

Summary Report from the Chair 5th National Assembly of Food Secure Canada

The theme for Food Secure Canada's National Assembly, held in Ottawa November 7-10th, was "Reclaiming Our Food System: A Call to Action". The implication was that the globalized food system is beyond the control of either producers or eaters; recognizing that it is also ecologically unsustainable and unjust, we need to get together to figure out how to take it back. This thinking echoes the principles behind the concept of "food sovereignty" developed by the global peasant movement La Via Campesina, that emphasize local control of both food production and markets, ecological sustainability, and respect for traditional knowledge and foodways. In the event, it became clear that reclaiming the food system requires a total transformation of the way we think about it.

In this regard, the keynote session on Friday night did indeed strike the key note. In collaboration with Rights and Democracy, Food Secure Canada invited Olivier de Schutter, the UN Rapporteur on the Human Right to Food, to address the topic The Food Crisis and Climate Change. This event was held on the evening of November 7th at the Bronson Centre in Ottawa and attracted an audience of about 500 people. Simultaneous translation English/French was provided.

M. de Schutter pointed out that from his perspective of promoting human rights, climate change hits hardest on those who are already marginalized (and hungry). Clearly, business as usual is no longer an option; we cannot continue with a global food system which is dependent on shrinking supplies of fossil fuel, which emits increasing amounts of 'greenhouse gases', and which fails to feed the world's population. Food sovereignty, he concluded, is the best strategy. In his response, René Segbenou from Mali, West Africa, commented that the first step in such a strategy is to move away from the place where we are now standing, in order to see from a different perspective. Colleen Ross, as a Canadian organic farmer, made this very concrete in terms of a local food production for the local community.

The theme struck by the keynote event was carried through the entire conference, which had a sold-out participation of more than 300 people from across Canada and, thanks to our partners, also had several speakers bringing a perspective from the Global South. In particular, they spoke to the effects of the drive for agrofuels, and discussed building food sovereignty from the ground up, comparing the experience in Haiti, Nepal, Mali, and Canada, and greatly enriching the conference overall.

Another important focus of the discussions at the Assembly, again following the keynote, was the impact on Indigenous peoples of environmental contamination and the effects of carbon emissions on the environment. In session after session at the Assembly, Indigenous leaders from BC, Yukon, Ontario, Nova Scotia, and Labrador repeated the same theme, describing powerfully the loss of their traditional foods, the caribou, the salmon, which have nourished their spirits and defined their communities. They drew tears and standing ovations from participants – and in the case of Henry Lickers from Akwasasne, laughter. In one of the most powerful presentations of the weekend, Henry addressed the plenary on Resilience as a storyteller, telling how as a teenager fresh off the Reserve he ran a lucrative trap-line (raccoons and skunks) in Toronto – and emphasizing the importance of respect for seeds and for women, the traditional seed-keepers. The call to action, Henry told us, is really a call to consciousness.

In workshop after workshop, and through the celebratory feast presented by local farmers and chefs, the participants in the Assembly took the call to consciousness and struggled with translating this into action. At the final plenary session, the Assembly enthusiastically endorsed the new People's Food Policy Project as a key action to move forward on this agenda.