

# : Global Governance Spotlight

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## Global Food Governance. Between corporate control and shaky democracy

Nora McKeon

The 2007/2008 food riots in capital cities around the world revealed the existence of a critical governance vacuum which the international community was obliged to address. Suggestions placed on the table were dominantly administrative (Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon's Task Force on Global Food and Nutrition, HLTf) or investment-led (the G8 Global Partnership on Agriculture, Food Security and Nutrition, GPAFS). The only effort to seek policy responses to the causes of the food price crisis was a proposal to reform the existing UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS). The proposal was advocated by a number of G77 countries and the Food and Agricultural Organisation of the United Nations (FAO). This solution won out with the support of a movement of small-scale producers and civil society organizations that had built up the strength of its global advocacy from the time of the World Food Conferences of 1996 and 2003 under the banner of 'food sovereignty'.

In this political context the reform process, conducted during 2009, transformed the Committee into a highly innovative global policy forum. The CFS is rooted in a human rights framework and is open to the full participation of organizations representing those sectors of the population most affected by food insecurity and most active in seeking solutions. These characteristics make it relevant across the range of global governance institutions which are seeking formulae for enhanced inclusiveness. Its pertinence is heightened by the fact that food

security and related issues of access to land, water and genetic resources are at the heart of global economic and geo-political power systems. The food crises these power systems generate are recurrent, as confirmed by the data of the State of Food and Nutrition Insecurity 2017. They are also intimately linked to crises in other areas such as climate change, finance, conflicts and forced migration.

In its first decade of operations the CFS has proved to be an effective forum for negotiating progressive global guidelines on delicate issues such as land tenure. Further, the CFS is framing policy debates taking the lived realities of food insecure communities into account. Its very success has stimulated a push-back on the part of powerful economic interests that would be happy to undermine its political significance. The coming plenary session of the CFS in October 2018 will debate the future of the Committee following an evaluation undertaken during 2017. The European Union could weigh in to defend the CFS and the human rights framework on which it rests, and its positions will therefore be important in deciding the outcome.

This paper reviews the CFS' main characteristics, highlights ways in which the political environment has changed since the 2008 reform, and analyses the challenges faced the context of the current evaluation process. It concludes with an exhortation to CFS member governments, the EU in particular, to value and reinforce this unique policy forum.

## The reformed CFS: an innovative global governance vision

The vision of the CFS that emerged from the reform could be very synthetically described as that of a space for inclusive political process. It seeks to privilege the voices of those most affected and is aimed at achieving policy coherence and promoting accountability around the Right to Food [see Box]. The reform opened the closed doors and carpeted meeting rooms of global food governance to the women and men who actually work the land and produce the food that nourishes the world's population.

### The reform of the Committee on World Food Security: important features (CFS 2009)

- Foremost inclusive international and inter-governmental platform for food security and nutrition in the UN.
- Promotes realization of the right to adequate food.
- Builds policy convergence by negotiating international strategies/voluntary guidelines and supporting their implementation.
- Promotes accountability and develops an innovative, inclusive mechanism for monitoring.
- Creates a multi-actor policy space that prioritizes the voice of those constituencies most affected by food insecurity.
- Governments retain decision-making responsibility and so can be held accountable.
- Five other categories of entities, including civil society and the private sector, contribute to the debate on the same footing as governments. They autonomously self-organize to relate to the CFS.
- Its policy work is supported by a dedicated High Level Panel of Experts that acknowledges the expertise of producers and practitioners.
- Promotes linkages between the global CFS and inclusive policy spaces at regional and country levels.

Since the adoption of the reform document, the CFS has made considerable progress in putting this innovative global governance vision into operation. It has achieved some important results, thanks in good part to the legitimate and articulate contributions of the autonomous Civil Society Mechanism

(CSM). The most highly visible of these are the Voluntary Guidelines on Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forest. The Guidelines, which were adopted in 2012 and are now being applied around the world are the first ever globally negotiated instrument in this delicate area. The CFS has also adopted numerous other policy outcomes in which evidence grounded in reality confronts the dominant narrative of how to fight hunger. It has been officially recognized that small-scale producers are responsible for 70% of the world's food and 90% of all investment in agriculture. This should debunk the message that industrial agri-business is the only recipe for feeding the world's population. What's more, 80% of the world's food reaches those who consume it not through formal value chains and retail networks, but through territorially-rooted markets. These perform a series of functions other than the purely economic: they provide more advantageous access to smallholders and nutritious food for consumers, and retain the value added in local economies rather than whisking it into the pockets of multinational investors.

## The changing political environment

In the interim, however, the political environment has become significantly more difficult than it was at the time of the reform. Corporate power in food chains has continued to grow unabated, with the mega-mergers of major agribusiness multinationals threatening a further concentration. Data technologies represent a new driver in this process, connecting inputs to farm equipment and retailers to consumers in unprecedented ways. At the same time financialization is transforming food and land into objects of speculation.

More generally, we live in an epoch in which representative democracy is under accusation for having sold out to the interests of the top 1%, including the corporations and financial speculators who operate in the world of food. The response to this legitimacy crisis is too often articulated in the form of authoritarian nationalism, right-wing populism and xenophobia. World-wide there is a trend towards shrinking space for civil society, as manifested recently in the exclusion of civil society organisations (CSOs) from the WTO Ministerial Meeting in Argentina. This shrinking space is accompanied by reduced ambition for defending Human Rights, with attacks on rights-defenders and criminalization of social movements on the rise. The primacy and legitimacy of the public sector – which ought to be the bulwark against these trends – is threatened by corporate capture of policy spaces and a development narrative that assigns a lead role to external private

investment. In this changed context defending the founding vision of the reformed CFS becomes both more difficult and more essential.

## Challenges of the 2017/18 evaluation

An external evaluation of the first years of work of the CFS, undertaken during 2017, assessed positively the pertinence of the CFS and its work. However, it also noted that it is insufficiently visible worldwide and its outcomes are not adequately applied at national level. The Committee's reactions to the evaluators' recommendations and a work-plan for their implementation are now being agreed under the facilitation of Germany and China and will be submitted to the CFS plenary session in October 2018. This phase offers an opportunity either to reaffirm the Committee's mission and strengthen its capacity to fulfill it, or to erode its political weight. Key issues at stake could be summarized as follows:

### Who decides? The actors

Since 2009 enthusiasm for 'Multi-Stakeholder Platforms (MSP)' has spread widely. Within UN and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) circles there is considerable interest in the 'CFS model'. The devil, however, is in the differences. In most MSPs, such as Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) or the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN), the various categories of participants are lumped together in the same room without distinctions as to roles, responsibilities and interests promoted, and without concern for power imbalances. In the reformed CFS, on the contrary, governments retain the decision-making role and – accordingly – accountability. The other participants are grouped into clearly separated categories and priority is accorded to those most affected by food insecurity. In human rights terminology, these actors are the 'rights holders'. The governments are the 'duty bearers' and the rest are 'other parties'. This is not to say that they don't have anything to contribute to the debate, but the essential political negotiation is between those who are fighting to obtain respect of their rights and the public sphere which is obliged to defend and protect them. The clarity of this vision is under attack by those governments who have no desire to be held accountable. It is threatened by corporate actors who have monopolised the 'private sector mechanism' to the exclusion of the small and medium private sector actors of the Global South. It is also endangered by opportunistic proposals to create transversal categories such as 'farmers' ignoring the real differences in interests between corporate agribusiness producers and small-scale family farmers. The introduction of stringent meas-

ures to guard against corporate conflicts of interest in the CFS space should be a priority.

### How? The process

In parallel, the use of the CFS as a space for political negotiation leading to policy outcomes – at the very origin of the decision to reform the Committee – is under attack by those who prefer to go for technical and institutional solutions privileging investments over public policy. This is manifested in the trend to shift framing of the debate and decision-making from inclusive plenary sessions and working groups towards the governmental Bureau and the secretariat, and to go for show-casing 'best practices' rather than obtaining policy outcomes. One powerful member, the US, is seeking to use 'red line' veto power inappropriately to prohibit the CFS from discussing issues with which it feels uncomfortable. The search for consensus, in itself an admirable objective, is being downgraded by efforts to reach it at any price. These efforts are pasting over controversies that are rooted in real and important differences of perceptions and interests which need instead to be acknowledged and negotiated. The call for 'evidence-based' policy can be an indispensable tool or a tombstone for legitimate political decision-making. In the CFS today it risks being interpreted in 'scientific', technical and quantitative terms. This is despite the fact that the HLPE and the composition of the CFS itself militate towards understanding the importance of qualitative evidence based on the lived experience of those who are subjected to food insecurity and violation of their rights. A key aspect of the CFS's process is, of course, adequate funding to implement its democratically determined work plan. The total budget of the CFS for 2018/2019 amounts to the modest amount of US-\$ 9,386,265. The bulk of the contributions come from the UN Rome-based agencies (through seconding of staff to the joint secretariat) and the EU and a few primarily European governments, leaving a deficit of US-\$ 4,215,211. The fact that it is not proving possible to cover the entire budget is a political issue, not a financial one. It opens the way towards a donor-driven work plan including only those items in which individual funders decide to invest.

### What? The content

The framing of the CFS agenda inevitably suffers from the factors flagged in the two preceding paragraphs. It took the Civil Society Mechanism several years to get agroecology on the agenda, and debate on contentious issues like food sovereignty or the food and nutrition impacts of international trade agreements are still taboo. It is essential that the CFS be able to carry out a legitimate, strategic

identification of key controversial issues to be researched by the HLPE and debated in the Committee. The outcomes of negotiations on these issues should not be left floating in separate compartments but must be compiled into a comprehensive and applicable policy coherence tool. This was originally foreseen in the function of developing a Global Strategic Framework included in the CFS reform document. At the same time, flexibility must be maintained to flag and examine emerging issues. The CFS was reformed in the wake of a food crisis. It must continue to complement the UN's humanitarian reactions to continued crises with efforts to analyse their causes and raise political will to address them.

### So what? The impact

The biggest challenge facing the CFS is to improve the use and application of its policy outputs both vertically – at country and regional levels - and horizontally, impacting on debates in other global policy fora in which decisions are taken that affect food security. The CFS evaluation process is considering a range of proposals in this sense. They require the convinced support of the Rome-based UN agencies – FAO, the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and the World Food Programme (WFP) – which is now tepid. Of paramount importance is to succeed in effectively implementing the function identified in the CFS reform document: promoting accountability by developing an innovative, inclusive monitoring mechanism, linking national and global monitoring activities, and tracking how CFS policy outcomes are being applied and with what results. The monitoring function is indispensable to ensure accountability, but also to learn from experience and to complete the necessary constant two-way flow of feedback between lived experience and global governance.

## Conclusion

The CFS is a unique policy forum that privileges the voice and accommodates the evidence of those most affected by the decisions under discussion in an effort to make global governance work for rights-based policy coherence. 'Contentious' CSOs, ironically, are the best allies of governments and the nation state system. The vision they advocate, based on sustainability, equity, solidarity, democracy, is the strongest defense against virulent nationalistic populism and marginalization of states by unbridled corporate and financial operations. It is in the interests of governments that aspire to function democratically to help ensure that social movements continue to perceive their engagement in the CFS space as being relevant to their on-going work at all levels. Germany has a special responsibility because of the relative solidity of its democracy and its economy and its role as co-facilitator of the CFS evaluation process. The very fact that the CFS is a 'soft policy' forum whose outcomes are voluntary enhances its capacity to be visionary. Governments can 'afford' to allow the CFS to use its unparalleled comparative advantage to give normative and paradigmatic form to politically motivating food-related aspirations. They can help push governance systems out of the ecological, social, political and economic quagmire in which they are floundering today. Civil society will certainly defend the CFS. But the future of the Committee depends on governments that are concerned to conserve the dignity and legitimacy of intergovernmental process.

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