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DOES DIRECT DEMOCRACY SUPPORT THE RIGHT TO FOOD AND NUTRITION IN SWITZERLAND?

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Over the recent years, Switzerland has been confronted with a series of food scandals. On one occasion, horsemeat was found to be labeled as beef² and on another IKEA pies were found to contain fecal bacteria.³ These incidents have shed light on the current lack of controls and deterioration of industrial food production methods. On numerous instances, small-scale farmers also expressed their dissatisfaction with the lack of political support for small-scale agriculture and organized several demonstrations in Bern, the capital of Switzerland. Their goal was to put pressure on the Swiss Parliament and protest against the low market prices, which are insufficient to cover their production costs. In 2016, this led the Federal Council (the Swiss executive power) to halt planned budget cuts. However, the Federal Council continues to turn a deaf ear to price issues, instead giving priority to free trade at the expense of small-scale farmers.⁴

In response, several political and interest groups have launched federal popular initiatives⁵ allowing Swiss citizens to vote on a wide range of food-related issues.

INITIATIVES PUT TO THE VOTE

On February 28, 2016, an initiative by Young Socialists Switzerland entitled No speculation on Foodstuffs was unfortunately rejected.⁶ The initiative aimed to hamper the financial system that creates price volatility in foodstuffs and consequently makes life even harder for the most vulnerable countries, which have to import food to feed their population.

FIAN Switzerland got involved and published the Action Guide: “Getting Active in the City of Geneva for the Realization of the Right to Food in Countries of the Global South” (2013).⁷ A press release was circulated in collaboration with partner organizations;⁸ however, deceptive arguments by opponents raised fears of job losses and created deliberate confusion by falsely arguing that normal trade in foodstuffs would be affected by this change to the constitution.⁹

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2 Nau, Jean-Yves. “Viande de cheval: premières leçons d'un 'scandale'.” *Revue Médicale Suisse*, (2013): 532-533. Available in French at: www.revmed.ch/rms/2013/RMS-376/Viande-de-cheval-premieres-lecons-d-un-scandale.

3 “Ikea a bien écoulé des tartes aux matières fécales en Suisse.” *Radio Télévision Suisse*, March 11, 2013. Available in French at: www.rts.ch/info/suisse/4727217-ikea-a-bien-ecoule-des-tartes-aux-matieres-fecales-en-suisse.html.

- 4 For more information, please see the message from Bernard Lehmann, Director General of the Federal Office for Agriculture (OFAG). Available in French at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=XAL7E3_z6Dk&feature=youtu.be. For more information on free trade agreements, please visit the website of the Federal Office for Agriculture (OFAG): www.blw.admin.ch/index.html?lang=en.
- 5 In Switzerland, citizens can demand a change to the Federal Constitution through a popular initiative, which is then subject to a popular vote. For the initiative to succeed, the signatures of 100,000 citizens with the right to vote must be collected during an 18-month period. Popular initiatives are the driver of direct democracy because they do not stem from Parliament nor Government but directly from citizens themselves. Available in French at: www.bk.admin.ch/themen/pore/vi/index.html?lang=fr.
- 6 For more information, please visit: www.stopspeculation.ch.
- 7 Available in French at: www.fian-ch.org/content/uploads/guide-Agir-pour-le-DAA-dans-les-pays-du-sud1.pdf.
- 8 For more information, please see the press release in French by FIAN Switzerland, Centre Europe-Tiers Monde (CETIM), Swissaid and Uniterre: www.fian-ch.org/fr/medias/communiqués-de-presse.html.
- 9 For more information, please visit: www.juso-spekulation-nein.ch.
- 10 For more information, please visit: www.securitealimentaire.ch/fr.
- 11 For more information, please visit: www.verts.ch/gruene/fr/campagnes/initiative_aliments-equitables/initiative.html.
- 12 For more information, please see the message from the Federal Council on USP's initiative. Available in French at: www.news.admin.ch/NSBSubscriber/message/attachments/40070.pdf.
- 13 For more information, please visit: www.souverainete-alimentaire.ch/in/fr.
- 14 Bolay, Charles Bernard. "Spéculation: On ne joue pas avec la nourriture." *Journal d'Uniterre*, 2016. Available in French at: www.viacampesina.org/fr/index.php/les-grands-ths-mainmenu-27/souverainetelimentaire-et-commerce-mainmenu-38/1232-speculation-on-ne-joue-pas-avec-la-nourriture.

Two other popular initiatives met a similar end:

1. The Food Security Initiative,¹⁰ proposed by the Swiss Farmers' Union (USP), aims to strengthen Swiss food production using diverse and sustainable production methods. The USP has also demanded effective measures notably against the loss of cultivated land in Switzerland and in favor of maintaining a low administrative burden for agriculture. This initiative will affect the orientation of agricultural policy.
2. The Fair Food Initiative,¹¹ proposed by the Green Party of Switzerland, raises issues related to industrial food production (working conditions and the precarious life of farm workers, loss of soil fertility and biodiversity, the harmful effect on Swiss farmers of the dumping of low-cost food products). It also demands that regulations that are applied to food produced in Switzerland equally be applied to imported food products. This initiative proposes regulating custom rights and giving competitive advantage to regional and seasonal production.

The Federal Council has advised people to reject these initiatives, which will be voted on in the next two to three years, arguing that they would contravene free trade agreements and that Switzerland does not have a food security problem.¹²

A third initiative was submitted in March 2016:

3. Uniterre—a farmers' union and member of La Via Campesina—proposed the Food Sovereignty initiative.¹³ It aims to give advantage to Swiss small-scale agriculture—which is both income-generating and diversified—thus guaranteeing young people access to land and supporting local food. It goes further than the Green Party's initiative by proposing to ban genetically modified (GM) foods and to guarantee the rights of small-scale farmers to use, propagate, exchange, and commercialize seeds. It calls for the removal of subsidies for agricultural products for export, specifying that if Swiss social or environmental regulations are not met, it should be possible to withdraw specific custom rights or even ban the import of products under investigation. The initiative asks Switzerland to put in place a framework that allows for the creation of a more transparent market, which prioritizes the management of quality production, while achieving a fair price for producers and fair wages for agricultural workers in Switzerland. It places the concept of food sovereignty at its heart. The aim is for the Swiss people to have control over agricultural and food policies, which it hopes to develop, while respecting other regions.

MAKING THE RIGHT CHOICE FOR EVERYONE'S FUTURE

Switzerland currently loses three farms per day and the agricultural sector has lost 50% of its employees over the last 30 years (from 300,000 to 150,000).¹⁴ The country has chosen to import over half of all foodstuffs consumed nationally. However, the population is slowly starting to understand the downward spiral that the world food

system finds itself in and the negative effects it has on the environment: soil degradation, groundwater pollution, the loss of agricultural biodiversity, and the harmful consequences for our health.

This food system has also had an impact on the human right to adequate food and nutrition in countries of the Global South, which are not able to develop their own local agriculture, as they are flooded with subsidized imports. Small-scale farmers from the Global South are forced to abandon their land and end up adding to the growing slums of megacities. Rural poverty drives urban poverty and is often the very cause of hunger.

CONCLUSION

Small-scale farmers who aim to feed the world's population without destroying the planet are in danger both in Switzerland and elsewhere. The Swiss people have the opportunity to gain from a system of direct democracy that allows them to choose new citizen-led food and agriculture policies that benefit small-scale farmers and preserve the environment for public health. Let's hope they seize the opportunity!