



Slow Food®

NEW YORK, MONDAY, 14 MAY, 2012

UNITED NATIONS PERMANENT FORUM ON INDIGENOUS ISSUES, ELEVENTH SESSION
HALF DAY DISCUSSION ON THE RIGHT OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLE TO FOOD AND FOOD
SOVEREIGNTY

I am honored to be here with you today and to take part in this discussion on the right of indigenous peoples to food and food sovereignty. I wish to thank the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, Ms Myrna Cunningham and all the various indigenous partners for inviting the Slow Food movement.

For twenty-five years now, Slow Food has sought to preserve agricultural and food biodiversity as a tool for ensuring a future for our planet and humanity as a whole. Combined with climate change, the progressive loss of diversity of plant and animal species could prove a terrible scourge in the years to come.

It is necessary to point out, though, that it would be senseless to defend biodiversity without also defending the cultural diversity of peoples and their right to govern their own territories. The right of peoples to have control over their land, to grow food, to hunt, fish and gather according to their own needs and decisions, is inalienable. This diversity is the greatest creative force on earth, the only condition possible for the maintenance and transmission of an outstanding heritage of knowledge to future generations.

Slow Food has based its existence on these principles and to maintain them it has built a network of food communities that has now spread to over 170 countries. The network, which is called Terra Madre, came into being in 2004. Since then it has captured attention and consensus in thousands of communities of farmers, fishers, pastoralists and artisans in every corner of the planet. Terra Madre is neither a party nor a union. It is simply a network, a movement of people who, with mutual respect for each other's diversities, seek dialogue, cultural exchange and solidarity. It all centers round the right to food.

If it is to be shared, food should be: good, insofar as it is a pleasure to eat for all; clean, insofar as it does not destroy the environment and resources of Mother Earth; fair, insofar as it respects workers of land, sea, pasture and forest, who by procuring our sustenance give us life itself.

All peoples should have access to good, clean and fair food. All peoples must have adequate food from their own natural resources or from markets of their choice. All peoples have the right to produce their food using traditional practices and cultures according to their taste preferences and food knowledge.

Following these principles and on these bases, many indigenous communities in every continent have given life to the Terra Madre network and taken an active part in the global conferences that have been organized in Turin, Italy, every two years since 2004. At the last conference in 2010, the opening ceremony was entirely dedicated to the reflections of indigenous communities in their own ancestral languages. Since then many initiatives have been launched thanks to the commitment of indigenous peoples. In 2011 the first "Terra Madre Indigenous People" congress was held in Jokmökk, in



northern Sweden, home to the Sami people. Hosted and organized by the Sami themselves, it was attended by indigenous people from 61 countries. We were honored to be hosted on Sami land.

The meeting was supported by IFAD, the International Fund for Agricultural Development, and by the Christensen Foundation. These meetings are valuable not only for their exchange of ideas and good practices, but also and above all because they generate self-esteem among the participating communities. In them one perceives a strong sense of belonging to a great community of destiny, of not being left alone in one's own local area, of having an important, constructive role to play.

This awareness was fortified and exalted in 2007, when the United Nations General Assembly's Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Populations affirmed with absolute clarity the outstanding contribution indigenous peoples have made to the diversity and richness of civilization, well-being and social organizations, reasserting the importance of the fight against discrimination that for over 500 years has spawned racism, marginalization and exclusion.

At last, the international community was solemnly announcing that respect for diverse cultures and the right of every community to be different strengthens the entire human rights system.

Slow Food not only shares these principles but also believes that at this moment in time, a moment of economic, ecological and financial crisis, turning the planet's cultural diversity to account may help to set off virtuous, sustainable practices.

Human well-being depends on the universal right to quality food for all. On the one hand, a large chunk of humanity is suffering from obesity and other overeating-related illnesses; on the other, over one billion human beings are undernourished and the scandal of death by starvation has yet to be erased.

Obesity and hunger are two faces of the same coin. They are the symbol of the failure of a global food system based mainly on industrial production depending mostly on fossil energy resources. Never before has the need to radically change a food system that destroys the environment and the dignity of field and food workers been so highly felt.

Looking back at our traditions and more sustainable food systems is by no means idle nostalgia. The reintroduction of local food products is essential for the feeding of the planet. Here we see true democracy in action — the participation of all for the common good.

For too long now, food production has sidelined or restricted the knowledge and skills of women, the elderly and the indigenous, relegating these people to the bottom rung of the social ladder. Arrogantly and insolently, humanity has cultivated an idea of development and progress based on the conviction that the planet's resources are infinite and that human



domination of nature is limitless. The march towards this idea of progress has left women, the elderly and indigenous populations at the end of the line with no one left to listen to them.

All the drama of modern reality is now revealing itself for what it is: the “glorious march” of progress is now on the brink of a precipice, the present crisis the fruit of greed and ignorance. Yet nature’s warning is even more frightening than the financial crisis. It is telling us that without a change in speed and direction, the fate of humanity will be tragic. Once we are on the brink, we shall have no choice but to retrace our footsteps. And at that point, it will be “the last” who will show us the way. We will depend on the sensitivity and pragmatism of women, the wisdom and memory of the elderly. At that point, we will also realize that, insofar as they have always practiced the economy of nature, it is indigenous peoples who hold the key for a more sustainable approach to the right to food.

Caution is in order, however. It should be clear to everyone just how much evil has been wrought on these people in the name of progress and the supremacy of the market. So much knowledge and wisdom, so many fruits of the earth have been seized from indigenous communities by unscrupulous pharmaceutical and food multinationals. Before setting out on our quest, we ought to return the loot and stand up against the logic of unsustainable industrial agriculture in indigenous areas.

The whole world and the international community, which has its headquarters here, have to put a stop to land grabbing in many areas of the planet, especially in Africa. The phenomenon is riding roughshod over the right to food and subsistence of many indigenous and farming communities and has to be stopped.

We all need to respect and promote natural and subsistence economies, for too long considered inferior to the economy of global finance. If we fail to decolonize our own thinking, we are going to achieve nothing. We have to forget all ideas of supremacy and the force of money and greed.

There is growing worldwide awareness that boosting local economies and agriculture and respect for small communities are a way of reconciling ourselves with the earth and nature. Lack of water, loss of soil fertility, genetic plant and animal erosion, unprecedented food waste — these are all problems that will remain unsolved if we continue to produce, distribute and consume food under the ongoing food system.

Historical reflection and analysis of reality tell us that many good practices and the traditional empirical wisdom of indigenous peoples deserve to be studied with care and attention. In the field of agriculture, the new discipline of agroecology is nothing other than the capacity to repropose the dialogue between traditional skills and scientific community in a modern key. It would be dishonest not to acknowledge that indigenous peoples have a historically sustainable approach to food production. They know how to maintain soil fertility by using natural resources and methods and improving the resilience of crops and breeding stock.



Thanks to knowledge acquired over the generations, indigenous communities have reinforced traditional knowledge systems, bolstering local economies and ensuring livelihoods. These communities have always preferred fresh, local produce to processed, imported products. The policy whereby many governments and agencies counter and threaten the agricultural practices of indigenous peoples, such as crop rotation and pastoral farming, is short-sighted and wrong.

Slow Food shares this Permanent Forum's goal of defending the indigenous practices that in many parts of the world are working to maintain shifting cultivation. All the international collaborations that advocate the autonomy and reinforcement of cultural diversities by maintaining a spirit of fraternity and fighting against any form of exclusion and superiority deserve our full, unconditional support. It is with this spirit that we personally have followed the work of the Indigenous Partnership for Agrobiodiversity, directed by Phrang Roy, in promoting food sovereignty and raising the profile of local food through its Food Festivals. The results are very encouraging and help to make gastronomic sciences not the privilege of an elite few but a right for all without discrimination.

The collaboration between Slow Food and the Indigenous Partnership will lead to the organization of the second Terra Madre Indigenous People event in April 2014 in northeast India. We sincerely hope many of you will be able to take part in this meeting, which will be unique of its kind.

As you will have gathered from my words and the spirit in which I have spoken, I set great store by the need to share the values of diversity and awareness that these ideas are slowly spreading among the world's peoples. It is simply wrong to take possession of the common goods of the earth. In the words of Native Americans, "Teach your children that we have taught our children that the earth is our mother... Whatever befalls the earth, befalls the sons of the earth. If men spit upon the ground, they spit upon themselves... This we know: the earth does not belong to man, man belongs to the earth... Our land is more valuable than your money. It will last forever".

Even as the arrogant are riding roughshod over the humble in many parts of the world, even as the highest hierarchies of knowledge and wisdom are leaving no leeway to farmers, shepherds, fishers and the weakest members of their number — women, the elderly and the indigenous — we are nonetheless growing increasingly aware that the only way out of the ongoing crisis is reconciliation with the earth. The good practices of the fight against waste, of sharing and giving, of the return to the land can be achieved slowly without frenzy and anxiety. The earth itself reminds us of the healing value of time. "There's more time than life and money" is an old saying where I come from. All humanity is indebted to the indigenous peoples who have abided by these principles in their daily lives. You have always taught your children that all things are interconnected and that the chance to take care of all creatures is the biggest gift bestowed upon us. May the lesson guide us. And speaking of gifts, your welcome to this meeting here today is and always will be one of the most precious I have ever received. Thank you.