

Food Sovereignty

Trade representatives from around the world will be meeting at the WTO Ministerial meeting in Cancun, Mexico in September. One of the main items on the agenda is the Agreement on Agriculture and the further liberalization of agricultural markets in the U.S. and abroad. One of the issues that will be debated by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society organizations (CSOs) in conjunction with the discussion of the Agreement on Agriculture is “food sovereignty.”

Food sovereignty is related to the whole issue of food security. In fact, the concept was developed by Via Campesina, an international group of peasant farmers, farm workers and small farmers, and brought to the 1996 World Food Summit in Rome where the issue of food security was the focus of the meeting. While this may seem like a side-issue or a distraction from the ongoing WTO debates, this is an example of the type of issues that could derail agricultural negotiations in the WTO.

It is the contention of Via Campesina that food security cannot be achieved without food sovereignty. Via Campesina defines food sovereignty as a country’s right “to define their agricultural and food policy, without any dumping vis-à-vis third countries.” Food sovereignty holds that the United States’ decision to establish a policy to support its farmers should not be subject to external constraints from organizations like NAFTA, the WTO or other groups to the extent that such policies do not contribute to the exporting of agricultural products at below the cost of production.

The remedy for below-the-cost-of-production exports is the parallel right of importing countries to establish tariffs to offset the subsidized exports that are being dumped on them. Countries are “entitled to impose taxes on excessively cheap imports, if they commit themselves in favor of sustainable farm production, and if they control production on the inner market so as to avoid struc-

tural surpluses.” This deals with one of the complaints of developing countries that their exports have been hurt by American production that has been pushed onto the world market at below the cost of production.

At the same time, food sovereignty does not require the U.S. to dismantle whatever program it establishes in support of its farmers. One of the goals is to stop the race to the bottom in terms of price and the resulting disintegration of rural communities.

Food sovereignty also recognizes the right of “consumers to be able to decide what they consume, and how and by whom it is produced.” If American consumers want to buy and eat “born, raised and processed in the U.S.” meats, that is their right and is not seen as a restraint on trade.

This also means that if consumers in Europe do not want to eat GMO products, that is their right, and their requirement of the labeling of products containing GMOs from the perspective of food sovereignty is not seen as an indirect trade barrier.

Central to the concept of food sovereignty is the participation of the populace in the establishment of agricultural policies. In other words, a country’s farm policies should not be the exclusive realm of the large players in the agricultural sector.

The concept of food sovereignty is clearly a big umbrella that could cover policy stances with widely diverse impacts and no doubt would be challenged from a number of quarters.

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