

Manifesto for the Right to Food

April 21, 2023

The right to food was recognized in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights of 1966, which states:

Article 11

1. The States Parties to the present Covenant recognize the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living for himself and his family, including adequate food, clothing and housing, and to the continuous improvement of living conditions. The States Parties will take appropriate steps to ensure the realization of this right, recognizing to this effect the essential importance of international co-operation based on free consent.

2. The States Parties to the present Covenant, recognizing the fundamental right of everyone to be free from hunger, shall take, individually and through international co-operation, the measures, including specific programmes, which are needed:

(a) To improve methods of production, conservation and distribution of food by making full use of technical and scientific knowledge, by disseminating knowledge of the principles of nutrition and by developing or reforming agrarian systems in such a way as to achieve the most efficient development and utilization of natural resources;

(b) Taking into account the problems of both food-importing and food-exporting countries, to ensure an equitable distribution of world food supplies in relation to need.

We, more than 60 actors involved in agricultural production, peasant agriculture, agro-ecology, artisanal food production and craft, food processing, distribution, catering and consumption, social and food assistance, the social and solidarity economy, the protection of human rights, the environment and the climate, members of civil society, and academic experts, met on the 19, 20 and 21 April 2023 at the Refettorio in Geneva on the occasion of a forum organized by the MATER Fondazione, in collaboration with FIAN Switzerland, Global Shapers Community, the Fondazione Pistoletto and Social Gastronomy Movement, and adopted this manifesto.

Paradigm shift: from food aid to the right to food

Guaranteeing the right to food requires a paradigm shift. We must not only guarantee the right to be free from hunger (through emergency food aid, in kind or in cash), but respect, protect and fully realize the right of all to have regular, permanent and free access to quantitatively and qualitatively adequate and sufficient food that ensures a mental and physical life, individual and collective, which is satisfying and dignified.

To succeed in this paradigm shift, it is necessary to create a system that makes it possible to avoid food being an adjustment variable in the budget of individuals or households. On the contrary, we must ensure that quality and sustainable food is accessible to the entire population. We must put an end to all forms of discrimination, including multiple and intersecting discrimination.

Law, public policy and participatory body

Realization of the right to food requires the adoption, through a participatory process, of a law on the right to food and a public food policy that is cross-cutting, with a financial commitment from the state. This law, and this policy and the practices resulting from it, must be based on the principles of human rights: participation, accountability, non-discrimination, transparency, human dignity, empowerment, rule of law and solidarity (PANTHERS).

To facilitate this process, a participatory and inclusive body – a Food Council or Commission – should be established to support the development and subsequent implementation of the Right to Food Act and the public food policy. It is also necessary to create a new transversal and interdepartmental unit within government structures to be responsible for issues related to food and sustainable food systems.

The participatory body should be composed in particular of representatives of government structures, municipal administrations and actors involved in agricultural production, smallholder agriculture, agroecology, artisanal activities, food processing, distribution, catering and consumption, social and food assistance, the social and solidarity economy, the protection of human rights, the environment, the climate and animal welfare. Employee unions, associations defending the rights of women, children and migrants, representatives of the health and education systems, and academic experts should also be part of the body. Measures should be implemented to guarantee full and effective participation of peasant farmers and people living in a situation of food insecurity.

Existing structures and processes in government structures have a role to play in the creation and functioning of this new body. The experience of bodies responsible for supporting the development of other public policies, for example in the areas of culture and housing, offer examples for the creation of such a participatory body.

Local production, fair prices, peasant farming and agroecology

The involvement of peasant farmers in the development of a law on the right to food and a public food policy is essential, according to the principles of food sovereignty, and must be guaranteed.

To implement the right to food, the State must encourage peasant, diversified, social and agroecological production of food that is nutritious and that protects biodiversity and guarantees healthy working conditions. To do this, it is necessary to promote its access to the market and to build partnerships beyond the logic of competition by re-establishing links between peasant farmers and consumers. We must make food a common good on the basis of food democracy.

The state has the right and the duty to define ambitious procurement criteria for all public food purchases, which guarantee the transition to sustainable food systems and contribute to the implementation of the right to food.

Framework conditions must be set to enable fair remuneration for peasant farmers and thus encourage job creation in this sector. A fair price must be guaranteed for products from seasonal peasant agriculture, prioritizing local production, accessible to all.

The state must ensure the physical accessibility of food, including close access to quality fresh products from peasant agriculture and short supply chains, as well as the necessary infrastructure for cooking, preparation and processing of food in the workplace. It must also guarantee the affordability of food, through transparent, negotiated prices that guarantee a dignified income and a decent wage for peasant farmers and agricultural workers, and other actors in the food chain. It must ultimately ensure the nutritional, social and cultural adequacy of food, guaranteeing the choice that corresponds to physical needs and food preferences.

Agricultural training should promote learning about agroecological practices. Agricultural soil must be protected and its regeneration encouraged. The transfer of land must be accompanied, and transparency of land transactions must be required. The right to land and the right to seeds must be guaranteed for peasant farmers. The autonomy of peasant farmers, including in terms of technology, must be promoted.

The State must compel all actors in the agri-food sector to transparently display their prices and their profit margins in order to make the real costs of food visible to consumers, and highlight the injustices, winners and losers in the food chain.

Food chains and distribution channels

Our food chains are globalized, unequal and unsustainable. This creates asymmetries between, on the one hand, local and peasant food production, which is fragmented and marginalized, and, on the other hand, an industrial agri-food system that concentrates power among a few actors and takes advantage of this balance of power. This situation is aggravated by the fact that distribution channels are segmented by audience and by social class.

We must move towards a decoupling of the fight against food waste from the provision of food aid. Tomorrow's distribution channels must be inclusive, universal, participatory and empowering. We must democratize the control of food chains.

Food aid distribution channels must accompany the solidarity channels of tomorrow, by transforming themselves, translating and reallocating their skills, know-how and resources. These new channels must be based on transparency, shared governance and balanced power relations. They must be at the service of a better articulation of existing channels and fair and fulfilling working conditions. They must also respect planetary boundaries and living organisms.

Reduction of food waste, recovery and revalorization of surplus and unsold food

The fight against food waste must be part of a public policy, financed by the state. Education against food waste must be compulsory in schools. It must be specific in the agri-food and catering professions. It is also necessary to offer concrete solutions to the general public through various awareness-raising actions.

The destruction of unsold food must be prohibited in supermarkets. Multiple selling that encourages over-consumption should be banned, while single-product discounting can continue to be permitted.

Commercial catering must continue to implement measures to reduce food waste.

The incineration of organic waste must be prohibited, and the recycling of peelings must be made compulsory for methanisation/composting. Food waste recycling facilities must be mandatory in apartment buildings, restaurants and supermarkets, and must be subject to control by the competent authorities.

To prevent food from becoming waste, strong collaborations must be encouraged to recover and distribute food surpluses, particularly at the level of households, farms, supermarkets, schools and restaurants, regardless of social status.

Waste must be reduced by promoting the revalorization of oversized or damaged products using preparation and preservation techniques such as fermentation, drying, and production of compost/biogas and animal feed.

Catering, education, nutrition and food environment

Public catering (preschool, school, higher, institutional) must provide adequate food and unconditional hospitality. Priority should be given to training public catering staff in sustainable cooking.

School meals must guarantee non-discriminatory and dignified access to food. The aim is to guarantee a free daily meal for all pre-school and school children, prioritising local and seasonal peasant agriculture. Several school levels already provide nutritious food, but this is not the case for the lower secondary level ('orientation cycle') which in most cases does not offer school meals.

Nutrition education must be taught at all levels of compulsory schooling. Currently, the existing framework is satisfactory but it is applied in a variable manner in compulsory schools. Priority must be given to training teachers in compulsory schools in sustainable food.

More broadly, we must ensure a food environment that promotes good food choices. Nutritional and sustainability information must be clearly visible on food. This information should not be blurred by marketing, especially on ultra-processed products.

Sustainable foods with high nutritional value must be made more accessible and highlighted, through changes in the architecture of choice in food shops and cafeterias, for example by putting less ultra-processed food near the checkouts.

All existing public health strategies and available economic measures, including subsidies, grants and taxes, must be put to use to promote the consumption of adequate and appropriate food.

We must continue to mobilize to defend and promote the right to food and food sovereignty!