

Women, youth and Indigenous Peoples must be at the centre of the global policy response to COVID-19

On 15 October 2020, the Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples' Mechanism (CSM) organised a Partner Event as part of the UN Committee on World Food Security's High-Level Virtual Events on Global Governance of Food Security and Nutrition, 13 - 15 October 2020. The CSM event highlighted some of the most pressing challenges to ensuring food security and nutrition faced by small-scale food producers and workers around the world. Bringing a transgenerational perspective, women and youth from people's organisations participating in the CSM spoke about the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on their livelihoods, grassroots initiatives to ensure community-level food security and nutrition, and the different policy demands that are coming from the ground as a result. The event was moderated by Ali Aii Shatou from the Indigenous Peoples of Africa Co-ordinating Committee and Nicole Yanes from the International Indian Treaty Council. They facilitated the conversation between CSM representatives of different ages, geographies and genders with the CFS Chair, Thanawat Tiensin, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Michael Fakhri, Maria Abad Zapatero, representative of the General Directorate for Sustainable Development Policies at the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Spain, and the audience.

During the first part of the dialogue, CSM youth and women from Argentina, Brazil, Canada and Cameroon, shared testimonies on the multidimensional impacts of COVID-19 on food security and the steps their communities are taking to address them. During the pandemic, smallholder food producers, workers, and communities have proven that economies based on solidarity, cooperation, and ecology are highly adaptive and resilient. In Argentina and Brazil, for example, youth have been carrying out solidarity work by bringing food baskets with fresh produce to the most vulnerable. They have been contributing to the care of the elderly, as well as children who cannot attend school and are therefore deprived not just of education, but also of school meals. Through MOCASE (*Movimiento Campesino de Santiago del Estero*) in Argentina, CLOC-Vía Campesina (*Coordinadora Latinoamericana de Organizaciones del Campo*) and through the MST (*Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra*) in Brazil, youth are urging their governments to turn into public policy what is currently being done at the ground level to promote food security and food sovereignty.

Jennifer Ankrom of Action contre la Faim, described how, in Pakistan, COVID-19 has added to the climate crisis. Between floods, heat waves, locusts and massive snowfall, the evidence is clear: food systems need to be transformed towards greater resilience. She spoke about the impending risk of severe and chronic malnutrition, as 95% of the population has changed their eating habits as a result of the crisis. "This is a crucial moment to rethink food systems, with agroecology and solutions from the ground at the heart of the transition," she added.

Next, the CSM panellists spoke about solutions to strengthen food systems resilience and key policy demands. Nettie Wiebe, from the National Farmers Union (NFU) of Canada (La Vía Campesina) and a co-facilitator of the CSM's Women Working Group, argued that new forms of economic and social relations are possible. "Now is the time when the care, knowledge, solidarity and energy of women is crucial. We need to be part of the discourse on policy response to the COVID-19 crisis," she said. The pandemic has exacerbated and brought to the

fore pre-existing inequalities and systemic patriarchal forms oppression. “In the world, women are the majority of food producers and the majority of caregivers. We provide for our households. And yet we are consistently overlooked in the policy discourse.” In their [recently published report](#), CSM’s women constituencies illustrate the impacts of COVID-19, community responses and feminist policy demands.

According to Margarita Gomez from MOCASE Argentina and a co-facilitator of the CSM’s Youth Working Group, COVID-19 has shown that neoliberal policies are not working. Not only are they part of the problem – creating hunger, poverty, environmental destruction and social exclusion – but they are unable to offer solutions to the unfolding crises of health, food security and climate. “We must radically transform our food systems, including reconfiguring whose rights are prioritized by our governance models and whose voices lead the way,” she said. Margarita’s statements reflect the contents of the [Youth Declaration on COVID-19, which was](#) published days before the CFS High-Level Virtual Special Event.

CFS Chair Thanawat Tiensin recalled the immediate attention the CFS had given to the response to COVID-19 related food security impacts since the pandemic outbreak. Upon request of the CFS, the HLPE drafted and published two reports on the matter. Several events have been held, including during the CFS High-Level Virtual Events in October. He underlined the importance of the contributions from youth and women, and all CSM constituencies in raising awareness about the impacts of Covid-19, the responses from their constituencies and communities, and the need for appropriate policy responses on all levels.

Maria Abad Zapatero underlined the strong attention of the Spanish government to the policy response to COVID-19 and the CFS. “We will do our best to reinforce and promote the work of the CFS within its mandate and to push for the work of the women and youth in line with a right to food approach.” Spain will particularly support and engage with the CFS Workstream on Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment. For too long, women of all ages have been invisibilized, for example as poorly remunerated or unpaid domestic workers. According to Ms. Zapatero, two groups have been among the most impacted in this crisis: elderly people, who are the most vulnerable to direct and indirect impacts of the pandemic; and young people, who are suffering from the effects of a second global food and economic crisis in a decade. In her view, a transgenerational approach to realising food security and nutrition also means that middle-aged people from middle- or higher-income countries have the right and the obligation to support the livelihoods and future of the other generations, in their own countries and beyond.

Michael Fakhri, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, urged CFS and Member States to reaffirm their commitment to the right to food and to CSM constituencies. “Women, youth and Indigenous Peoples have the clearest sense of what is at stake in food systems and they should be at the heart of change,” he stated. He also reaffirmed the importance of the CFS as the main global food governance platform where all voices are heard, and food policy is enacted in the spirit of collaboration. Mr. Fakhri emphasised that inclusivity, sovereignty and dignity should continue to be at the centre of CFS’s work. This also applies to the preparation of the UN Food Systems Summit 2021. “A multi-stakeholder, bottom-up model should be followed,” added Fakhri, alluding to the [call recently launched](#) by a wide range of civil society

organisations denouncing the fact that the Summit lacks democratic legitimacy and is designed to benefit transnational food and agriculture corporations and global financial capital.

All panellists agreed that CFS has the mandate and capacity to address the fragilities of the global food system which COVID-19 has drawn dramatic attention to. The voices raised in CSM's report "[Voices from the ground: from COVID 19 to radical transformation of our food systems](#)" reaffirm the urgency of a global policy response that is led by the CFS and that builds on the scientific evidence presented by the High-Level Panel of Experts (HLPE), as well as the key demands of small-scale food producers, Indigenous Peoples, agricultural and food workers, consumers, landless peoples, urban food insecure, women and youth.

Event Zoom recording:

https://fao.zoom.us/rec/play/HtXidOSpqx6WufBCImDY4eldEy0hZte80oqmJ_JlY2QzTzbarFaVn_xMHyqxKwRwv60rQq0TT3311v_TR.dx6CGD5fbuzsaQgr

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