

# DEVELOPMENT, THE ENVIRONMENT AND FOOD: **TOWARDS AGRICULTURAL CHANGE?**

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# REFORM OF THE COMMITTEE ON FOOD SECURITY: AN OPPORTUNITY FOR GLOBAL GOVERNANCE?

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The food price crises of 2008 and 2011 have put the issue of food security high on the international agenda. Faced with these cyclical price rises, several international institutions were called upon and mobilized in response to the emergency. These organizations cover a broad spectrum of institutional arrangements: UN intergovernmental agencies (FAO, IFAD, WFP); international organizations outside the UN framework (World Bank, CGIAR); intergovernmental treaties or conventions on particular aspects of food security (such as the International Plant Protection Convention); international initiatives and programmes such as the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food initiative and the G8.

This global picture is completed by a number of actions carried out by organizations or programmes operating on a transnational scale (such as non-governmental organizations, multinational corporations or regional cooperation programmes such as CADDP in Africa).

However, according to the mandate, theme or sector of each institution or initiative, the responses remain partial. This leads to the fragmentation of agendas within institutions and to initiatives with different dynamics but with occasionally overlapping functions and aims.

In a context where the strong leadership of an institution, state or group of states is lacking, this fragmentation of the food security global governance landscape could be problematic.

## THE CHALLENGES OF THE COMMITTEE ON FOOD SECURITY

It is in this context of fragmentation that the challenges facing the reform of the Committee on Food Security (CFS) must be understood. The CFS was established after the 1974 World Food Conference in the perspective of another “global food crisis”. It was intended as a forum for analysis and for monitoring policies dedicated to all aspects of food security throughout the world. However, the Committee failed to engage other UN agencies and civil society in the process, and was hence confined to a technical role, mainly focusing on agricultural aspects. The Committee considered food crises in terms of availability, and regarded increases in agricultural production as the main solution for food security. Although the FAO had developed, thanks to extra-budgetary funding, programmes and other initiatives seeking to build links with the socio-economic (poverty, health) and environmental (climate change, biodiversity) issues of food security, and such projects had only a very slight effect on the activities of the Committee, whose

influence on the international food security agenda remained very limited until recently.


The revitalization of the CFS is part of the radical reforms that the FAO has engaged in since 2005. The process, which is unprecedented for a United Nations agency, represents a takeover by Member States of an organization considered to be losing legitimacy (McCalla, 2007; Lele, 2009). The CFS reform, driven by Member States, was approved in October 2009. It emerged in the form of a re-evaluation of the Committee's legal status that enabled it to communicate its decisions not only to the FAO Conference, but also to the United Nations General Assembly through the Economic and Social Council. The objective of CFS revitalization is to make it "(...) the main international and intergovernmental open platform, gathering a broad range of stakeholders who are committed to working together in a coordinated way and in support of processes instigated by countries for the elimination of hunger and to ensure food and nutrition security for the whole of humanity"<sup>1</sup>. The Committee therefore claims to act explicitly to improve the quality of international coordination, asserting itself as the legitimate intergovernmental platform par excellence, in the mould of the Conferences of the Parties on climate change or biodiversity. In other words, a common platform for all stakeholders acting on a global scale, who are keen to benefit from a comprehensive framework that can support their actions to address the challenge of world hunger. This aim is based mainly on two mechanisms: an inclusive and participatory process and an increased mobilization of expertise.

#### CFS ENLARGEMENT AND EXPERTISE

The transformation of the relative role of states in the management of world affairs has become a truism in the literature on international relations (see for example Stone, 2008). The construction of international rules entails the involvement of an increasing number of stakeholders, or groups of stakeholders, who do not necessarily (or do not only) apply their influence through the channels of national representation. Rather than a weakening, this represents a

transformation in the role of states. The issue of food security is no exception to this development and the creation of an advisory group within the CFS reflects this change. The advisory group – comprising representatives of non-governmental organizations, professional organizations, the private sector and foundations, “sister” and “associate” groups connected to international organizations, and international financial organizations – provides a procedural legitimacy that intergovernmental coordination alone no longer delivers. In particular, the advisory group enables stakeholder participation to go beyond the annual CFS plenary sessions, allowing in particular their involvement during the inter-sessional phases. Such participation plays an undeniable role in increasing the transparency of decision-making while ensuring a wider representation of interests at the table. In addition, it increases the mobilized knowledge base (broadening the scope further than the agricultural field alone and its focus on increased production) and maximizes the opportunity to increase social learning through frequent member interaction. It is too early to measure the impact of such inclusiveness on the coordination process or, even more so, on the problems to be addressed. However, the degree to which the various advisory group stakeholders have become engaged provides a good way to assess the impact of the changes. It is within the group of non-governmental organizations that the most dramatic changes can be seen (see ETC, 2009; IPC, 2010). Traditionally excluded from political discussions, at the request of the CFS they have established their own coordination mechanism to strengthen their legitimacy and thus have more impact in debates. For example, during discussions on the issue of land grabbing, NGOs pushed for the international community to consider the voluntary guidelines developed by the four UN agencies (FAO, IFAD, UNCTAD and World Bank) as insufficient, regarding these guidelines as too timid. In consequence, an open working group to develop principles for the responsible investment of the CFS was put in place during its last session in October 2010. This working group should benefit in particular from an inventory of all existing initiatives on the subject, a report requested from the High level panel of experts (see below), and also from the establishment of a wide consultation

1. See document CFS: 2009/2 Rev 2, § 4, FAO, Rome



process to provide feedback, data and new recommendations. Without trying to predict whether this will lead to something truly innovative and likely to effectively regulate the behaviour of stakeholders investing in farmland throughout the world, it is however reasonable to assume that such a process would not have been possible without the presence and involvement of the advisory group members.

The second pillar of the CFS revitalization is related to the mobilization of scientific and technical expertise. Given that international coordination is frequently hampered by non-consensual opinions and by major controversies over possible solutions, the establishment of a High level expert panel (influenced in part by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change – IPCC – model) is expected to provide the international policy-making process with data and recommendations that are as objective as possible. The panel comprises a steering committee of 15 members selected for their experience and international reputation. The committee oversees the establishment of ad hoc teams to deal specifically with given problems, under the responsibility of one or more members of the steering committee. While the IPCC's main aim was to involve the hard science community in the field of politics, the creation of the Expert Panel on Food Security should especially help the emergence of debates and solutions that are usually "filtered" by the interest – real or imagined – of existing institutions or states. The first two topics commissioned by the panel of experts were: the volatility of agricultural prices; and land tenure and responsible investment. The reception of these initial two studies during the thirty-seventh session of the CFS in October 2011, given that they are highly controversial and already heavily debated by various international bodies, will provide a good indicator of the value brought by independent expertise that is less subject to political or institutional influences. It will also reveal the extent of the role actually given to such expertise in building the political debate and the development of innovative solutions.

#### **CONCLUSION: IS FOOD SECURITY BECOMING A GLOBAL ISSUE?**

A procedural legitimacy, therefore, through the inclusion of concerned stakeholders and a better

understanding of the substantive nature of discussions by using a specialized analytical approach, should lead, at least on paper, to the enhancement and increased effectiveness of political debate and international coordination. However, there are still many obstacles to tackle before the CFS becomes a real platform for cooperation on food security.

The first barrier relates to institutional aspects that may undermine the expectations of CFS reform. Remaining embedded within the FAO, there is a risk that the CFS will be consistently fixated, consciously or not, on the issue of food security in its agricultural dimension. Nutritional, commercial, environmental or social (poverty-related or health) components remain underrepresented despite the broadening of the advisory group or the constitution of the expert panel. It will be some time before the CFS, which exists within an organization that specializes in agricultural and food issues, can claim legitimacy in these fields that are not directly included in its mandate.

Other obstacles relate to the nature of the problem itself: while the global nature of environmental issues is clear, this is not the case for food security, which remains a problem that is essentially envisaged at the national level. If we add the lack of consensus regarding the relative importance attributed to the various dimensions of food security, it is particularly difficult to agree on what should be the focus of coordination and, even more so, on the tools and policy options likely to add value in comparison with a situation where global collective action is low or absent.

In this context, it is clear that at this stage no one (state, group of states or international institution) has sufficient legitimacy to impose a single model of collective international action. The current fragmentation may therefore continue. Undeniably, the CFS already delivers benefits by providing a unique platform where all stakeholders can, at the very least, exchange ideas, learn and discuss current initiatives; it will, however, take time and require obstacles to be addressed before the forum becomes one where food security is truly conceived as a global issue and where solutions can be developed with the consent of all parties. The continued investment of states (beyond periods of global food crises); the construction of

synergies with existing global initiatives (such as the G20 or the Secretary General's high-level task force on the global food security crisis); assigning a major role to independent expertise and enabling the FAO

to rise to the challenge; are all key determinants for the CFS to have a sustained influence on the international food security agenda, and to make a real impact on dealing with hunger. ■

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