue was a recurrent theme throughout the discussion on all three items. There was a consensus that FAO/NGO consultation should be rendered more regular and substantive. Participants expressed the view that it would be useful to set up informal working groups with NGOs on specific subjects or events, like the ICN, as existed in some other UN agencies. It was pointed out that such groups could not be considered to represent all NGOs enjoying status with FAO, much less the NGO sector as a whole, but could be useful instruments for making available NGO experience in specific substantive areas. The importance of consultation and cooperation with national NGOs was also stressed, and the desirability of using NGO networks which are already in place, as well as the World Food Day Committees, rather than creating new structures. It was suggested that, given the multiplicity of NGO initiatives at all levels in areas of relevance to FAO and the proposed creation of the new Office for External Relations, attention should be given to promoting a range of modalities for enhanced cooperation.

APPENDIX A

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