

Mid-term External Evaluation of the Swiss Agency for Development and  
Cooperation's Support to the Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples' Mechanism

Conducted by Faris Ahmed and Molly Anderson

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## 1. Executive Summary

The Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples' Mechanism (CSM) is continuing its vital role of bringing key voices of rights-holders to the Committee on World Food Security. The rapidly changing nature of food governance and embrace of multistakeholderism in fora such as the UN Food Systems Summit (UNFSS) have forced CSM into continual adaptation. External shifts in power have destabilized the role and internal structures of CFS, and created barriers to CSM as it strives to achieve its goals. In addition, the devastating impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the unwillingness of many CFS participants to give it top priority (in formulating policies as well as adapting processes), have posed extreme challenges for civil society and Indigenous Peoples' organizations and their participation in the CFS. Not only are societies dealing with serious health issues in their communities, but they face difficulties engaging in the virtual format. Demands on community-based organizations have increased as a result of COVID, so putting in the time needed for CFS work has been more difficult.

Despite these challenges, CSM has had significant accomplishments during the evaluation period. These include a concerted effort to make COVID a key priority of CFS and the peoples' countermobilization that was conducted parallel to the UNFSS, which highlighted in a useful way the major discrepancies between food systems solutions envisioned by civil society and more mainstream solutions coming out of multistakeholder mechanisms. CSM reached new audiences through enhanced communications work, and engaged new movements in new regions where members share common cause. In addition, the CSM's Working Groups on Agroecology and Food Systems & Nutrition developed and articulated their positions clearly, and fully engaged with numerous consultations and negotiations. Although CSM is proud of these achievements, the outcomes of recent CFS negotiations have been highly disappointing from the CSM's perspective. Key CSM positions that constitute core elements of CFS work, such as the centrality of human rights, have not been reflected in the final negotiated text; and CSM participating organizations believe that negotiations have not been conducted in ways that allow them to participate equitably. This poses existential questions for CSM that must be discussed in the coming two years.

During the evaluation period of 2019-21, the CSM has focused on improving facilitation and engagement with Working Groups and constituencies; spreading leadership through new appointments to constituencies and the Coordinating Committee; and implementing strategies to revitalize its Youth Constituency. CSM participants express satisfaction overall with inclusion and participation, and voiced their appreciation of the Secretariat's substantial efforts to carry out the CSM's critical work on many parallel fronts.

Based on interviews with people working inside and outside CSM, we recommend that the CSM set a priority on forming stronger and wider alliances; devising a more flexible negotiation strategy; working more at national and regional levels to build support for CFS outcomes and monitor their implementation; continuing to enhance facilitation within the CSM space; and investing more in communications and outreach. We recommend continued or increased support from SDC, preferably on a multi-year basis to facilitate planning. Increased support is warranted to accommodate IFAD's reallocation of funds away from global initiatives and toward debt relief, which left a large funding gap in CSM's budget.

## 2. Introduction

This mid-term evaluation was conducted to allow the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) to exercise due diligence that its aims in funding the CSM are being met, but also to allow reflection and learning within the CSM at this time of major challenges. The objectives of the evaluation from the Terms of Reference for the Evaluation were to:

- Assess the support of SDC to the CSM, how does this support contribute to SDC's access to CFS dynamics and debate, how the support of donors should evolve in the future.
- Assess the effectiveness of the CSM, including the contribution of the CSM to the CFS policy processes and their follow-up.
- Assess the inclusiveness and representativeness of the Mechanism and its internal governance.

In addition, the evaluation was intended to consider the findings of the external evaluation conducted in 2018 and assess the follow-up to date of its recommendations.

SDC hopes to improve food security and nutrition policies and actions at the national, regional and international levels through enhanced CSO participation in the CFS, and hopes to show that CFS policies and debates have been fed by civil society contributions, particularly the views of the most vulnerable, through CSM facilitation.

Specifically, the SDC anticipates that its support helped the CSM to:

- Effectively facilitate CSO participation in and influence the work of the CFS Bureau and Advisory Group meetings, CFS Plenaries and all Open Ended Working Groups. CSO positions and proposals have been brought to the attention of the CFS and have been partly incorporated in its decisions.
- Contribute to the dissemination, use and application of CFS policy outcomes, through: i) the production of CSO manuals, tools and communication; ii) CSO participation to regional, global and constituency meetings that strengthen the capacities of CSM participating organizations to promote the use of these CFS policy outcomes; iii) CSO participation and input to monitoring events of CFS policy outcomes at national, regional and global level.
- Define and monitor its priorities and budget, and foster participation, exchange, knowledge and consensus building through its Coordination Committee and Annual CSM Forum with the support and facilitation of CSM Secretariat.

### **3. Methodology**

To meet the goals of this evaluation, we worked closely with the SDC's Global Programme on Food Security team to develop lists of people to interview, questions to ask informants, and documents to review. We also consulted with the CSM Secretariat in creating the final list of people to interview. The CSM Secretariat sent an extensive list of more than 65 documents that had been created by CSM during the evaluation period, including CSM input to Advisory Group and Bureau Meetings, monitoring reports, draft strategy documents, statements on negotiations, budgets, CSM updates, and final reports.

In selecting people to interview, we wanted to hear from a gender-balanced array of people who represent different CSM constituencies and regions, from newcomers to CSM as well as those who have worked with it for several years, and from native English speakers as well as those who speak other languages and often participate in CSM and CFS activities via translators. We also selected people from outside the CSM who have had key positions in the CFS and were likely to have useful perspectives on the effectiveness of the CSM and what might help it to improve its ability to contribute to the afore-mentioned goals of the SDC. The list of questions asked is attached in Appendix A. All but two of the 19 people we invited participated in interviews that lasted approximately one hour and addressed the questions we had devised. We recorded interviews so that we could check our own notes; but to encourage candor, we promised informants that we would not attribute quotes to them or share the recordings.

### **4. Context of this Evaluation**

This evaluation comes at a time of unprecedented global challenges, and it is important to set that context in order to understand the CSM's achievements and difficulties. First, the COVID-19 pandemic has been ongoing since March 2020 and necessitated a shift to virtual meetings and various adjustments in the CFS schedule, such as increasing the number of sessions during 2021. Second, the political climate and particularly the global attention to food systems changed dramatically during the period under review (2019-2021). The UNFSS was a big part of this shift, but rapidly growing global concerns about the accelerating climate change and biodiversity crises also contributed, along with growing recognition of food systems' impacts. In addition, there were new political alignments with China's growth in global political influence and the appointment of a Chinese Director-General at

FAO, and rising US influence over CFS, between the former Trump and current Biden Administrations. Authoritarian and right-wing parties gained power in many countries and cracked down on human rights and civil society activities.

The UNFSS deserves special mention because some CFS participants felt pressure to shift their attention to its complex and time-consuming activities and to complete the negotiations on the Voluntary Guidelines for Food Systems & Nutrition (VGFSyN) before the Summit took place. While additional rounds of negotiation probably would not have changed the outcomes, the pressure to wrap up the process before the Summit added to an already-tense atmosphere. CSM and others within the CFS feared that the Summit would undermine the CFS as the main body of global and inclusive governance on food insecurity and nutrition, and derail it from issues it had already committed to tackle. At CFS49, the ambivalence of some Member States, which had not been consulted about the launch and organization of the Summit, was palpable as they discussed whether to pick up its outcomes.

During the evaluation period, a new CFS Chair and Secretary were appointed as well as a US Ambassador to the Rome-based agencies who was openly critical of issues important to CSM, such as agroecology. According to the CSM, tensions between FAO Senior Management and the CFS increased and there are mixed feeling within the FAO Council about the relationship between FAO and the CFS, with some believing that CFS should be subordinate to the FAO (even though the CFS reports to ECOSOC and the FAO Council with a Joint Secretariat of the three Rome-based agencies since the 2009 reform). In addition, IFAD discontinued its funding of CSM: the IFAD President decided to redirect resources from its grant program for global initiatives to cover urgent gaps in the debt relief program, which had negative impacts on CGIAR, FAO and the CSM. In response to this unexpected gap, CSM had to immediately cut activities such as planned regional consultations and funding to get participants to Rome, and called on NGOs for help to ensure basic participation of all constituencies in CFS meetings. IFAD staff explained to the CSM Secretariat that the reason they had to make this cut was because the US had stopped its support of the IFAD debt relief program.

During the evaluation time-period, FAO took steps to align itself more closely with the private sector, for example by signing an agreement with CropLife International (which represents major pesticide corporations) and by developing a Private Sector Engagement Strategy. The changing nature of the CFS and Rome-based agencies led many within the CSM to question whether the CFS was fit for its intended purposes, as expressed in the 2009 reform, and whether it is a space conducive to furthering civil society and Indigenous Peoples' aims.

## **5. Themes Emerging from Interviews**

In this section, we want to address the value of the CSM and its current status, with specific questions regarding representativeness and inclusion in the sections below on achievements, challenges and recommendations.

### **5.1. The Value of CSM to the CFS is Widely Recognized.**

We heard affirmation of CSM's role by multiple CFS participants. Many noted that the CSM brings strong legitimacy and credibility to the CFS as an inclusive platform. "CSM is the conscience of the CFS", we were told. There was a unanimous sense among informants outside the CSM that civil society participation is essential to the CFS in order to bring in diverse voices and make it 'the world's foremost inclusive food policy making body'. An important distinction emerged between CSM participants and those outside the CSM, however, in that participants believe that CSM represents rights-holders, particularly people whose rights have been violated through food system policies and practices. From the perspective of CSM participants, many of the interests represented in the CFS do not speak for the human rights of their members but instead for narrow political or financial interests. For example, corporations within the Private Sector Mechanism do not have rights. Informants outside the CSM did not mention this key function of the CSM.

*They manage to get the voices of civil society. Their advocacy is doing well---the way young ones are organized is great. All the work in being heard is very positive and the capacity to elaborate their vision and positions is good. You can see continuity and work behind it. This comes from continuous support, from Swiss and others. [non CSM participant]*

*CSM is what gives the CFS legitimacy --- this is at the heart of the matter. What's at stake is the CFS. The Secretary doesn't like the CSM, but I keep telling him that he needs them. Without the CSM, the CFS is useless and there are forces that want to make it useless. [non CSM participant]*

*CFS would be a lot poorer without the CSM. Although many of their positions aren't accepted, the outcomes are much better. [non CSM participant]*

## **5.2. The Morale and Strength of the CSM are Surprisingly Good.**

CSM participants demonstrated a surprisingly strong spirit, despite the challenges of the last couple of years. The UNFSS played an unexpected unifying role for the CSM and its participating organizations, strengthening their resolve to confront a food policy and governance system that is increasingly captured by corporate interests. The increasing difficulties of working within the CFS's institutional structures (see Challenges section below) have also left CSM participating organizations undeterred. CSM participants are not disengaging from the CFS, by and large, despite the increasing challenges of working in this space and the difficulties they must also manage in their home countries due to COVID. CSM participants continue to view the CFS as a vital institution, and the CSM as an inspiring space to share struggles and connect with each other. This is illustrated by the following statements from our interviews:

*I feel like we have a lot of fire, passion. We're quite frustrated that we get sidelined by powerful governments. It's a source of frustration, but we have not quit. Whenever we've experienced pushback, it has made us fight back harder [because] we know that entrenched power will not give up. [CSM participant]*

*We asked internally, why should we defend such a thing as the CFS? We still believe it's not yet the moment to say we should not defend this. People feel it should be strengthened. [CSM participant]*

## **5.3. CSM has Shown Considerable Adaptive Capacity during these Times of Turmoil.**

The CSM Secretariat and Working Groups have had to do their jobs in very difficult circumstances, and react nimbly and inclusively to the evolving nature of CFS's work during COVID, among other challenges. A few of the areas where CSM has demonstrated resilience and adaptability include:

**a. Adapting to evolving CFS modes of interaction:** COVID necessitated a rapid rethink of how to make participation effective in many institutions; and CFS did not always get it right. The CSM had to respond quickly to fill some gaps, in order to ensure that its constituencies from the Global South were able to participate virtually and effectively. CSM provided much-needed interpretation of some English-only documents; offered (selective) financial support to some CSM participants in order to boost their internet bandwidth, and adjusted its operations to conduct the CSM's work more virtually.

**b. Recasting CSM itself:** The CSM found itself increasingly relating to entities outside its immediate mandate of liaising with the CFS (Rome based agencies) only, largely because of the UN Food Systems Summit. This entailed a fundamental reassessment of the scope and mandate of the CSM, a shift in narrative, and strategic repositioning. CSM put in place a strategy of widening its reach and communications to key spaces outside the CFS in order to ensure that civil society and social movement voices were being heard outside the CFS space.

*We're continuing to expand the boundaries of our own narratives ... The resistance and the language wasn't always the same, but there are common goals and fronts, even if differing strategies, to confront the FSS. [CSM participant]*

**c. Enhancing facilitation:** The CSM and a Working Group on Facilitation continued to advance a key objective of enhancing the ability of CSM participants to clearly understand and carry out facilitation between and within their constituencies and subgroups; and enhancing their awareness of power and identity in an open, consensus-based space.

*We've raised the bar in participation, accountability, inclusion; but at the same time we're overstretched by urgencies on the outside, and the volume of work. [CSM participant]*

**d. Reshaping 'gender'.** The CSM was a key proponent of a more current definition of 'gender' -- both in the CFS negotiations and within the CSM. The CSM championed an expanded, non-binary framing of gender based on gender diversity and including LGBTQ+ rights and concerns, while continuing to offer proposals that challenge patriarchy.

## **6. Specific Achievements of the CSM**

### **6.1. A Leader in COVID Response**

People within and outside the CSM acknowledged that the very serious impacts of COVID on food security and hunger and the need for coordinated policy responses would not have been discussed as intensively without the CSM's efforts and the important inputs from HLPE. The CFS Chair requested an issue paper by the HLPE and placed COVID on the Advisory Group and Bureau agenda, yet CFS Member States did not take this up enthusiastically and unanimously. This failure of the CFS to respond came on top of the UNFSS not dedicating any serious attention to coping with COVID and its impacts on food systems. CSM published [three reports](#) on the impacts of COVID on civil society and Indigenous Peoples: a Women's Report, Youth Report, and Synthesis Report, *Voices from the Ground*, which supplemented the commissioned HLPE report. They then convened a Group of the Committed, consisting of Member States from Europe, Africa and Latin America, plus the Special Rapporteur on Right to Food and representatives from the World Health Organization. The Group organized a side-event during the CFS47 Plenary in February, and strategized on ways to get coordinated action within the CFS. A particularly important intervention was the [webinar](#) organized for 30 September ahead of CFS49. Moreover, the CSM forced discussion of COVID in plenary during CFS49, and CFS extended the rolling section of the MYPoW by agreeing to a 'continued deliberation on, and due attention to, the impacts of COVID-19 on food systems, agriculture and nutrition at all stages of the implementation of the approved MYPoW's workstreams'.

### **6.2. Coordinated Resistance to the UNFSS, with Strong Communications and Engagement**

The UN Food Systems Summit (FSS) was launched outside the CFS, even though it would be expected that CFS should lead such an event. According to the CSM, the FSS and its organizers failed to consult CSM in a meaningful way. While the Special Envoy, Agnes Kalibata, met with CSM, she was dismissive of peasants and their role in transforming food systems. CSM asked that a self-organized Action Track be established within the FSS that would address corporate dominance of the food system. This request was ignored, and FSS organizers delayed responding to requests for a meeting with CSM representatives for an entire year after the proposal. CSM engaged in careful deliberation about what its response should be and decided not to participate in the FSS, although the CSM Secretariat was emphatic that individual CSM participants make their own decisions about participation based on their own priorities. Some CSM participants did go ahead and engage in various capacities, although most joined a global counter-mobilization that CSM and its participating organizations led. For the CSM, resistance to the FSS was grounded in its bypassing of the CFS, lack of transparency in decision-making, failure to

include human rights until late in the process , close ties with corporate interests, attempts to undermine the HLPE with a new 'IPCC for food", and a reliance on multistakeholderism rather than the UN's system of multilateralism.

CSM created a Liaison Group of members from different regions and constituencies that managed the response to the FSS, and hired a new Communications Officer. The Liaison Group organized a [coordinated response](#) including a sign-on Declaration, calls with the wider CSM and links with academics from around the world who had concerns about the Summit and wanted to support civil society. The Liaison Group also published analyses of the Summit dynamics and held several calls that were open to all CSM participants. The result of these calls was a decision to launch a virtual counter-mobilization, which took place over three days in late July, and another half-day counter-mobilization on the first day of the Summit. The [July event](#) consisted of a virtual rally with contributions of songs, dances and spoken words from around the world; a day of panels that "unmasked" the Summit and analyzed the takeover of science and governance; and a day of side-events and dialogues around the world. The positively framed [#FoodSystems4People](#) campaign generated unprecedented media and social media engagements, which lifted up CSM and civil society messages to new audiences around the world (see Appendix B).

CSM participants pointed to the counter-mobilization as a great success:

*A very rich experience...so many contributions from grassroots groups speaking from their reality, demonstrating that this is happening in the territories... This gave us a common fight to build together to build a strong movement and strong response. [CSM participant]*

*There is an expanded sense of scope -- connections to climate, poverty, rights, etc., and a view that this is not about food systems, this is about democratic and inclusive governance. It's bigger than food. [CSM participant]*

The CSM's position vis-a-vis the Summit was criticized by many within and outside the CFS, but the counter-mobilization and publications that ensued from its stance helped to elevate important controversies in global food system governance – such as the role of the private sector, questions around conflict of interest, and the need for transparent principles of engagement that protect weaker participants. Funding support for both the FSS and civil society should not therefore be seen as contradictory: the FSS happened despite CSM concerns and built greater awareness and momentum around the need to transform global food systems. The proposed ways forward that emerged from the FSS and civil society were quite diverse in nature; but, from the evaluators' perspective the variety of approaches needed to be articulated in order to find solutions that meet the needs of small-scale farmers, women, Indigenous Peoples, youth and the other constituencies that CSM represents. By participating in the FSS and also supporting the CSM, SDC enabled critical and robust discussion of different perspectives and ensured that civil society participants were able to make their own decisions free from coercion of any kind. The importance of CSM was acknowledged by its explicit inclusion in the UNSG Statement of Action, and the FSS Secretariat included the CFS and HLPE explicitly in the proposal for moving forward with a Coordinating Group in Rome. This demonstrated that CSM advocacy and partnerships with other entities that had concerns about the FSS made a difference in outcomes of the FSS.

### **6.3. Facilitation Guide and Working Group**

A Working Group on Facilitation formed within the CSM and developed a [Facilitation Guide](#), characterized by one member as, "not very visible outside, but a big achievement inside". The Guide, developed with the support of external governance and facilitation experts from the Center for Agroecology, Water and Resilience (Coventry University), aims to help CSM participants have a common understanding of what facilitation means and how to engage diverse participants effectively. In particular, the Guide helps CSM to maintain its focus on the voices of smaller organizations and constituencies that might be lost otherwise.

**BOX:** The **CSM Facilitation Guide** comprises three sections that address:

- The key principles that underpin the CSM's facilitation approach;
- The context for the CSM's facilitation effort: the United Nations Committee on World Food Security;
- An overview of how facilitation is achieved in practice in the CSM.

The Guide also contains a 'Spotlight on Youth', a special section that introduces the CSM's Youth Constituency and Working Group, its history, and recent activities. Members of the Facilitation Working Group are trained to give presentations or host workshops on this new Guide to Facilitation.

#### **6.4 Excellent Feedback to the Agroecology, Youth, and Global Narrative HLPE Reports**

CSM Working Groups developed excellent comprehensive responses to the HLPE reports that were published during this evaluation period. The reports are not easy to assimilate, but they form the first step in moving toward negotiations and recommendations that the entire CFS can adopt. Solid feedback at different stages helps the HLPE to get its recommendations right, and the CSM responses helped to clarify CSM's position. The Youth Constituency developed an especially thorough 44-page response to the HLPE report on "Promoting youth engagement and employment in agriculture and food systems".

#### **6.5. Formation of a Strong Youth Constituency**

The CSM Youth Constituency had continued on a downward slide for some years, and had almost stopped functioning a few years ago. This was mainly due to capacity challenges and high turnover within the group. But thanks to the dedication and tireless work of a few very committed youth leaders, this constituency was revitalized and really hit its stride during this evaluation period, continuously evolving towards a broader based, open and consultative space. It drafted a powerful Declaration, published in October 2020; engaged in CFS plenaries and negotiations; participated in side-events during CFS46, CFS47 and CFS49; and participated in a side event to the CSM Special event in October 2020. In addition, members of the constituency engaged with the consultation on the HLPE report on Youth; organized webinars and capacity building for youth from among the CSM constituencies; and articulated positions to the upcoming CFS youth process.

#### **6.6. Coordinated and Consistent Participation in Agroecology and VGFSyN Negotiations**

While some CFS participants interviewed were quite critical of the way CSM engaged in negotiations, it is clear that CSM participants worked hard over multiple calls and email drafts to develop coordinated and consistent positions. Even when the negotiations dragged on for weeks with extra sessions scheduled, CSM negotiators stayed with the process.

The Working Groups built their position papers in long and inclusive processes (see for example <https://www.csm4cfs.org/csm-vision-on-food-systems-and-nutrition/> and the Vision Document on FSyN <https://www.csm4cfs.org/csm-vision-on-food-systems-and-nutrition/>). Participation involved continual organization and coordination, requiring substantial time. For example, the VGFSyN process involved 15 negotiation days (with participation from different time zones), 10 additional Friends of the Chair meetings, and dozens of bilateral meetings with Member States in addition to internal CSM Working Group meetings. The CSM organized several well-attended public briefings before negotiation rounds, to share and explain the CSM priorities for the negotiations; held Working Group calls to decide on positions; and circulated drafts of statements with multiple opportunities for revision. No other CFS member or participant conducts similar events, although they help in ensuring transparency. CSM also organized similar public briefings after having carried out internal assessments of the policy convergence process.

## **6.7. Strengthened Collaboration with Academics**

Many prominent food systems researchers and academics from around the world have attended CSM Forums and participated in Working Groups since the 2009 reform, but they had not worked in a coordinated manner previously. CSM members initiated this collaboration. The Academic Group had several virtual meetings and worked in sub-groups to develop critical analyses of the narratives and Action Tracks, analyze corporate power in the Summit, and counter the capture of science by reclaiming independent food systems analysis. Each of these groups had significant participation from CSM members, and each one has produced articles or reports. For example, the second group published a report on September 23, 2021, "[Exposing corporate capture of the UNFSS through multistakeholderism](#)" with infographics and analysis. The third group developed a Special Issue of [Development Journal](#) with 22 articles, many co-authored with civil society.

## **6.8. Ongoing Efforts to Share Representation and Leadership across the CSM**

Building new leadership within CSM has been a consistent focus of the Secretariat and wider CSM, effected partly through regular turnover of the membership of the Coordinating Committee, Advisory Group and focal points of Regions and Constituencies. The Facilitation Working Group helped this process, as did facilitators assigned to each Working Group who were consistently attentive to making sure diverse voices were heard in meetings and represented in follow-up reports. In addition, greater efforts were made to share leadership roles and encourage new leaders to rise from the CSM constituencies, as previous evaluations have pointed out the CSM's reliance on a few experienced leaders, and not enough attention paid to renewal and succession.

*A key requirement of facilitation is sharing power: Over decision making, access to information, resources, and even 'space' - CSM Facilitation Guide, p. 13*

# **7. CURRENT CHALLENGES**

## **7.1 Related to COVID**

The ways that CFS adapted to COVID were especially difficult for social movements from the Global South, who had very little access to vaccines and limited mobility. Many of them were absorbed in dealing with the immediate impacts of lock-downs, such as lack of food for community members and closure of markets for producers. Social movements often have poor access to technology, especially in Africa; so their Internet connections were not reliable (the evaluators experienced this in trying to set up interviews as well). The CSM Coordination agreed to support several active CSM participants, mostly from African countries, with a small financial amount to strengthen their internet connectivity to negotiations. This decision was made despite constrained financial circumstances of the CSM due to IFAD's withdrawal of funds. Moreover, solidarity and care are important to the CSM, and many of the customary ways of expressing solidarity and care have not been possible under COVID.

The CFS Secretariat did not want to slow down processes such as negotiations, even though CSM members pleaded for this because they were overwhelmed. Plenary meetings were held at times convenient to delegates who were able to be in Rome; but travel was impossible for many civil society participants and therefore, the only way that they could engage was to stay up very late or get up very early. CSM members responded valiantly; we heard of participants getting up for meetings that took place in the middle of the night for them. These challenges had a cumulative impact of over-stretching some participants, and some regions participated considerably less in meetings and negotiations. The decisions by the CFS Secretariat and Chairs of Negotiation Processes to move ahead with virtual meetings and on a schedule convenient to Rome-based participants effectively excluded many members of civil society from CFS sessions. While CSM tried to accommodate time-zone differences by, for example, holding two sessions at different times of Coordinating Committee and some Working Group meetings,

this is not an ideal solution because it prevents the entire group from discussing issues together. The CSM had little ability to push for changes to schedules set by the CFS Secretariat.

## **7.2 Related to National Implementation**

The “Rome to home” effort is blocked in many countries by changing political dynamics, such as neoliberal or authoritarian governments that have little interest in civil society perspectives (or in implementing CFS outcomes). For example, the Brazilian delegation had previously been very supportive of the CSM and worked in close collaboration; but that is no longer possible under the Bolsonaro Administration. However, CSM participants from countries with neoliberal or authoritarian governments continued to engage and contributed to analyses of options that they might pursue. They also continue to promote the dissemination and application of CFS policy outcomes within their constituencies and organizations. Advocating for stronger rights-based policy instruments in the international arena gave CSM participants more room to call for similar approaches at home.

The ability of CSM participating organizations to facilitate national implementation of CFS products is also related to questions of limited capacity and political strategy. The CSM has indicated its intent to address both these fronts in the coming period through bolstering its capacity to dialogue with governments at national levels, as well as engaging local organizations and movements in wider alliances for food sovereignty, climate justice, health, equity and democratic inclusion.

## **7.3 Specific to Agroecology and Food Systems & Nutrition Negotiations**

CSM members said that they had limited ability to influence text under negotiation, and sometimes their suggestions were bypassed by the Chairs. They were dismayed that some elements core to the CFS, such as the centrality of human rights and recognition of existing international agreements, were not reflected in negotiated text. They were frustrated that delegates from Member States sometimes were silent in negotiations, even though they had agreed in meetings beforehand to advocate for positions important to the CSM. The United States played an oppositional role consistently and was unwilling to compromise, and other major agro-exporting nations formed a bloc with the US against many suggestions from the CSM. CSM decided not to support the adoption of the outcomes of either negotiation because they contained elements that were utterly contrary to CSM positions, even though they had participated in good faith. This decision was criticized by some informants.

Relevant quotes:

*CSM repeatedly asked to slow down. If things are moving too fast, we can't provide nuanced advice, we're forced into advocacy positions, and that increases the chances of polarity ... it forces confrontational stances.* [CSM participant]

*We are too often the only dissident voice .... There's no willingness from governments to actually listen to our voice ... This has been very frustrating and complicated for us, but it's very important for us to still be there.* [CSM participant]

*Even though CSM is making a lot of efforts, these are not being recognized by Member States.*  
[non CSM participant]

## **7.4 Related to Differing Perspectives on the CFS and Norms of Negotiation**

We heard from a few people outside the CSM that they believe it is aggressive, rigid and unable to compromise. Sometimes this seemed related to cultural norms of how negotiators should behave, although it appears to the evaluators that a double standard was applied: some Member States were also overtly rigid, uncompromising, and dominant in discussions. Other times, criticism of CSM's negotiating style seemed to stem from differing understandings of the CFS and the role of CSM. It was often alleged that CSM polarizes issues; but some also raised

the fact that CSM has a triple burden of first, bringing to the CFS issues that are the most consequential to communities in their home countries— the reality facing them on the ground. Secondly, CSM bears the most responsibility (and is accountable to its constituencies) when these issues get dropped from the text. And thirdly, CSM must also play the role of the ‘watchdog’ who ensures that policies agreed at CFS are actually being implemented on the ground.

There were also existential questions about whether the consensual nature of CFS negotiations can be congruent with the CSM’s negotiating style, and whether the CFS’s current structure will achieve the outcomes CSM desires.

Relevant quotes:

*Diplomats are not accustomed to being held accountable at this level. CSM are there not to have polite conversations. They are there to win.* [non-CSM participant]

*There are Member States that can impose their own red lines but others can’t. If the CSM has a red line, there are tactics that they must follow. They must organize a coalition of countries willing to stand behind them and go to bat for them. CSM doesn’t have the right to set a red line because they don’t have voting rights. I’m not asking them to go against their most important elements, but they need to learn to play with the system in the best way to support certain key elements.* [non-CSM participant]

*The more you are aggressive, the less support you get. You can make noise, but no one listens, no one cares. So CSM needs to show its collaborative manner and respect others. Sometimes they bring a lot of passion, but keep this less --- go to the point, but be diplomatic. Express yourself gently --- this doesn’t mean you are weaker... People don’t give you permission to do anything just because you represent marginalized people.* [non-CSM participant]

*Colleagues in the CSM are preventing better collaboration from Member States because they are too aggressive, not collaborative at all. Decisions are made by Member States, so the way we talk and behave could build better support and trust to support civil society organizations.* [non-CSM participant]

## **7.5 Related to Inclusion, Participation and Facilitation**

While equity of participation, with some voices dominating, has caused tension within CSM in the past, we found little evidence from CSM informants that this is still a major issue despite including participants with less experience in the CSM in our list of informants, to assess this question. Many spoke positively about the efforts of the Secretariat to ensure that everyone is heard. Nonetheless there are still tensions within CSM that must be managed, and sometimes more experienced participants are reluctant to make space for newer members. In the evaluators' opinions, these are problems encountered by every social movement and civil society network. The CSM Secretariat is well aware of them, and in our assessment, has taken active steps to ensure inclusion and equity of participation.

It is quite evident that the ways that the CSM functions are not well understood by Member State delegates and diplomats – and have not been for some time. We heard from one informant who is not part of the CSM that the “homogeneity” of perspectives that appear in CSM interventions was “suspicious”. This individual suggested it might indicate that diverse voices are being silenced if they deviate from a particular line that more powerful people within the CSM want to take. From the evaluators’ perspective this comment revealed a lack of understanding of the painstaking process of multiple meetings that allows the CSM to find consensus positions and avoid contradicting its own people. Coordinators are assigned to Working Groups and related negotiations, and they can shape policy directions. But coordinators who attempted to stifle certain voices would hear immediate objections. Language justice was raised in some interviews: English is the dominant language in the CFS, and sometimes translation is not available. For example, Spanish and French translations of supporting documents

only became available a week before plenary, so non-English-speakers did not have time to prepare. While translation is not always available for CFS meetings, CSM has stepped up and provided interpretation for CFS meetings (including CFS Bureau and Advisory Group meetings, side events and informal negotiations such as Friends of the Chair negotiation), when CFS failed to do so.

Relevant quotes:

*There's a huge disparity in resources between NGOs and peoples' movements. The latter has been overwhelmed by COVID challenges... The [CSM] Secretariat was really aware of that and worked hard to ensure social movement participation... deliberately identifying grassroots organizations as the spokespeople. [CSM participant]*

*I have the sense, there was a lot more tension in CSM [previously] but now there is a lot more trust, collaboration and common ground. The CSM Secretariat has gotten stronger and fine-tuned processes. [CSM participant]*

*Some have a much easier time being a successor, because they already have a mentor from their organization that currently occupies that space. It's not a level playing field. [CSM participant]*

*Some people won't give up the space to others less experienced ... You have to have the capacity to be flexible, and provide support behind the space. [CSM participant]*

## 8. RECOMMENDATIONS

### **8.1 CSM Responses to Recommendations from 2018 Evaluation**

It is important for this mid-term evaluation to consider how the CSM has responded to the 20 recommendations from the 2018 evaluation during this two-year period. CSM had planned a follow-up with the evaluators, but this had to be postponed because of COVID. However, through internal discussion, the CSM identified the following areas as responses to the evaluation, and as strategic priorities for the future<sup>1</sup>:

- **Strategic vision / strategy development** (related to Recommendations 11, 13-16)
- **Bringing Rome home (i.e., ensure that outputs from the CFS are applied and monitored in home countries):** (related to Recommendations 9, 17-19)
- **Facilitation, inclusion and representation:** (related to Recommendations 7, 8 and 12):
- **Strengthening youth participation** in the CC and CSM (Recommendation 3):
- **Capacity building** (Recommendations 1 and 20):

The evaluators can see significant progress in each of these areas since 2018. Here are the actions CSM has taken on each:

**Strategy Development:** The Coordinating Committee (CC) meetings in October 2018 and May 2019, as well as the CSM Forum in 2018, dedicated a large part of the agenda to responding to the 2018 evaluation recommendations. The CC meeting and CSM Forum in October 2019 continued dealing with strategic vision and strategy development, and these have also been an explicit focus of the CSM's Working Group on Governance for the last year with multiple calls and a draft proposal prepared on potential ways forward. The Working Group is trying to look realistically at the challenges that CSM has faced and determine the best course of action.

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<sup>1</sup> These responses have been provided by CSM and verified by evaluators. They represent a record of discussions and decisions made at the CSM's Coordinating Committee meetings and other gatherings.

'Bringing Rome Home': This area is perhaps the one that has had least attention, partly because of other priorities imposed by COVID. It should be carried forward into the next phase of CSM's work. A proposal on strengthening the use and application of CFS outputs was discussed at the CC meeting in May 2019. It was agreed that a follow-up process should be included as a priority in the CSM long-term strategy and in the workplan for 2020. The main monitoring effort in 2019 was on the CFS policy recommendations on smallholders, discussed at CFS 46. In 2020, the monitoring focus was on the use and application of the Framework for Action on Protracted Crises.

Facilitation and Inclusion: This priority area was advanced by creating a Working Group and producing a Facilitation Guide.

Strengthening the Youth Constituency: The Youth constituency and Working Group increased their engagement in the CSM during the past two years in a significant way. The Youth constituency participated strongly in the MYPoW discussions in 2019: special efforts were made to ensure that at each of the CFS meetings on MYPoW a delegate from the Youth Constituency could participate and speak. In fact, they achieved important changes in the MYPoW through their able engagement. Further efforts were made in the context of CFS46 and since, heading towards the future CFS workstream on youth engagement in agriculture and food systems. Youth members outside the Youth constituency have been appointed in the CC for the 2021-2023 period to increase their representation. Strong leaders have emerged in the Youth constituency. However, the facilitators have been tasked heavily and have indicated a need to find replacements.

Capacity Building: The CC identified several measures for capacity building as a key followup to the evaluation, as this is critical to ensure an effective transfer of knowledge and smooth handover to new CC members. Specific training elements for new CC members were included in the agenda of October 2019. On several occasions, gaps and needs have been identified and proposals were made on how to strengthen capacity building efforts within the limited possibilities and resources that are available. One prominent area needing greater attention is engaging with less-active constituencies and regions, particularly given the challenges that some have faced due to COVID. This may require a dedicated staff member for outreach. Capacity-building within the Secretariat received a strong boost with the hiring of a Communications Officer.

## **8.2. Recommendations Voiced by Informants**

Some of the recommendations from our informants were small measures to improve operations. For example, one person suggested that more detailed notes from CSM meetings would help those in time-zones who have more difficulty with meetings during Rome-time; and when two sessions of a Working Group or Committee are scheduled to accommodate time-zone challenges, notes from the first session might be compiled to help the second session. In addition, these parallel meetings might be held occasionally on subsequent days instead of earlier and later on the same day, so that the same group of participants doesn't always meet first. Another recommendation voiced by a social movement member of CSM is that meetings begin with a reminder to give social movements more space.

Other recommendations that informants raised are not quite so easy to handle. First, regarding the aftermath of the UNFSS, one informant urged CSM to welcome NGOs that participated in the Summit because otherwise CSM is succumbing to the Summit's efforts to divide civil society. In other words, build a bigger tent and don't hold grudges against those who decided to take part in the Summit. CSM needs these people and organizations to join its own efforts. This recommendation may meet some pushback among CSM members who don't trust the organizations and individuals that engaged with the FSS.

Regarding how CSM shows up in negotiations and plenary sessions, we heard that CSM needs to find more Member State allies who will agree to support crucial points. We also heard from a few informants that passionate outbursts in interventions are off-putting and it's important to maintain a calm manner. We heard that CSM needs to develop more diverse strategies and, wherever possible, try to find common ground with the Private

Sector Mechanism (possibly on youth employment). The CSM would benefit from being less predictable in its oppositions and language. One informant said that CFS delegates tune out when CSM makes interventions, either because of the manner with which the intervention is made or because the content repeats interventions that have been voiced before.

Perhaps most importantly, we heard that CSM should seriously reconsider the practice of participating in negotiations but then refusing to approve the facilitated outcome. It can agree to the outcome, but submit a statement of where it disagrees with the final language. Failing to approve negotiated outcomes after modifying the final wording was seen by one informant as “suicidal” and a tactic that lets down Member States that have tried to support the CSM during negotiations. Furthermore, some informants saw this as an inability of CSM to compromise, which is the essence of negotiation. We address this issue further in the next section.

### **8.3. Our Recommendations to CSM**

In this section, we draw upon the recommendations from informants, those from the 2018 evaluation, and our assessment of the context, to propose the following five strategic priorities for CSM.

#### **8.3.1. Form Stronger and Wider Alliances**

A game-changer for CSM was its engagement with a wider community in the leadup to the UNFSS. The peoples’ mobilizations demonstrated the value of connecting with movements for common cause across regions and sectors. The momentum built during the last year is critical to carry forward, to solidify relationships with vital movements working in climate justice, Indigenous reconciliation, anti-poverty and food justice, migrants’ and food workers’ rights, and public health. One possible connection is with climate change activists who got frustrated in Glasgow, inviting them to use the CSM as a proxy for larger global governance, and to advance climate solutions through food systems, especially since the next COP on climate is likely to focus on food systems. Some movements have already developed strategies to deal with challenges that the CSM faces, such as those in public health who have worked on identifying and managing conflicts of interest.

CSM can accomplish this by first mapping organizations and social movements that have common ground and then sharing activities such as webinars for political education. The ambition should be mutual learning and solidarity, rather than finding other organizations to join CSM. (The [Long Food Movement report](#) published by ETC Group and IPES-Food has good insights on how to join forces across sectors.) In addition to movements and organizations, CSM can work more closely with UN Special Rapporteurs on Right to Food, Extreme Poverty, Environment, Indigenous Rights and others. The Special Rapporteurs were useful allies in articulating issues with the UNFSS, they are sympathetic to the concerns of civil society, and they have unique standing in the UN system.

#### **8.3.2. Negotiate More Strategically with Member States**

It has become evident that the CSM's negotiation strategies, while meaningful for its members, are not delivering results when it comes to text outcomes. Overcoming this barrier will require reflection among CSM members about the negative perceptions that some CFS participants hold and creation of strategies that will overcome these perceptions without sacrificing the essential role and principles of CSM. There is considerable trepidation about the Youth and Gender workstreams and upcoming negotiations, given the CSM’s lack of success in influencing negotiated text during the previous two negotiations. At the same time, these two streams also present opportunities for “big tent” alliances, and may provide a unifying role among the CFS’s many actors. CSM needs to decide what it wants to achieve: is it better to participate in a flawed process and make some unpalatable compromises or to stand alone on a moral high ground? One informant (who was sympathetic to CSM in most ways) suggested that it would be better not to negotiate at all than to negotiate and then decide not to approve the final product.

CSM can accomplish this objective by developing a more detailed and strategic approach to negotiations. The WG on Governance has been thinking about strategy for several months already, and the discussions now need to involve the rest of the CSM. In addition, ways need to be found to help diplomats and UN staff in Rome to understand CSM better; there is a gap that needs to be bridged between realities on the ground for civil society and Indigenous Peoples and the perceptions of other CFS participants. From our perspective, the evaluators can see that the reality in which paid negotiators and permanent representatives to the Rome-based Agencies live is in stark contrast to the context and circumstances of many CSM participants. Many Rome-based diplomats cannot therefore fully relate to what some social movements encounter in their communities – whereas a large number of CSM participants are activists representing people whose lives are on the line or communities where people are being attacked and killed.

CSM would benefit from trying to better inform bureaucrats about how it functions, to avoid the perception that the CSM is simply “oppositional” or speaks with one voice. In addition, CSM needs to reconsider whether it can formally accept negotiated text as long as its reservations are entered, even if the text fails against the CSM’s red-lines. This would allow CSM to promote some parts of the guidelines in-country, while remaining clear about shortcomings in other areas. We see this as a feasible way of maintaining CSM's integrity and retaining its ‘bottom line’ on human rights (which are consistent with the 2009 reform, and other relevant UN agreements).

### **8.3.3. Work More in National and Regional Spaces**

Particularly as interventions in CFS processes are becoming more fraught and less likely to result in outcomes that CSM wants, shifting focus to national and regional spaces may be desirable and help to “bring Rome home” – in other words, ensure that CFS policy products are disseminated, understood and applied by key actors at regional and national levels. This would not mean walking away from the Rome-based work, but rather, strengthening it through enhanced dialogue with government counterparts and engagement with allied organizations at home (including in advance of CFS negotiations). This would help strengthen relationships with Member State delegates and with national and regional organizing, and facilitate valuable learning about what works and doesn’t work under different circumstances. There is considerable work to be done to implement and monitor guidelines that CFS has already developed, and this will require close coordination with allies on the ground in each country and region.

CSM and its participating organizations can accomplish this objective by extending and deepening their work surrounding CFS processes to include pre-negotiation advocacy and dialogues; focusing on dissemination, implementation and monitoring of CFS outputs; and building more diverse national coalitions in support of its positions. Furthermore, CSM must carefully consider how to deal with the implications at national level of having withheld support (or having expressed reservations) for a policy document negotiated at CFS plenary. CSM participating organizations do not have to feel obligated to take forward the full package, but rather, to follow through on the areas where there is strong resonance with their own positions, and while still maintaining the right to express reservations with the entire document.

### **8.3.4. Enhance Inclusion and Leadership through Facilitation within the CSM Space**

The Facilitation Guide and working group are excellent beginnings, but need follow-up to spread their messages more widely. The Guide currently is not widely known or used outside the CSM.

CSM can accomplish this by dissemination, capacity building and modeling good facilitation. The Guide can be used outside the CSM as well, because it provides an excellent methodology for generating convergence among civil society and Indigenous Peoples’ groups aimed at improved collaboration and common action, regardless of the domain of activity.

### 8.3.5. Invest more in Communications and Education

Strengthening communications is a clear priority, and the pay-off of enhanced communications during COVID were evident. Communications and education are time-intensive, however. This function therefore needs more resources either in the form of a staff assistant or a person seconded from a well-resourced NGO ally. In particular, the Secretariat needs assistance with outreach to regions (e.g., Central and Southeast Asia, Australasia) and constituencies (e.g., landless, pastoralists, fishers) that have been less active under COVID and virtual meetings. They are starting to do this but have limited time to devote to it. Less active regions and constituencies may need long-term mentoring to become effective working in the CSM and CFS.

The CSM can accomplish this by strengthening its Communications Working Group, which brings together communications professionals from CSM's participant organizations, enhancing the reach and impact of its internal and external communications activities. CSM also needs to strengthen support to regular regional consultations in all continents, as a way of enhancing collaboration with CSM participant organizations in the regions.

## 9. CONCLUSION: Our Recommendations to SDC

This evaluation finds that the CSM is providing strong value for money to SDC by accomplishing its mission of enabling the voices of vital rights holders in the food system to be heard at the policy table in Rome. In addition, we conclude that this support to CSM and its constituencies greatly enriches the discourse at the CFS. We recommend renewal of SDC support to the CSM with full confidence in its ability to perform its mission and objectives.

Finally, we did not find that funding the CSM involves any risks to SDC or other funders. While CSM's at-times activist approach to negotiations (by withdrawing support for approved documents) does create a chasm in the institution, it is the responsibility of the larger CFS community to address these situations and find ways to mitigate them in a way that satisfies all its members and constituents. Likewise, CSM's decision to mobilize against the UNFSS may be perceived as putting SDC in an awkward position, since it seems to be supporting both sides of a debate. However, if the overriding aim is to ensure that civil society and particularly marginalized rights holders have a voice in international policy fora, the funding that allows CSM to carry out the wishes of its participants is entirely congruent with this aim. We found no evidence that CSM was restricting participation in the UNFSS or in its own processes. If representatives from Switzerland are engaging in other efforts to influence policy and practices, this should not diminish the critical importance of supporting civil society.

With regards to the specific objectives of this evaluation and SDC's aims in supporting the CSM, we found the following:

#### SDC's objectives for the mid-term evaluation:

- *Assess the support of SDC to the CSM, how does this support contribute to SDC's access to CFS dynamics and debate, how the support of donors should evolve in the future.*

We found that SDC's support to the CSM has been invaluable in helping CSM navigate the many challenges during the evaluation period – when the uncertainty of funding, planning, and coordination were greatest. SDC has provided the essential stability of funding CSM needed to continue operating, adapt and be responsive to unexpected global and institutional developments. Because of SDC funding, CSM was able to bring a compelling case for COVID action to CFS, which no other actors were championing in the same way. Furthermore, CSM extends the reach of the CFS by acting as a key node for dissemination, dialogue, and application of CFS products in the regions. Both of these activities may require additional resources from funders, but would be highly strategic investments.

- *Assess the effectiveness of the CSM, including the contribution of the CSM to the CFS policy processes and their follow-up.*

We found that CSM does influence CFS policy processes but there are ways to improve how its participants interact with Member States and delegates. In particular, we recommend that CSM invest more substantial effort in developing political alliances and strategies to enhance their negotiating power. In addition, CSM should develop and actively disseminate educational materials and hold introductory sessions for Member States that describe in simple terms how the CSM functions, its essential role in the CFS, and whom it represents. This material should be designed to address the criticism we heard, such as that CSM is “homogeneous” and overly passionate. In addition, we hope that CSM will consider supporting future negotiated outcomes in which it has invested considerable time and energy, but submit clear reservations.

- *Assess the inclusiveness and representativeness of the mechanism and its internal governance.*

We heard from CSM participants that the space is open and inclusive, largely due to the efforts of the Secretariat. Numerous civil society organizations who work in the food systems space are not participating in CSM; conversely, some CSM participants choose to be part of many divergent food policy spaces. The choices of where to engage are not influenced by CSM.

While the challenges and workload of the CSM Secretariat continue to be tremendous, we heard from them that they are not interested in expanding staff significantly – although they are short-staffed at present and have posted two job vacancies. At the same time, all members of the Secretariat are over-stretched. Communications needs a new staff-person to work alongside the Communications Officer. There was strong agreement that new resources are needed for a long-term communications/outreach function that has been so instrumental in expanding CSM’s presence and profile, both within and outside CFS. CSM may be able to work with big NGOs to leverage funds and provide in-kind support. Some of the people we interviewed asked for a staff-person who can work primarily on internal organizational issues, such as engaging with and building capacities of the CSM’s least represented constituencies (fishers, landless, pastoralists) and orienting/mentoring new leaders.

It is important for funders to be generous without being directive, especially given the tremendous current need for adaptability. The CSM must retain its autonomy, and it has shown that it can handle funds responsibly and flexibly to meet the most urgent needs. Moreover, multi-year resources are key to CSM’s success, as they offer the ability for long term planning and financial stability, allowing the CSM to pay more attention to some priorities that are currently under-resourced.

## **APPENDICES:**

### **APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW GUIDE**

*Seventeen individuals were interviewed for this evaluation. Interview questions were tailored for specific people and roles.*

1. Please describe your role and how you are connected to the CFS and CSM (as applicable).
2. What do you see as the main achievements of the CSM in the past 2 years? How do you think the CSM is doing now? Are they getting stronger/weaker? How is morale and leadership?
3. What are the key challenges that the CSM faces?
  - What specific challenges do governments and the Secretary pose? Which governments have been most antagonistic and why?
  - Beyond internal workings of the CFS, what are the main challenges that the CSM faces? How are they responding to them?
  - What do you think the most promising strategies are to overcome these challenges?
4. Which of the recommendations in the previous CSM evaluation (2018) do you think have been well addressed? Which ones have not? Which ones need to be implemented as a priority?
5. What will CSM need to implement these strategies? Do they have the capacity and resources now, or do they need something else?
6. What have been the CSM's major challenges when it comes to representation and inclusion?
7. How can the representativeness of the CSM be assured? How can the CSM prevent some members' voices prevailing over others? Are some people over-stretched? How can leadership roles be better distributed, given the critical value of institutional knowledge and the steep learning curve for becoming familiar with the CFS and CSM?
8. What are the opportunities and risks for funders of the CSM?
9. What do you think CSM could achieve, if it had more resources and fewer encumbrances? What is your highest hope for the CSM?

**APPENDIX B. Highlights of Online and Media Activities**  
*(attached separately)*