



International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty

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From:

International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty

International Secretariat

Rome, 7 June 2024

To: FAO MEMBER STATES

Subject: Comments on FAO's "Update on the global civil society organizations (CSOs) dialogue and other mechanisms of engagement", included in the report of the 138th session of the Program Committee, to be endorsed by the Council in its 175th session.

The IPC is the autonomous and self-organized global platform of small-scale food producers rural workers organizations and grassroots/community-based social movements to advance the food sovereignty agenda at the global and regional level. IPC is a space of alliance and policy dialogue for 11 global organizations and 8 regional ones, comprising more than 6000 national organizations, and 300 million small-scale producers.

Since 2003, IPC has operated on the basis of an Exchange of Letters with FAO, which recognizes IPC's long-standing function of facilitating the participation of small-scale food producers and consumers in FAO processes. Being the broadest network of small-scale food producers worldwide, the IPC has played a leading role in strengthening connections between the FAO and agricultural producers. It has contributed significantly to developing FAO strategies on land access issues, facilitated informed participation of producers in the ITPGRFA negotiations, and actively participated in various FAO committee meetings over the years. The IPC has also been instrumental in reforming the Committee for World Food Security (CFS), creating the Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples Mechanism (CSIPM) for relations with the CFS, supporting the development, approval, and implementation of the FAO Strategy for Partnership with Civil Society and advancing the United Nations Decade of Family Farming (UNDF).

With this letter, the IPC wants to take a stand on the agenda item of the 175th session of the Council "Report of the 138th Session of the Program Committee (Rome, 20-24 May 2024)", especially the endorsement of the Council of the conclusions of the Program Committee about the "Update on the global civil society organizations (CSOs) dialogue and other mechanism of engagement". We are addressing Member States on some of the priority matters arising from the recent experience of these constituencies' engagement with FAO.

We acknowledge FAO's various efforts at discussing ways to improve CSOs' and Indigenous Peoples' engagements in FAO's work toward achieving and sustaining partnership. In particular, we refer to the Global Informal Dialogue that FAO convened in June 2023 to discuss with CSOs how to improve the engagement with CSOs and Indigenous Peoples. Building on the official FAO position and message presented in that Global Informal Dialogue, it is necessary to express some serious concerns about the constraints now faced in achieving meaningful engagement with FAO.

We also want to note that the institutional commitments made by the FAO over the past 20 years to establish a formal relationship with organizations of small food producers and other social movements have hardly been considered. The FAO still regards organizations of small-scale food producers, Indigenous Peoples, and social movements as mere observers within its governing bodies, without recognizing them as representing the interests of the vast majority of food producers and, simultaneously, as representatives of the groups most affected by hunger and malnutrition.

After leading by example within the UN family for decades, FAO currently lacks an institutionalized mechanism for CSOs and Indigenous Peoples' partnership in FAO policymaking bodies, technical committees, and in-country operations. We trust that this formal communication will contribute toward filling that gap.

Unlike the Committee on World Food Security, CSOs and Indigenous Peoples participation is not structured in clear mechanisms in FAO, and we are witnessing current retrogression in FAO's relationships with stakeholders. Stakeholder participation has become increasingly unstructured, *ad hoc* and at the mercy of decentralized managers unaccountable to precedents or mutually agreed principles, including Exchanges of Letters, let alone to the FAO Strategy for Partnership with Civil Society. This deficit has emerged as a major shortcoming in the implementation of FAO's policies, programs and projects through its headquarters, regional and country spheres of operation. FAO's ongoing clarification of the stakeholder-accreditation processes and 'status of engagement' with CSOs bears the earmarks of an ambitious administrative—but institutionally, programmatically, and constitutionally unproductive—step. In 2013, FAO Members already adopted the Strategy for Partnerships with Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), which enshrined recognition of the Underlying Principles of FAO-CSO Engagement. These principles must be respected as the minimum standard, which should be developed further in the current context¹.

¹ Mutual Principles:

- a) A partnership is a voluntary association of actors sharing a common interest; based on mutual respect and acknowledgement of each organization's capacities; built upon the comparative advantage and knowledge of each organization, and not compromising the position, opinions, and nature of any of the partners.
- b) Respect for UN principles, human rights and dignity, gender equality and, in particular, the progressive realization of the right to adequate food in the context of national food security. FAO's acknowledgement of relevant principles for civil society organizations.
- c) Autonomy and self-organization: once granted access to a forum, CSOs can autonomously organize, deciding how best to occupy the different spaces of dialogue and express their positions.
- d) Internal consultations: CSOs will carry out internal consultations among their constituencies to establish their positions and identify their representatives.
- e) Sufficient time: CSOs need time to cascade relevant information to their main offices and members prior to consolidating and presenting a joint position.
- f) Civil society acknowledgement of relevant principles for FAO.

During the 2023 Global Informal Dialogue, and based on the various discussions and inputs, the following proposal for a consultation process that seeks to restore trust and improve FAO-CSOs engagement emerged:

- *We proposed* the creation of a mechanism for meaningful stakeholder engagement in FAO governing bodies such as the FAO Council and Conference, as well as in the technical committees. This mechanism can be informed by the lessons learned and from the good experiences of CSOs and of the Exchange of Letters with the IPC, which are in line with the 2013 FAO guidelines for balanced participation and the FAO strategy for partnership with CSOs. Also, the CSIPM is a good example to be taken into account.
- *Building on* the CSOs consultation prior to the FAO regional conferences, we proposed to develop a similar consultation prior to the FAO Conference, as well as another consultation bringing together CSOs, small-scale food producers' organizations, Indigenous Peoples, and social movements in the work from FAO technical committees to inform the FAO Council.
- *We also proposed* to jointly establish a forum to discuss priority issues and developments to eradicate hunger, integrating voluntary SDGs commitments and the relevant binding obligations, and reviewing the ongoing FAO programs.

A roadmap for the consultation process was presented during the informal consultation:

- An online consultation could be part of the process but cannot supplant the actual consultation.
- This consultation process should respect and build upon the principles of the 2013 Guidelines and FAO Strategy e.g. the autonomous representation of constituencies, time for consultation, and language balance.
- FAO could make a proposal based on the discussion at that meeting, and this could be discussed during the CSO's regional consultations.
- To convene, after all the regional consultations, a global consultation that gathers and shares the outcomes of all the regional consultations.

Unfortunately, FAO's management disregarded IPC's proposal and wanted to discuss CSO engagement with FAO in the context of the World Food Forum only. Consequently, and differently to what is stated in the document **CL 175/10** presented to the FAO Council, the IPC does not acknowledge that any progress has been made by the FAO in this area. Currently, the World Food Forum does not meet the fair participation conditions outlined in the 2013 strategy for engagement with CSOs. We, therefore, caution against allowing this forum to become a substitute for the dialogue spaces we have built within the FAO over time. The current report to the FAO Council makes clear that the FAO is not discussing substantive mechanisms of participation in its governing bodies and technical committees.

In addition to these matters arising at FAO Headquarters, stakeholder engagement in some of FAO's regional and country operations has not lived up to the Strategy for Partnership with

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- g) FAO membership and governance: FAO is an organization accountable to its Member States. The nature of the Organization entails agreements and adoption of standards of other UN and intergovernmental bodies.
 - h) Neutral forum: FAO can provide a neutral forum for dialogue and debate.
 - i) Knowledge organization: FAO is a knowledge organization, not a funding institution. In those cases when the Organization funds a CSO, FAO's rules and regulations apply.

Civil Society. Rather, despite principles of operation negotiated in the Exchanges of Letters, some FAO regional processes in the last few years have shown FAO officers selecting CSO partners aligned with the private interests of governments at the expense of small-scale food producers and consumers. In fact, some of the IPC regional members ascertain that at the country level, neither the FAO Strategy for Partnership with Civil Society nor the Underlying Principles of FAO-CSO Engagement apply in practice.

Furthermore, we are facing a lack of support and performance consistent with agreed-upon principles in key areas such as the participation of Indigenous Peoples. Very symptomatic was the fact that the participation of Indigenous Peoples organizations with a long history of engagement with FAO was unfortunately dismissed. Only the president of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues was there (UNPFII), although this function is not part of his mandate, and the selection process did not follow the principle of self-determination of small-scale food producers and Indigenous Peoples.

As one of the three RBAs, FAO's support to the CFS and the Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples Mechanism has been quite strong since the CFS reform. FAO hosted the CSIPM secretariat in the FAO building, recognizing the CSIPM as a necessary pillar of the reformed CFS. Moreover, by recognizing the importance of the direct participation of peasants and Indigenous Peoples in FAO activities through the IPC, the FAO has, since 2003, supported this participation by facilitating both access to its headquarters in Rome and the provision of a workspace within the FAO itself, as well as enabling direct dialogue with the FAO's decentralized offices.

Nevertheless, we have been facing in the last few years a decrease in FAO's support at all levels, exemplified by the staggering delay in approving the Memorandum of Understanding between the IPC and the FAO. Knowing that the CSIPM is also experiencing the same issue, we want to state that this severely impairs the work of the IPC and CSIPM members, and more in general the effective participation of small-scale food producers and Civil Society Organizations. FAO should provide the necessary support in terms of infrastructure, free access to FAO rooms and technical support for preparatory meetings, and facilitation in receiving member states' financial support for Civil society and Indigenous Peoples participation.

In conclusion, we would like to ask your delegation to support our request to rectify CSOs' and Indigenous Peoples' partnership in FAO processes by developing institutionalized mechanisms for our participation in FAO's governing bodies and technical committees based on the principles of FAO-CSO engagement agreed in 2013; as well as to ensure the IPC and CSIPM conduct their mandates fully, whose necessary conditions are the approval of the Memorandum of Understanding and infrastructure support. Raising critical questions about the FAO report on stakeholder engagement to the Council would be helpful toward this end.

On behalf of the International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty,

La Via Campesina

International Indian Treaty Council (IITC)

URGENCI

World Forum of Fisher Peoples (WFFP)

World Forum of Fish Harvesters & Fish Workers (WFF)

COPROFAM

The Australian Food Sovereignty Alliance

World March of Women

Habitat International Coalition

Movimiento Agroecológico Latinoamericano y Caribe (MAELA)

International Movement of Catholic Agricultural Rural Youth (MIJARC)

ROPPA