

Civil Society Statement at the Closing of the European Forum on Sustainable Rural Development

We, civil society organisations representing various constituencies of the rural poor, had actively participated in the European Forum on Sustainable Rural Development during the past four days, and we would like to articulate the following views at the conclusion of the conference:

We recognise the significant improvement in this EU conference in terms of civil society participation: from having only one representative of the farmers' organisations during the first conference in 2002 to the relatively significant number at the current conference. We thank the EU, the conference organisers and the European NGOs, which facilitated this process.

However, the framework set by the Forum and the choice of presenters and discussion leaders leaves a feeling that it is still a long way to go to have a debate with mutual respect and full equal footing among civil society organizations, social movements and institutional representatives.

We recognise that there was an overall consensus on the central importance of family farms and other rural producers such as pastoralists, artisanal fisherfolks, artisans, farm workers, indigenous peoples, and especially youth and women in solving poverty and fighting exclusion. That the conference re-valued the importance of state's role in the development process is also acknowledged by us. It is also reassuring that there was a consensus that civil society, including farmer and peasant organisations, plays a critical role in any rural development process. We hope that the donors will maintain their commitment to these consensus points.

There are however alarming trends in the discussions and conclusions of the conference. First, the discussion on land was thin, and omitted the questions of redistribution and restitution. The more comprehensive framework set by the ICARRD final declaration, which was signed by 94 governments, the EU Guidelines on Land Policies and the Guidelines on the Right to Food, which all member states of the FAO have ratified in 2004, were totally neglected. The overarching bias was on instituting legal frameworks usually construed as formalisation of private individual property rights in natural resources.

Second, the discussion on migration was narrowly based on the problematic assumption that it is a natural process of human development, blind to the fact that most migration processes are socio-economic and political dislocations and are usually outcomes of exclusionary development processes in rural areas. Sustainable development cannot and should not depend on forced migration driven by hunger.

Third, there was a strong advocacy by the donor community for EPAs as a key feature of rural development: despite consistent reminder from farmers' organisations that such agreements often perpetuate, not solve, rural poverty. Despite the pronouncement by Minister Heidemarie Wieczorek-Zeul that the EU has no market access agenda in Africa, officials refused to recognise the need for policy spaces of African governments to protect local producers from unfair competition. By pushing for market liberalisation through EPA and the WTO, the EU is threatening rural livelihoods in Africa that it pretends to promote.

Overall, there was a very strong and consistent bias by the donor community to define rural development as merely 'economic development'. Pushing for such a narrow perspective on development, ignores the fact that rural life includes social, political and cultural dimensions and values.

Therefore, on balance, there were both reassuring and alarming discussions and conclusions in the conference. We shall continue to engage the EU on these alarming concerns. We will closely monitor the development of initiatives put forward in this Forum, particularly the adoption of a Code of Conduct for Donors. Once donors reach an agreement on this, we would like to recommend them to start a debate with social movements and other civil society organisations on this at all levels. Meanwhile, we will also move on to consolidate our gains from this process. The commitment of the EU during this conference to actively assist civil society, especially farmers and peasant organisations, to enhance their autonomy and capacity in the framework of food sovereignty is one significant step towards this.

P.S. We thank you for saving us from a pointless debate on a "New Green Revolution" for Africa.

Berlin, 21.6.2007