

Arab Civil Society Winning Battles in International Fora

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By: Mariam Al Jaajaa, General Manager of The Arab Group for the Protection of Nature



The Rome-based Committee on World Food Security (CFS) is the foremost inclusive international and intergovernmental body that reviews and follows up on food security and nutrition policies. As part of its reform process which took place in 2009, the Civil Society Mechanism (CSM) was established as the largest international mechanism of civil society organisations (CSOs) with a mandate to influence food security and nutrition policies and programmes on the national, regional and global levels.

Representing Arab Group for the Protection of Nature (APN), I was fortunate to be nominated by CSOs from the region to act on behalf of West Asia in the Coordination Committee of the CSM. The experience has been invaluable but often fraught with great frustrations. Participating in platforms that include very little presence from the Arab region is an immense challenge. There are times I find myself alone, in the midst of 200 CSO organisations from all over the world, fighting for the region's priorities. Unfortunately, Arab governments are frequently absent within influential international decision making spaces, leaving Arab civil society to ensure that regional priorities are put forward during events, consultations, and policy negotiations.

To be able to introduce issues that are critical to the region, one needs not only to overcome the resistance of governments and the disinterest of international institutions, but also – and most surprisingly – the opposition that comes from large civil society organisations based in the North. Because these organisations have grown accustomed to determining what global civil society looks like, how it operates, and the issues it should fight for, it is often difficult for CSOs based in the Arab region to insert ourselves into international arrangements such as the CSM. It has been eye-opening to note that international civil society is not exempt from global power imbalances, and CSOs often have privileges over others based on the wealth of the region they come from and their geographic proximity to the decision-making space. Unfortunately, Southern CSOs are often included as token partners. We are encouraged to wear our traditional attire and are sometimes allowed to speak our languages, but not to speak our full minds. What was shocking for me was to see several civil society representatives pushed to speak against issues that mattered the most to them. For instance I witnessed a

representative of the indigenous peoples voting against giving a platform for people suffering from occupation, and a representative from Africa dismissing “conflict and crises” as a priority topic.

Additionally, only three languages are formally recognised within this global civil society platform - English, Spanish and French - which prevents many southern CSOs from joining the discussions which have a huge impact on their daily lives.

After ten years of lobbying amongst CSOs, UN organisations, and governments, APN succeeded in inserting the contentious issue of food insecurity in times of conflict high on the agenda of the CFS. The adoption of this work stream was marked by the publishing of the FAO 2010 SOFI Report ‘Addressing Food Insecurity in Protracted Crises’.

APN was then nominated to coordinate the Global Civil Society Working Group on Protracted Crises – the only CFS working group facilitated by Southern organisations. APN President, Razan Zuayter, was selected to be part of the CFS Steering Committee for the Protracted Crises Process, and I was nominated to be on the CFS Technical Committee which prepared the draft documents for negotiation. We managed to put communities suffering from crises at the centre of consultations and intergovernmental negotiation sessions, which culminated in the endorsement of the Framework for Action for Food Security and Nutrition in Protracted Crises (FFA) in October 2015.

By building strong alliances with government representatives, both from the Arab region and those elsewhere with similar concerns, we managed to ensure that our common priorities were included in the FFA. The document tackles sensitive issues with courage. Thanks to the insistence of the civil society Working Group, the Framework advocates a comprehensive human rights-based approach with a focus on resolving and preventing the underlying causes of food insecurity and under-nutrition in crises. This stands in contrast to the narrow scope of adaptation and recovery - often found within the “resilience” approach - which is frequently promoted by large, global institutions. The FFA includes “occupation” as one of the root causes of food insecurity in protracted crises, and explicitly prohibits the “use food as a tool for political or economic pressure”.

The FFA highlights the need for strong accountability mechanisms and identifies the main reasons behind the failure of current policies and programmes, including the undermining of local capacities, institutions and priorities by externally driven interventions; a lack of commitment to support small-scale food producers; and vested commercial, political and institutional interests.

With significant challenge from certain governments, the FFA is the only CFS document thus far that recognises local food systems as a main component of supporting resilience, including through local procurement and building food reserves at the community, national, and regional level.

As I continue my journey in this very complex space the many lessons I’ve learnt have surely made my wider advocacy efforts more effective. First it is clear that great perseverance is needed to ensure that policies such as the FFA move into implementation, and that this is followed with monitoring frameworks.

Second, in order to exert greater influence from the region, CSO efforts must be unified both regionally and globally. Thus we have co-founded the Arab Network for Food Sovereignty (ANFS), which comprises 49 member organisations including those representing small producers, NGOs, women, youth, workers, consumers and researchers from eighteen countries across the Arab world. We have also built strong alliances with organisations from the south facing similar battles.

Finally, we have learnt that we need to be persistent, unapologetic in our goals, and to fight for our space in international fora. As Arabs, we are the best representatives of ourselves, and we must defend our autonomy and not lose sight of our priorities.