

It is a joy to be with all of you and to coordinate this working group on “**Food Sovereignty and Access to Food.**” I wish to provide some very brief contextual remarks and also pose some possible questions for discussion on this most important timely topic.

In discussing the subject of “Food Sovereignty and Access to Food”, it seems opportune to first affirm the Church’s teaching as regards the God-given rights and dignity of every human person. This is one important starting point, as it were, for all discussion as relates the human being’s relationship to the fruits of nature which sustain us.

Another starting point of reflection is the truth that **natural resources are God’s gift to everyone.** As Pope Benedict XVI wrote in his encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, “integral human development is closely linked to the obligations which flow from *man’s relationship with the natural environment.*” For this reason, food must be seen as God’s gift to all people, and the use we make of food, entails a shared responsibility for all humanity, especially

the poor and future generations.

Hunger, on the other hand, is often the result of selfish behaviors that, born in the human heart, manifest themselves in the lack of access to food for many. Pope Benedict XVI has asked:

*How can we be silent about the fact that even food has become the object of speculation or is tied to the course of a financial market that, lacking definite rules and poor in moral principles, appears anchored to the sole objective of profit?*

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the world already produces enough food to feed every human being and could feed 12 billion people, or roughly double the current world population.

Too often, however, attention is diverted from the needs of populations, insufficient emphasis is placed on work in the fields, and the goods of the earth are not given adequate protection. As a result, economic imbalance is produced, and the inalienable rights and dignity of every human person are ignored (Pope Benedict XVI to Director General of FAO on the Occasion of World Food Day, October 15, 2010).

The lack of progress in meeting the objectives of the World Food Summit and Millennium Goal No. 1 to halve the

number of hunger victims by 2015 is both frustrating and disappointing.

While the Church does not dictate absolute technical or governmental solutions in this regard, She proposes sustainable food production strategies and programs in harmony with authentic human development. Pope Benedict XVI has observed that:

*The international community often limits its food assistance to emergency situations. Instead, it needs to address the problem with long-term strategies that consider the human dimension of development and not just economic benefits.*

Many nations have recognized the “right to food” in the *World Food Summit Declarations*, and more than 150 States are parties to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). Nonetheless, many States actively engage in trade policies that are detrimental to the enjoyment of human rights in other countries.

The relatively new concept of “**food sovereignty**” is an attempt to seek an alternative system that could better ensure the right to food. Food sovereignty seeks to guarantee food security

first, by favoring local production for local markets. However, given the relative newness of the concept as such, we must acknowledge that its very interpretation and definition are very much a matter of debate.

The concept or “movement” of food sovereignty embodies a call for greater access to resources by the poor. Food sovereignty puts food security first and is not “anti-trade” as such, but rather, treats trade as a means to an end, rather than as an end in itself. Food sovereignty emphasizes locally-orientated small-scale peasant agriculture producing for consumption inside the country, as opposed to the export-oriented, industrialized agriculture models.

Food sovereignty rejects the proposition that food is just another commodity for international agribusiness. Instead, it puts providers and consumers at the center of decision-making. This people-centered approach is deeply rooted in local production, based on the principal rights of farmers to produce the quantity and

quality of food that they need to secure their livelihoods and those of future generations.

During the World Food Summit in 2002, an NGO/CSO (Civil Society Organizations) entitled “Forum on Food Sovereignty”, which was attended by representatives of over 400 farmers’ organizations, defined the concept of food sovereignty as follows:

*“Food sovereignty is the right of peoples, communities, and countries to define their own agricultural, labor, fishing, food and land policies which are ecologically, socially, economically and culturally appropriate to their unique circumstances. It includes the true right to food and to produce food, which means that all people have the right to safe, nutritious and culturally appropriate food and to food-producing resources and the ability to sustain themselves and their societies. Food sovereignty means the primacy of people’s and community’s rights to food and food production, over trade concerns.”*

In accordance with the principle of subsidiarity, the Church proposes that decisions as regards agriculture *involve and include the best interests of respective local farmers, laborers, and consumers*. Subsidiarity, as relates to agriculture, specifically calls

for greater access to economic opportunities in local and regional food systems.

Partially for this reason, the Holy Father has called for support of international efforts to promote the family farm as a key component of national economies, since the traditional nuclear family, *“has shown itself to be a competent instrument for agricultural production and for training of new generations.”*

Such initiatives do not, however, eliminate the possibility of high-tech productivity, large-scale business or global collaboration in agriculture. On the contrary, a sustainable and comprehensive management of food production demands that human intelligence be directed to moral technological and scientific research. But at the same time, the Church proposes that necessary and particular emphasis be placed on the **“human dimension of food production”**, and especially, the inherent dignity of human beings and their legitimate needs and interests.

In this perspective, it could be useful to consider the new possibilities that are opening up through proper use of traditional,

as well as innovative farming techniques.

It is important, moreover, to emphasize that solidarity with poor countries in the process of development can point towards a solution of the current global crisis, as politicians and directors of international institutions have now begun to realize. Institutional means of regulating the exploitation of farmers and resources used in food production can be important in combating the negative effects of globalization on food production.

**While respecting the importance and necessity of private property**, the question of equitable agrarian reform in developing countries should not be ignored. Indeed, there is an urgent moral need for a renewed sense of *solidarity*, especially in relationships between developing countries and highly industrialized countries.

At this time, I wish to propose some questions to facilitate further thoughts or consideration of the topic of “Food Sovereignty and Access to Food.” These questions by no means have to be addressed, and the “floor”, as it were, is open....

## QUESTIONS

- 1) First, I wish to ask, what interpretations of the concept of “food sovereignty” might conflict with Church teaching?
  
- 2) What is the proper role and normative stance of the government as regards procuring access to food? How might public and private collaboration address food sovereignty concerns and access to food, particularly for the poor? Examples?
  
- 3) Should the “nature of the stakeholders” change the approach to food sovereignty and access? Are there cultural variants for “food security”? For example, should a different model or guidelines be proposed for indigenous (i.e. first nations) peoples?
  
- 4) What are possible positive bilateral initiatives of countries who seek initial implementation of the Right to Food?
  
- 5) What is the role of the State (and international community) vis-à-vis civil society in creating food sovereignty policy?
  
- 6) How can regulated trade and international law facilitate a recognition of the legitimate rights of individuals to food and augment access to food on the part of all?
  
- 7) Genetically modified food and “food sovereignty”??