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Critical elements on impact assessment and accountability framework within the Committee on World Food Security

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As food prices spiked on agricultural markets and political instability spread throughout the world in 2007-2008, food and nutrition security (FNS) has arisen again on the development agenda. It was through the issue of price volatility that food politics became a global issue and some countries and stakeholders pushed for the formalisation of a global governance of FNS. In this context, the Committee on World Food Security (CFS), set up in 1974 under FAO to review and monitor food security policies, was reformed in 2009. Its revitalization led to new institutional arrangements with the inclusion of a wide range of stakeholders and the creation of a mechanism producing scientific and professional expertise on controversial issues in order to inform policy makers, the High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition (HLPE).

This issue brief builds on the discussions held during an international workshop on global governance of FNS (July 2014), convened by IDDRI, CIHEAM-MAIM (Mediterranean Agronomic Institute of Montpellier) and CIRAD (Centre de coopération internationale en recherche agronomique pour le développement), gathering 30 experts. It aims at making explicit what can be learnt from the CFS reform and contributing to the reflection on global FNS governance. One of its objectives is to provide supporting views on the CFS monitoring process. It will also address the specific issue of accountability within and outside the CFS framework, as one of the most critical issue for enhanced FNS governance.

HIGHLIGHTS

- The reformed Committee on World Food Security (CFS) is an interesting governance mechanism and generated a diversity of outputs and outcomes with little equivalent in other arenas. They can be major steps to foster an effective global governance of food and nutrition security (FNS) but they remain fragile.
- The evaluation process of the CFS which is planned in 2015 could help consolidating the functioning of this global platform. It should put the stress both on processes and impacts; immediate efforts of monitoring of the CFS impacts should rapidly be developed.
- For evaluation and monitoring purpose, assessing the impacts of the CFS depends on the different theories of change to achieve the objectives that are set to the institution and on the impact pathways expected, which can be very diverse among the stakeholders. Impacts assessment faces methodological challenges but different methods could be mobilized.
- The theory of change approach reinforces the idea that the impacts of a platform like the CFS are to be expected in the intermediate steps, that is to say how it helps national coordination and national policy design for FNS with a specific focus on the needs of those who have little or no access to the levers of power.
- For monitoring potential CFS impacts, clarifying the framework of mutual accountability between stakeholders with differentiated responsibility will be essential.

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THE CFS, A MAJOR GOVERNANCE REVOLUTION

Food and nutrition security is increasingly considered as a global rather than only a national or local public good. Many stakeholders consider that food security for all on the planet cannot be achieved without international coordination. They particularly stress the issue of climate change mitigation and adaptation or price volatility on international commodity markets for which one country's policies can impact other countries' situation. However, FNS governance does not constitute a spontaneously coordinated whole and the reality on the ground is of a deep fragmentation and breakdown of agendas.¹ The CFS reform constitutes a new governance approach, as it seeks to extend the intergovernmental discussions to a variety of stakeholders and broaden the problematic of food security to issues outside the realm of agricultural production in an inter-sectorial approach, relying particularly on the HLPE. While these intentions are considered very useful by many stakeholders, others consider that food security should be dealt with at other scales (mainly national, particularly for some governments, insisting on their sovereignty) or in other instances. Other global steps have been made to address the issue of price volatility, like the AMIS system or the agreement on stocks in Bali at WTO in 2013. However, broadening the approach to other dimensions of food security appears difficult. The CFS discussions are still very focused on the relationships between agriculture and food security rather than food security itself.²

Among the outputs of the reformed CFS that are put forward, the VGGT ("voluntary guidelines on the responsible governance of tenure of land, fisheries and forests in the context of national food security") is acknowledged as an important achievement. It is considered as an example of a constructive multi-stakeholders policy negotiation at the global scale that would have been inconceivable under the previous CFS functioning. However, it is important to stress that these guidelines are soft law and can only be implemented through the consent of the concerned actors, first of all the States themselves. To what extent can we consider that the CFS governance mechanics is thereby

reinventing or shaping differently what is internationally binding especially compared with other global governance mechanisms (e.g. WTO) where stringent compliance mechanisms exist? Answering this question is crucial in order to not only focus on the participatory nature of the process of production of such guidelines, but also to ensure that they can have an impact on public and private strategies at different scales. For instance, the endorsement of voluntary guidelines by States and their inscription in a rights-based approach could create obligations, and give the impetus for accountability processes at different scales. However, many analysts remain sceptical about the effective ability of these guidelines to have any impact on the ground. Assessing the impacts of the reformed CFS and clarifying accountability processes are therefore two crucial issues for the future, raising many methodological and political challenges.

ASSESSING THE IMPACTS OF THE REFORMED CFS: WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

What can we expect from the reformed CFS and what criteria should be used for judging the successes or failures of such governance platform? Can it be measured by its capacity to reduce the number of people malnourished? The CFS evaluation should actually consider the Committee's actual primary role, which is global coordination and convergence of policies, and not the actual governance of global food systems or directly the capacity to reduce the number of food unsecured people. In addition, it might be too early to proceed to a proper evaluation of the CFS as it would be very difficult to document impacts. Considering the length of institutional and legal processes, more time is needed to have enough perspective on the integration and use of soft law: for instance, the Voluntary Guidelines to support the progressive realization of the right to adequate food have been approved in 2004 and we realize that ten years are not so much to assess their impact. A proper evaluation of the CFS would be of course necessary but in the mid-term future, so that the time could be used to reflect on a proper methodology which could allow assessing impacts to the situation of food insecurity and malnutrition on the ground.

Regarding the framing of impacts and effects expected from the CFS, inevitably, different groups within the Committee will have their own criteria for deciding whether the process is working adequately and delivers the expected outcomes. Indeed, different stakeholders consider their participation to the reformed CFS with different objectives: for instance, facilitating the establishment of

1. See Lerin, F., Louafi, S. (2014). "Addressing the fragmentation of discourses and governance for food and nutrition security", *IDDRi Working Papers n°10/14*, Paris, France; Margulis, M. (2011). "The evolving global governance of food security", *Research Paper – Global Governance*, DFAIT Policy Staff, Canada.

2. See Alpha, A., Bricas, N. (2014). "Opening the CFS to an inter-sectorial approach to food security: a difficult process", *CIRAD Working Paper*, Montpellier, France.

national food security policies and making national governments accountable for them in front of the international community; or ensuring a balance in the mobilisation of different fields of expertise for the formulation of those policies. In any evaluation effort of what impacts the CFS produces, it is therefore useful to account for this diversity of objectives through a diversity of analytical perspectives.

Even if it is too early for a proper evaluation, monitoring CFS outcomes should be launched quickly. It is needed in order to prepare the relevant material and data for the evaluation, but it is also directly needed in the short term by many members, participants and observers of the CFS so that they can assess, decide and justify their involvement in the CFS. For those who have limited resources, their further engagement is partly linked to their possibility to assess how the debates, guidelines or frameworks adopted in the CFS are enabling people to produce and access nutritious food in a sustainable way and how their action in the CFS can help them to have an impact locally. While monitoring the substance of CFS outcomes is one of the main critical issues at the agenda, it remains pivotal to monitor the changes in processes growing out of the CFS reform. Indeed, the CFS experience, compared to other multilateral and intergovernmental platforms of governance of public goods or environmental conventions, has created a particularly inclusive environment with the existence of the HLPE, the Civil Society Mechanism³ (CSM), and the Private Sector Mechanism (PSM) where ideas can be expressed and controversies addressed properly thanks to the structure given to debates by the HLPE.⁴ The new governance principles set up by the CFS reform are to be evaluated and monitored *per se*. They show the feasibility of institutional innovations like the CSM enabling Civil Society Organisations (CSO) and social movements' participation to an intergovernmental discussion that has little equivalent in other arenas. The organisation of the different stakeholders engaged in the CFS is a long and complex process and it might be relevant to differentiate the organisational achievements and to assess the progress made in terms of transparency and legitimacy. The balance between monitoring outcomes/impacts and processes is rightly highlighted in the June 2014 document of the CFS Open-Ended Working Group on Monitoring.

Finally, it has to be emphasised that no monitoring is neutral. It depends on the objectives that

are set to the institution, the analytical perspective chosen, the types of impact pathways expected, which can be very diverse among the stakeholders. It is therefore necessary to design the monitoring framework within the more general conceptual framework of evaluation, implying for instance the use of concepts such as the theory of change.⁵

REVEALING THE DIFFERENT THEORIES OF CHANGE BEHIND STAKEHOLDERS' ENGAGEMENT IN THE CFS

Adopting a pluralistic approach that identifies different "theories of change" would eventually meet both the need to assess the Committee's effects on interim and long-term outcomes and the need for information on how the interventions produce those outcomes. The theory of change approach applies critical thinking on the design, implementation and evaluation of initiatives and programmes intended to support change in their own contexts. In the case of the CFS, it could help specifying its intended outcomes, the contextual factors that are likely to influence them, and the impact pathways through which these different influences can combine to produce an expected (or unexpected) outcome. It reinforces the idea that the impacts of a platform like the CFS are to be expected in the intermediate steps, that is to say how it helps national coordination and national policy design for FNS with a specific focus on the needs of those who have little or no access to the levers of power.

As for the evaluation and assessment of impacts, we could refer to the International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD) for which the spill-over impacts have been tracked through case studies at various scales. It helped exemplifying the diversity of possible impact pathways and some lessons could be drawn for the CFS from this experience especially at a time when the CFS is trying to adapt its guidelines to national contexts.

The theory of change approach replaces the two principal and often independent types of evaluation reports with one that explicitly and deliberately covers both activities process and implementation. Inevitably, there are important methodological challenges associated to the design of such a monitoring or impact assessment framework incorporating the concepts of theory of change and impacts pathways. The first challenge is to make the link

3. See Barling, D., Duncan, J. (2012). "Renewal through Participation in Global Food Security Governance" *International Journal of Sociology of Agriculture and Food*, Volume 19, issue 2

4. See Eklin, K. et al. (2014). "The Committee on World Food Security reform: impacts on global governance of food security", *IDDRI Working Paper*, n°03/14, Paris, France

5. See Connell, J., Kubisch, A. (1998). "Applying a theory of change approach to the evaluation of comprehensive community initiatives: progress, prospects and problems", *Theory, Measurement, and Analysis*. Washington, DC.

with the local, national and global scales. To cope with this challenge, lessons can be learnt from the IAASTD processes and the Guidelines on the progressive realisation of the Right to Food. A second issue deals with the capacity to attribute changes to actions—an ongoing problem for any evaluator. The next set of difficulties relates to the ability to combine in the same framework a qualitative and a quantitative approach in order to have comprehensive and well-documented results. And another methodological challenge lies in the fact that within the CFS, various stakeholders hold different views about what it will take to produce the long-term outcomes of the CFS. Indeed multiple theories of change may be operating simultaneously and must be articulated to produce an evaluation.

NOVEL WAYS OF MONITORING MULTI-STAKEHOLDERS PLATFORM

The new arrangements in global governance of FNS produced by the CFS reform, as well as other initiatives like Scaling Up Nutrition, are examples of an evolution from intergovernmental governance led entirely by Member States working together toward more multi-stakeholder arrangements. The development of multi-stakeholders platforms questions the best way to ensure mutual accountability since the very tenets and framework of accountability are also evolving.

In the CFS, Member States accountability is critical as governmental bodies have the power to decide and are the only ones that can be bound by an international legal instrument. No one denies that States bear the primary responsibility for protecting the rights and interests of their people while international institutions responsibility is to hold States accountable for the treatment of their citizens. States accountability, not only for domestic policies but also for international cooperation, is therefore critical in global FNS governance. However it does not mean that States are the only ones impacting food security at the global and national scales. Non-State actors and more specifically transnational actors have indeed a responsibility as their actions have impact on human rights—more precisely the right to food; they should also be held accountable for their strategies, decisions and initiatives impacting FNS. The accountability of private sector, civil society, private philanthropy but also international organisations and international initiatives⁶ therefore appears to be critical;

6. e.g. the New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition or the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa.

but how to address it? In the framework of the CFS—but not only there—this raises a crucial question: what do the different stakeholders consider to be an obligation? It seems relevant to approach this issue through the double lens of mutual accountability (different types of actors are accountable to one another) and differentiated responsibility (government accountability, private sector's responsibility, civil society organisations' legitimacy). The accountability framework should also be differentiated depending on the stage in the process of the CFS where stakeholders are engaged specifically: elaboration of guidelines, negotiations, implementation and assessment.

State but also non-State actors' accountability is central to ensure that CFS outputs are translated into effective impacts and outcomes but it is also politically sensitive in terms of sovereignty. Innovative accountability mechanisms should then be explored; various methodologies such as peer review processes (like at the OECD) or case studies should be explored and assessed. Common principles for such an accountability framework like transparency and legitimacy are also key issues.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Analysis and research is therefore needed not only to support the development of the CFS but also to provide useful inputs for other global governance platforms. There are two main blocks of questions. The first one relates to the evaluation and monitoring framework that has to be supported by a pluralistic approach accounting for the different theories of change of the diversity of stakeholders involved, while the second one deals with multi-stakeholder accountability frameworks. Behind these two blocks lies a series of sub-questions and issues: what conceptual framework(s) should be used for assessing the CFS impacts and influence from global to local scales? To what extent the guidelines and principles agreed within the CFS are considered binding by the CFS stakeholders and do they want to be held accountable for their implementation? Eventually, there is a remaining question related to the form of a desirable process of global governance: would such a monitoring and accountability framework be enough to ensure that the ideal and demanding governance principles of this very specific multi-stakeholder process are also taken on board by other multi-actors governance mechanisms that affect food security on the ground?