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Predictable Surprises

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I must say it's really a delight to be able to share this space with so many old friends that I haven't seen for some time sometimes, and so many excellent great organizations we've worked with over the decades. And I really appreciate it, I must say, that the ETC Group has picked up one of the pieces that we've worked on together with ETC and IPES Food, with the Long Food Movement. One of my particular areas of enthusiasm was around the idea of what we then called gray swans, and which I think we very nicely now describe as predictable surprises. That to me is one of the most important areas that we were coming across and debating with the Long Food Movement, and I'm glad it's carrying on in this kind of exciting way.

It's also, I think, really nice to see now, have the chance now to explore some of the history of that and think more about the surprises of the past, the predictable surprises and the not predicted surprises of the past, where in civil society, in different levels of activity, from the global to the local, and in terms of both food and health and environment and other areas of the movements, we found ourselves dealing with black swans, gray swans or now predictable surprises.

We've been actually I think pretty good in civil society at pulling off surprises. Over the decades, we've surprised governments, the media, sometimes ourselves, fairly often, with pretty explosively important information. One of the hallmarks of civil society, I think, in my experience at least, has been coming up with whole new ways of seeing things, whole new ways of understanding things, new information, new data, that takes key actors in the world off guard, makes them rethink their positions, and gives us an opportunity to suddenly move ahead and accomplish something that we might not have otherwise accomplished.

That does go back a long time. In my experience, one of the first occasions was around what was called initially the Nestle's boycott, led by different organizations working together, finally the infant formula campaign came together, and it was a campaign against infant formula, of course, and it had a shock impact on the world. I remember it made all of the major journals and newspapers and magazines. It became a big battle between the Berne Declaration and Nestle's, because the Berne Declaration clearly laid out the data of what was happening with infant formula around the world, how damaging it was, and Nestle's really didn't know how to respond to it, really struggled to try to come back with some kind of answer, and they did the worst of all possible things and the best of all possible things for civil society, which is Nestle sued the Berne Declaration. And that lawsuit, which I don't think the Berne Declaration predicted, but certainly welcomed, allowed a a debate which caught more media attention and which the Berne Declaration very

happily lost. I remember really well traveling at the time and reading, it was Time Magazine at that moment, the article which said how the judge had concluded after the trial that the Berne Declaration should be fined for what it had said because, although it is true that Nestle's kills babies, they didn't mean to. That's what the judge said, that was absolutely wonderful. I think Nestle's was fined something like 50 Swiss Francs or maybe it was 500 Swiss Francs, but it was like nothing compared to how that coalesced everybody and changed the way that civil society addressed corporations. In fact, in my experience at least, it was the first time that a civil society organization, in the food system at least, directly challenged a major corporation and did so very successfully.

It was, we pulled the surprise. We didn't —and this will become a recurring theme of what I'm saying— we didn't know how to move after that, we weren't quite sure how to capitalize on it. I mean, certainly in the case of the Berne Declaration, they helped to form the infant formula campaign, IBFAN, and that did move on and continue its work. It didn't lead to a multiplication of initiatives exactly, beyond the fact that the rest of us in civil society working in these issues witnessed what had happened, recognized the possibilities, and then tried to emulate what the Berne Declaration originally accomplished. We could certainly argue, though, that more could have happened in other ways —we could have built on to that nutritional initiative in other places besides the WHO, but also in FAO and elsewhere.

After that campaign, I remember one of the first that stood out in my mind was when Oxfam UK David Bull published his book on pesticides, and that again dropped like a bomb in the middle of the UN system, UN environmental program, and created a space for a lot of international action by civil society at the local level, at the national level, as well as through international organizations, and created the Pesticides Action Network, which is still alive and thriving around the world and has expanded its work into other important areas, and itself became a coalition of civil society that that was able to build on the surprise shock of that information and make it a very important force that attracted both GRAIN and ETC Group, then called RAFI, and many others to work together as well.

It goes on from there perhaps to looking at, I'm thinking of IATP, the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, I think Sophia is on the line, and Sophia in the earlier days, back in the mid 1990s, when IATP did what was seen to be a rather superficial thing, a sort of 50th anniversary of the World Bank and 50th anniversary of FAO in 1995, and took advantage of those occasions to really take a leadership in bringing a civil society together to perform a critique of both the World Bank and of FAO. And FAO was at that moment on the threshold of its first World Food Summit, and so it was an excellent opportunity for many of us to get together and work together in a broad spectrum of issues and concerns —pesticides, seeds for us in those days, trade issues, certainly, financial concerns about the UN system, and so on—, all came together to take advantage of an occasion which we knew was coming and to grab it and turn it into something that we wanted to use, and it was an important move for us.

Again, sometimes these were one organization initiatives, Berne Declaration or Oxfam or IATP, but others of us were able to join in, and I think we could go back and analyze about how that could have been done better in every case, but that still was accomplished.

One of the biggest ones I remember —Larry Lohmann, are you there too, I hope—, Larry did this amazing stuff almost 20 years ago now, I guess, Larry, the carbon trading, he suddenly produced this enormous study which was just so detailed about the experience of carbon trading and climate change negotiations that it was unavoidable for governments. It simply again was a game-changing explosion of information and data which no one could fight with, it was really hard to do anything but sort of say 'okay, we'll try to do better', which is not what we wanted to achieve, but it made a huge difference. And it was again a predictable surprise, in that many of us knew that Larry was doing the work, together with the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, of course The Corner House putting this together, and it had tremendous potential to to be game-changing. In civil society we seem to lack again though the actual bandwidth or the actual resources, the human financial resources to build upon it in the way that maybe we could have. It still made a huge difference, there's no doubt about that, it's just we could have wished perhaps for more if we had had a chance.

Look at the work that was done by GRAIN a few years later. Around 2007 or so, I remember talking to Renée Vellvé about the work that GRAIN was doing around land grabs, a totally new concept for me. I had never even heard of the idea before in any real way. I found the information that Renée was digging up was completely astonishing and extraordinarily important and almost hard to believe initially. I had to be taught to understand it better, and it had a big impact on the world and how we understand these issues. Again, we've at one more time captured the headlines, captured the attention of governments and media and United Nations agencies, and produced information that was important not just as some sort of global level, but it had clearly had national and regional and local implications that allowed for civil society to act at all of those levels. It had implications for not just even food, but it came there and it was an opportunity again, another bomb dropped by civil society that impacted everybody.

What else can I suggest? Certainly Via Campesina, first at the World Food Summit in 1996, but then of course with the Nyéléni process and that report. I think that the conclusions of that, the concept of food sovereignty was a game changer for all of us in civil society and how we look at these issues, understand these issues, and it caused virtually everybody else in the world to scratch their heads and tried to figure out how this was going to change their own negotiations, whether it was again at the national level, in dealing with corporations, fighting corporations or dealing with UN agencies. It changed everything, and it was a concept, again a surprise, that reached out and really brought a wide range of civil society together in a coherent way, and I think perhaps was a real step change from the earlier examples I gave, because it it is one where everybody was invited in, in this sense, everyone had a place to see themselves in aligning themselves along with food

sovereignty, understanding it, seeing how it applied to what they were doing, and it invited collaborations that weren't there before.

These examples keep on going, I think, for us. For ETC Group, the Terminator technology issue was one where it was a surprise. Hope Shand discovered the patent, got it into a CBD negotiation and suddenly Terminator seeds became both a moratorium in the United Nations system, but also a major political debate around the issue of GMOs. And of course, there was the wider issue of GMOs, which is worth looking at as well and how that evolved over time.

The thing, I guess, for us is then: we in civil society are good at surprises, we're not necessarily good at sharing the information about those surprises in advance, we're not necessarily very good at that planning them ahead, even for ourselves and our own organizations or our own sector of civil society, and we don't always have the resources, almost never have the resources we need to have to be able to build on the initial surprise and make it move.

You can divide, I think, predictable surprises into categories in a way. There's maybe, I would say, three kinds of predictable surprises. There's a surprise. There's what I'd like to think of as being surprise parties, where civil society gets together and plans, such as the Nyéléni Initiative, or such as a UN conference of some kind, or a campaign against GMOs, where there's collaboration together and we prepare our way for that and we're coordinated across groups and civil societies, so that yes, our enemies or governments —some enemies, some not— are surprised, but we've planned it well. Those examples are rare, we haven't done those very often and I think that's been a weakness that we haven't been able to do that better.

Then the third kind of surprise, I think, is what I've described as sleepover surprises, sleepover parties. We know that from our kids, but it's also, I think, the kinds of things that have happened occasionally, sometimes by accident, where we've put in place ideas or initiatives that don't bear fruit until sometime later, but they can play a role.

One was the creation of the Committee on World Food Security back in 1974, during the World Food Conference. It was sort of a token giveaway to angry governments of the global South and angry civil society organizations, where, because Henry Kissinger and his friends were kind of capturing the UN agencies, capturing FAO, separating the World Food Council from FAO, and creating the financial instruments for the food system as well, and moving science and technology out of FAO into CGIAR —all of that was happening at that time, so the one sort of breadcrumb that was thrown out to the rest of us was, 'okay, we'll let you have this Committee on World Food Security, which will ostensibly allow these various UN bodies to come together and consult with each other', so there'll be some sense of cohesion between the different instruments that Kissinger was happily creating on us.

And it was useless, it died almost immediately, or didn't die, it would have been nice if it died, as it felt at the time, it just didn't play a role. Until, suddenly, in 2008, with the world food price crisis and the economic crisis at that time and the UN in disarray and efforts by New York to capture the Rome-based agencies, civil societies said, ‘well, why don't we just rejuvenate the Committee on World Food Security, which some of us in civil society’ —not me— ‘had been following’, and were able to grab onto that, persuade the heads of UN agencies that it was really the only option that was viable, throw our weight behind it and create a revitalized Committee in World Food Security which, for all of its weaknesses, still has remained the most important forum for debate on food and agricultural issues.

So it's kind of a sleepover surprise, that we didn't know what use it was going to have, it didn't look very promising for some time, but it finally was. And that's not the only example, I think we've seen others of those. The efforts organized by the Third World Network, for example, around the Cartagena Protocol 23 years ago —the effort to try to create some kind of a structural proposal to have some governance over the transboundary movement of living modified organisms. It seemed very weak at the time, it had some dangers built into it, which we were alarmed by, but it created a structure which still had the potential to be adapted. Once it was there, once it was structured, it could be amended and modified, interpreted differently, both for and against us, but it could be interpreted either way, and it has the potential to move out and have a wider impact than we'd ever would have imagined back in the year 2000.

The same is true of the work the GWN did again in 2010 at the CBD in the Nagoya protocol, which again was negotiated, civil society was fighting to have it established. There was deep alarm that the issue around the digital information, the whole DSI question, was not being addressed, but the structure was put in place, it had some muscle in terms of governments at least being keen on the issue and aware of it, the issue of biopiracy being very clear. And so even years later, as we see the negotiations completed now around the oceans treaty, with all of its weaknesses, there still is an element of DSI there and debate around that, and it's a structure again which was a sleepover surprise, but one which is still useful to us as time goes on. So putting some of these structures in place I think also is sometimes valuable and we shouldn't necessarily underestimate them or ignore them.

So those are the kinds of surprises, but maybe I should also say that I identify two other areas that concern me as I looked at the history of this. One of them is, I remember this came up during the discussions around GMOs and development of biotechnology very early in the 1990s, around 92-93, being with Henk Hobbelink in Amsterdam, for the Dutch government brought civil society and others together scientists together to debate biotechnology, and us being told that it's not enough to have an early warning system, you also have to have an early listening system. And in civil society, I think we've lacked that generally, that we haven't really developed our own skills for listening —to others, to ourselves, to our neighbors or in civil society, to see how we can move forward and make changes, how we can

build on each other's experiences, so that the bomb dropped by Larry Lohmann, or the bomb dropped by Henk Hobbelink, or the bomb dropped by whoever, with that new information, new ideas, can actually be built on in a way that we know it's coming, we know its potential, how do we work together to turn it into something more powerful. I think it's a standing concern for us in trying to understand the possibilities ahead of us.

The other thing that's clear is that we're living in a world of crises, there's no doubt about that. We're now, and I'm going from the past to the present, we're in a century of crises, where none of us will be surprised that there'll be, no predictions required here, we know that there will be another pandemic at some point. We're not sure whether it's going to come from African swine fever or it's going to come from H5N1 or Dengue fever or where, but we know there will be another pandemic. We know that there will be another financial crisis, we might be in it right now in terms of not just inflation, but in terms of banks and where that takes us. We know that there will be environmental catastrophes that will grab the world, and not just regional ones, as horrific as they are, but ones which perhaps have even a wider global implication or demand more global response. There will be other wars, something we didn't think was true and now we know is true and there's of course about thirty of them right now around the world.

So we know that those are there and we know that, knowing that they're going to come, we can start to think now about how we do respond to them, what steps do we need to take now. And to me, the surprise has been that it doesn't make that much difference whether the crisis comes from a famine, a drought, or it comes from a cyclone, or it comes from an economic collapse or a pandemic. When it hits, it will impact everything else. You never have sort of uni-functional crises, it's always a multiple crisis. You don't have a drought without having multi-crop collapses and livestock collapses and famines. When you have that, you also have disease. With famine and disease, there's usually war. So these things come together, it doesn't matter much where it starts, where it's initiated, we all get involved, whether we are looking at these issues from the point of view of labor and what's going to mean for laborers and workers around the world, or we're looking at it from the point of view of the food system, or health systems, or fighting the marginalization of people in municipalities, or racism. It’s going to affect us all.

And so we can, I think, in this century of crisis, think together about what roles each of us can play. Wherever the crisis originates, how do we try to recognize that's coming, how do we already put in place, already have sorted out now the steps that need to be taken to ameliorate the crisis, and perhaps even take advantage of that surprise to achieve some of the goals we wouldn't otherwise achieve. Can we take the work that's been done on agroecology and prepare it in terms of analysis of land availability and markets and opportunities and health needs of people in communities, to now have a strategy in place that, when a drought comes or another crisis comes, we can take the experiences we have from agroecology, the preparatory work we've done, and find ways we can quickly

support marginalized communities and the health community and others to survive the crisis and build upon our experiences.

So it’s, I think, the importance of recognizing that the crisis will be multiple, that the crises can be looked at from a global level or a local level, it's kind of easier for us to think perhaps more at the local or the national level about how to come together, but they will, and to know that we have in civil society the strength already to again make the surprises happen. We have now a capacity that we never had 50 years ago, when I first got into this work, to cooperate together, to be talking to each other like this to make things change. And we know that those crises are coming, those beautiful surprises are out there. So, what do we need to do, what planning and preparation do we need to have, what does the health community need to say to us, what do the education folks need to say, what do the food folks need to say, what do the peace folks need to say, so we can build on these things together. I think the potential for turning these what we used to call black swans into gray swans or into the predictable surprises that we can take advantage of, and orchestrate ourselves and to build ourselves, the potential for that is really very high, and the opportunity I think it's great. I'm really glad that such a group is taking a lead here and bringing everybody else into the group as well to sort out how we can take advantage of these things and make a safer world at the same time.