CFS 51 Side Event 07: Data governance in the digitalization of the food system - Bringing together small-scale food producers and governments
Tuesday, October 24, 2023 8:30h - 9:45h

Summary

This side event was co-organized by Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples 'Mechanism (CSIPM), the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, and the government of Mexico.

The Committee on World Food Security (CFS) negotiations for Policy Recommendations on strengthening collection and use of food security and nutrition data provided an opportunity for all actors in the CFS to enhance their understanding of how digitalization and digital technologies could dramatically change the food system in the next decades, for better or for worse. The central question addressed was the responsibility that governments should bear to ensure the digital transformation of the food system benefits those most impacted by food insecurity - the small-scale food producers who supply the majority of the food consumed globally. This transformation should pave the way for a future where everyone has secure access to nutritious food, grounded in human rights, food sovereignty and biodiversity.

In that context, this side event brought together small-scale producers, Indigenous People and governments to discuss the impacts of digitalization and provide a model for further discussions beyond this side event.

The event was moderated by Michael Fakhri, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food. Panelists included Taina Hedman, International Indian Treaty Council (IITC), CSIPM Coordination Committee; Patti Naylor, National Family Farm Coalition (NFFC), La Via Campesina, CSIPM Data working group coordinator; Moayyad Bsharat, Union of Agricultural Work Committees (UAWC), Occupied Palestinian Territory, CSIPM Coordination Committee (online); Víctor Suárez Carrera, Deputy Minister of Food Self-sufficiency in Mexico; and H.E. Ms Nosipho Nausca-Jean Jezile, Ambassador of South Africa in Italy.

Michael Fakhri, who is a strong advocate of a robust governance framework for data, introduced the event by recognizing the recent CFS negotiations as one of the pioneering discussions on this subject within the United Nations System. He highlighted how discussions around technology are frequently confined to market or business opportunities, overlooking underlying power dynamics. A better way to look at digital data-collecting technologies is as infrastructure, as a common good. This perspective then shifts our understanding of what is at stake.

Moayyad Bsharat, the first panelist to speak, was unable to travel from the Occupied Palestinian Territory to Rome even though he had been granted a visa. As Moayyad emphasized, for colonized peoples such as Palestinians, data is often controlled by the colonizer and used as a tool for oppression. Data is seldom neutral and often carries significant political implications. This is particularly evident in the technologies deployed and controlled by Israeli corporations. An example is how the Israeli occupation authorities use digitalization to monitor workers in the field, violating their human rights. He also warned of the risks of privatizing information, which turns it into a tool to attract investments that compete with the small food producers and farmers and are used to expel them from the agricultural sector.

H.E. Ms Nosipho Nausca-Jean Jezile stated that the benefits of data and digital technologies must be returned to those from whom the data is being taken. She gave an example. In South Africa, there is a legal framework which is referred to as Access and Benefit-Sharing and is in

alignment with the Nagoya Protocol. The framework aims to ensure a fair and equitable distribution of benefits derived from the use of genetic resources, such as indigenous plants for medicinal purposes - a common practice in South Africa. It acknowledges indigenous knowledge to enable innovation. Hence, throughout the entire value chain, there is a reciprocal benefit that reverberates back to the custodians of this Indigenous knowledge.

From the Kuna Yala community in Panama, Taina Hedman shared her Indigenous perspective. "We, the communities, have all the power. We are the center of information," she stated. "The global power wants to extract the knowledge from us – we are the ones who have the information." She continued with an analogy, "Just as you wouldn't raid someone's fridge without asking, respecting Indigenous rights means seeking their free, prior, and informed consent. Let's honor the UN Declaration on Indigenous Peoples' Rights (UNDRIP) in data governance. She reflected on the notion that data is not solely confined within the boundaries of corporate control, as it has been around long before the era of digitalization. Indigenous Peoples have long been custodians of data, safeguarding their ancestral knowledge. This knowledge has been documented and protected for the care of Mother Earth and humanity," she concluded.

Patti Naylor, a smallholder farmer from the United States, discussed the harmful aspects of digital technologies to small-scale farmers, citing the extraction and exploitation of their data and knowledge by corporations, surveillance and privacy violations, and potential threats of labor deskillment or outright replacement. She also recognized that technologies are normalizing an extractive agriculture system. National sovereignty over food production and distribution systems are critical to food security, thus, governance of data technologies must be put in place. "Data collection fuels the power of agribusiness corporations. […] Data and digital technologies are a political issue. We are being told that this is necessary to feed the world. But what about the ancestral knowledge and practice of agriculture which has fed the world for millennia?" she asked the audience.

Víctor Suárez Carrera underscored the importance of equitable access to technologies. He highlighted a stark reality where a significant part of the rural population in Mexico lacks Internet access, prompting the government to adopt an ambitious goal of providing 95% of rural communities with access to free telecommunications and Internet. Control of technologies is also a concern of the Mexican government. Carrera expressed skepticism over the touted benefits of digital technologies, including Big Data, automation, and AI, being hailed as a panacea for global food insecurity - a claim he considers to be yet another false promise. "We have witnessed several agricultural "revolutions": Agriculture 1.0 with agrochemicals, 2.0 with GMOs, 3.0 with climate-smart agriculture and now 4.0 with digitalization. Each phase promised food security for all, but instead we saw more corporate concentration and food insecurity," he concluded.

Michael Fakhri summed up the debate and the complex and connected issues. He stated that we could think of data and knowledge as different sets of relationships that produce different ways of understanding the world. Knowledge comes with the context of the moment front and center. In contrast, data comes from a different set of relationships where we may not know who we are working with. "It's abstract," he explained, "as if there is a machine sucking out our experiences and repackaging them in a way that we don't have access to." He echoed the words of Taina reminding the audience that Indigenous Peoples' right for free, prior and informed consent is not just recognized in the UNDRIP. It is deeply rooted in their right to self-determination and is an inherent part of their identity.

The Special Rapporteur ended the event with the following reflection: "Companies act as if their new technology is going to change the world. However, these companies need the people more than we need them. We have the power."