

THE RIGHT FOR FOOD – Public Seminar organised by Koperattiva Kummerç Ġust

*Information provided by Angele Deguara, Koperattiva Kummerç Ġust,
for TRIALOG Information Service TIS, www.trialog.or.at/tis*

Koperattiva Kummerç Ġust, the only Fair Trade Organisation in Malta organised a public seminar on Saturday 6th December 2008 on the theme of the right for food. The seminar, which was held at the Millennium Chapel Hall in Paceville, is part of a two-year project co-funded by the European Commission called Enlarging Fair in which KKG is a participating partner together with Fair Trade Organisations from four other New Member States (Hungary, Slovakia, Czech Republic and Slovenia) under the coordination of Pangea-Niente Troppo, an Italian Fair Trade Organisation. KKG is also participating in this project as a member of Ctm Altromercato. The seminar was well attended by representatives of the participating International Fair Trade organisations as well as by members of local NGOs, the PL (Malta Labour Party), Alternattiva Demokratika, the Green Party and the general public.

One of the objectives of the Enlarging Fair project is the design and implementation of a common campaign which will be launched in all the participating countries during the second part of 2009 and which has already been launched in Italy. The focus of the common campaign is the right to food and will deal mainly with the issues of food security and food sovereignty and the role of Fair Trade in helping poor producers overcome their unjust disadvantage in the world market. In line with the campaign theme, the guest speakers at the seminar addressed a number of issues related to food production and distribution both from a global and local perspective.

The seminar was chaired by Dr Adrian Grima who in his introduction referred to Via Campesina, an international peasant movement comprised of the world's poorest farmers and landless workers, who in 1996 came up with a new vision for a worldwide future for food. The vision is “food sovereignty” which he views as a food revolution which ensures global justice as it empowers poor producers whose livelihood has so far been dominated by global powers such as international institutions, corporations and governments. It is a revolution because fighting world hunger advances the agenda on all United Nations Millennium Development Goals. Dr Grima also referred to the threats faced by small farmers in the Mediterranean region and how, as the neo-liberal model is once again showing its vulnerability, local food production should be promoted and local resources exploited to ensure food security against the threats of an unjust, environment-polluting export-oriented industrial agriculture.

The first speaker to address the seminar was Ms Borbala Simonyi, a Hungarian expert in food sovereignty who gave a theoretical overview of the complex relationship between the right for food, food security and sovereignty from a global perspective. She explained that the *right for food* is a legal concept which is “realised when every man, woman and child, alone or in community with others has physical and economic access at all times to adequate food or means for its procurement in ways consistent with human

dignity”. *Food security* is a technical concept which refers to the access to food both in terms of food availability as well as being able to afford food which is available. States are not accountable for food security. *Food sovereignty* is a political concept which offers an alternative framework that challenges the mainstream, liberal trade-based food security paradigm. It refers to the right of people or countries to define their own food policies which are appropriate (ecologically, culturally, economically, socially) to their circumstances. Food sovereignty implies a true right for safe, nutritious food for the people; values food producers and providers; localises food systems so that producers and consumers are close to each other; puts control locally; builds knowledge and skills and works with nature.

From the local agricultural scene, Mr Mario Salerno, President of the Malta Organic Agricultural Movement, spoke about the food production crisis and the health and environmental hazards linked to the use of agricultural pesticides and other chemicals for the production of genetically modified organisms. He explained the advantages of organic farming that his Movement promotes and the importance of spreading awareness among the population about the type of food we are being fed by the profit-oriented mass agricultural industry. Mr Salerno’s intervention was followed by the contribution of another local speaker, Mr Mario Cardona on behalf of the Manikata Farmers’ Cooperative who explained that the cooperative was originally set up in response to a government proposal to destroy agricultural land for the development of a golf course and when the proposal was dropped, the farmers decided to embark on a new project preserving and promoting Maltese agriculture and its produce, organising guided tours and food tasting activities and producing local products such as wine and carob syrup.

Dr Gordon Knox, retired geologist and Visiting Lecturer at the University of Malta addressed the issue of water, warning that Malta is heading for a crisis unless it drastically changes its policies and practices in relation to water management and conservation. Water provision is unevenly distributed and in countries like Malta where water is scarce, and natural provision has to be supplemented by expensive reverse osmosis desalination plants, greater caution has to be applied. Once water resources are lost by displacement or pollution, they are very expensive to replace. Dr Knox argued that considering the expenses and energy involved in water desalination, the uncontrolled water extraction from both registered and illegal boreholes, limited water recycling and the huge volume of virtual water (water embedded in commodities or used in the production of commodities) which Malta imports, Malta’s situation is highly unsustainable. This is further exacerbated by an anticipated rise in the population, an issue which for Dr Knox is an issue of grave concern worldwide. He suggested that between two extreme scenarios which he called the “Drift Scenario” (where changes from the present scenario are minimal) and the “Ruthless Conservation Scenario”, Malta urgently needs to take the latter course. This involves a massive public relations campaign aimed at educating the public and effectively changing the present wasteful attitude towards this priceless resource which is very often taken for granted.

The final intervention was made by Ms Claudia Piacenza from Pangea-Niente Troppo and one of the co-ordinators of the Enlarging Fair Project. She referred to the millions of

people who are undernourished in different parts of the world especially in India and China. Projecting the campaign slogan “La Fame non e’ giusta”, she argued that the present food crisis is due to “unnatural” causes and has its roots in unsustainable agricultural policies; unfair trade regulation; agricultural benefits distorting the market situation; systematic marginalisation of small producers; long-term lack of agricultural investments in the Global South and indifference to the preservation of existing ecosystems. Multinational corporations make huge profits from food scarcity. While producers of chemical fertilisers, sellers of agricultural products and seed merchants benefit from the existing unjust and unsustainable system, it is small landowners, landless workers and farmers located in marginal areas of the world which are often ecologically vulnerable who suffer most from this global imbalance. It is here where Fair Trade comes in. Ms Piacenza believes that Fair Trade has a significant role to play in the struggle against global poverty and injustice. Fair Trade has the role of educating different sectors of society and informing them about the roots and causes of hunger as well as to promote Fair Trade as a concrete alternative choice to fight global trade inequalities; as a force of change reflected in our everyday responsible lifestyle choices.

The theme of “The Right for Food” will be further developed in the 2009 Worldfest event. This is a yearly KKG event and this year it will take place on 9th May, World Fair Trade Day..