Food Sovereignty for Marginalized Populations in the African Diaspora

By Beverly G. Ward and Pamela Boyce Simms

QEW HAS BEEN a non-governmental organization of the United Nations (UN) since 1999, holding four UN agency accreditations with the mission of bringing a spirit-led Quaker voice to UN deliberations on the environment. The QEW United Nations Working Group initiated an African Diaspora Earthcare Coalition in 2016. This July, the Coalition came together at the International Social Justice Commission United Nations Office in New York City to discuss food sovereignty for marginalized populations in the African Diaspora under the aegis of the UN International Decade for People of African Descent (IDPAD), 2015–2024. The event took place in conjunction with the United Nations High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) July 10–19, 2017.

The event began with Coalition members getting better acquainted over a shared meal on the evening of July 11. Pamela Boyce Simms (Quaker Earthcare Witness), Sara Green (Black Land Liberation Initiative, Unitarian Universalists Association UN Office), Jennie L. Stephens (Center for Heirs Property Preservation), Beverly Ward (Field Secretary for Earthcare, Southeastern Yearly Meeting), Veronica Womack (Black Belt Justice Center), Beverly Wright (Historically Black Colleges and University Environmental Justice Consortium) and Joseph Akeyo (Support Aid Ministry, Movofa Sustainability) reviewed the flow of the following day’s side event over dinner.

The event officially began with an African Diaspora food tasting. The tasting menu included:

- Chef Grace Odogbili (NY) providing Kachumbari, an East African onion and tomato salad, especially enjoyed in Kenya and Tanzania. It is spicy, simple, and flavorful. Kachumbari is the Swahili name for fresh tomato and onion;
Chef Carla Green, Green Community Garden (Newark, NJ), offered “Callaloo” a Jamaican Traditional Caribbean dish; Chef Tarsha Gary shared a U.S. Southern gourmet dish, “Watermelon Salad” prepared by Sara Green; and Chef Kwame Williams (NJ) served “Ackee and Saltfish in Cassava Cup” a Jamaican national dish and a lemon-ginger beverage.

Pamela Boyce Simms, convener of the Coalition, opened the side event session with an overview of the IDPAD and the Coalition’s work. The overarching goal of the African Diaspora Earthcare Coalition is to create “a robust, evolved, post-carbon remnant,” a globally interconnected, local, environmentally resilient community within the Diaspora.

The way forward involves the relocalization of sovereign food production in the African Diaspora incorporating:

- Innovative, culturally relevant economic models without strings;
- 21st Century evolutionary culture-building, egalitarian governance; and,
- Intentional healing within a vast network of Diaspora nodes where people of African descent are building environmental resilience.

This first year, the Coalition prioritized the retention of agricultural land which underlies food sovereignty. The need to feed the UN-estimated 200 million people who identify themselves as being of African descent living in the Americas and many millions more living in other parts of the world outside of the African continent is imperative given drought, famine, wars, and other anthropogenic and climatic events.

The priorities include producing healthy, toxin-free food locally; employing holistic agricultural practices which enrich the soil and the Earth; preserving local biodiversity; determining agricultural land availability; working through land retention challenges; and, innovating strategies, models, and work-arounds to meet the needs.

Pamela’s overview included a review of African-American U.S. land dispossession. Between 1865 and 1910, Blacks in southern states acquired over 15 million acres of farmland and controlled 218,000 farms. However, over a half a million African-American farms were lost between between 1950 and 1975. Currently, Black farmers own less than 3 million acres of farmland and account for less than one percent of all U.S. farmers.

Three panelists presented on the “State of potential agricultural land in the African Diaspora.” Each provided examples of the linkages between the loss of Black land ownership, the economic potential of the land, the historical trauma, and the narrow framing of the question of food insecurity among people of African descent.

Dr. Jennie Stephens, Executive Director Center for Heirs’ Property Preservation, outlined some of the property challenges faced by African-American heirs. Partition sales, forced property sales, property tax sales, and financing, to list a few, are among the factors that contribute to the continuing loss of land ownership among African-Americans. Veronica Womack of the Black Belt Justice Center noted that African-Americans were over-represented among the approximately 10 million people who lost their homes through foreclosure and bank eviction from 2007 to 2013. Little has been done to address the pervasive structural problems, including food insecurity, resulting from the economic marginalization of urban communities of color by capital accumulation.

Joseph Akeyo presented Nancy Abwalaba’s Kenyan land ownership case example. Dr. Abwalaba traces the root of ethnic conflict among some coastal Kenyan communities and those who live “upcountry” to colonial and post-independence policies and practices that left persons without titled deeds landless. Since 1960, some families have claimed that they were evicted from their land to make way for tribal partisan government projects that have not begun to date. This has been exacerbated by private developers grabbing beach property and denying public access to natural resources and recreational areas.
The participants separated into four groups to respond to the query, “From your vantage point or that of your organization, what are some innovative, non-justice related next steps to ensure people of African Descent in the Diaspora produce food as climate change accelerates?” Participants were instructed to think about and discuss what role as individuals they or their organizations might play.

This breakout session was followed by a panel discussion with Chefs Carla Green and Kwame Williams who provided information on healthy foodways and practices. The participants then continued to address the query in their groups while being visited by Resource Persons Sara Green, Joseph Akeyo, Beverly Ward, Veronica Womack, and Beverly Wright.

The final portion of the side event included reports from the breakout groups. Highlights from the suggested strategies, models, and innovations included agro-forestry; organic farming driven by people of African descent; heirs property retention, land rights awareness campaigns and deepened Diaspora organizing; and returning generation farming linked through historically Black Colleges and Universities.

The African Diaspora Earthcare Coalition has begun preparing for 2018. While next year’s work will focus on sea level rise, water access and quality issues, Coalition members will continue to organize around the spectrum of land and food sovereignty issues.

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