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Research Report

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The UN Committee on Food Security: A new approach to global governance?

Alain de Janvry

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► Learning from the crisis : Seeking to coordinate policy responses

The world food crisis of 2007-08 had devastating effects of food security. The price of rice tripled between 2006 and 2008 while those of wheat and corn more than doubled. The number of hungry people rose from 850 million in 2005-07 to more than 1 billion in 2009. Social unrest was widespread and some governments fell.

... / ...

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.... Causes were multiple and cumulative, including droughts in critical production regions, rising oil and fertilizer prices, use of food grains to produce biofuels in industrialized countries, and rising demands associated with prosperity and changing diets in large emerging economies, all of this while world food stockpiles had fallen to unusually low levels. The crisis marked a turning point toward the recurrence of large price spikes, increasing short-term price volatility, and rising secular trends in food prices.

After more than 30 years without a food crisis, and a century of declining real food prices, the world was caught by surprise. Lack of preparedness at the country level and lack of capacity to coordinate policy responses at a world scale were the harsh lessons of the crisis. Without policy reforms at the national and international levels, these price peaks and high volatility were likely to be recurrent as past determinants remained in place. But crisis induced policy responses. Two things had to be done: improve each country's capacity to improve its own food security, and help prevent policy responses at the country level that would harm other nations, particularly poorer and more trade dependent countries. Major donors increased their support to agriculture and private investors were attracted to agriculture as a source of profits under high price conditions. A global land rush was unleashed, with wealthy food dependent countries seeking to increase their food security through direct control over land in developing countries where it was used below potential. Yet, the policy front also had to be addressed, and this in a coordinated fashion due to interdependencies in achieving food security through trade, technology flows, introduction of new institutions, and environmental impacts. Global governance for food security was recognized as seriously lacking. This is where reform of the Committee on Food Security (CFS) became potentially relevant.

► Reforming the Committee on Food Security : The promise of inclusiveness and expertise

The Committee of Food Security (CFS) was created in 1974, following the 1973 world food crisis and the 1974 World Food Conference, as an inter-governmental body charged with monitoring world food security and the policies implemented by government for this purpose. This Committee was, however, confined to the specialized UN agencies (FAO, IFAD, WFP) and focused principally on issues of food availability and aggregate food production, the co-called "size of the pile of rice". This was recognized as insufficient to address the new dimensions of world food insecurity. Following the shock of the world food crisis of 2008, the CFS was reformed in 2009 in an attempt to put into place some world governance able to respond to global food security concerns. The purpose was to broaden the approach to food security from its agricultural dimensions (availability of food through production and trade) to the other key dimensions of food security, namely access, use, and continuity. Reforms of the CFS pursued two modalities. The first was to make the committee more inclusive, going beyond member states of the FAO, IFAD, and WFP, to include participants from the United Nations agencies and bodies, international and regional financial and trade organizations (WB, WTO, etc.), regional cooperation programs (CAADP), international conventions (e.g., on climate change, plant protection), international agricultural research bodies (CGIAR), civil society organizations and NGOs, the private sector, and philanthropic organizations (such as the Gates Foundation).

The second was to make its work more evidence-based by appointing a High Level Panel of Experts (HLPE) with 15 independent members charged with providing scientific knowledge-based analysis and advice to the CFS. Typically the HLPE selects and guides

project teams that prepare reports on issues of interest to the CFS. These reports and the recommendations they contain are subjected to extensive open e-consultations. But reports and recommendations are the ownership of the HLPE. This approach to evidence allows to bring to consideration by the CFS issues and potential solutions that are not filtered by the interests of the member organizations and governments. A useful approach for this in guiding CFS debates is for the HLPE to identify the different sides of debated issues and to weight their contributions and limitations in achieving food security.

The status of the CFS was upgraded by having it report on its decisions not only at the FAO's annual conference but also to the General Assembly of the United Nations via ECOSOC. The CFS thus seeks to gain the same legitimacy as the Conferences of the Parties (COP) on climate change and on biodiversity, but with two distinctive assets: broad inclusiveness of stakeholders and expertise-based decision-making.

The CFS itself is a platform for debates on food security issues, for exchange of information about national-level policy approaches to food security, coordination of policy reforms in response to food security concerns, and eventual convergence of food security purposes and policies. Interactions among members are not only in the context of plenary sessions, but of joint work and consultations that support a process of social learning. The NGO members have for example put into place, at the demand of the CFS, their own coordination mechanism to have more weight in the debates. Ad-hoc working groups are also organized to work on issues reported by the HLPE and on proposed decisions by the CFS. It is in a sense a unique attempt at building inclusive and evidence-based governance in managing world food security. Given the deficit of effective governance at the global level in confronting issues with

clear global dimensions and interconnections (in spite of the proliferation of global governance initiatives and overlapping mandates in global governance), it is interesting to analyze what the CFS has been able to do, whether what it has done may make a difference, and what are the challenges looking ahead for its future role.

The operation of the CFS and the HLPE is a process of institutional construction in the making. By-laws are being elaborated in the process of meeting the need for rules and decision-making mechanisms. As such, it is very much work in progress. Yet, lessons can be derived from the first three years of operation of the Panel and the Committee.

► Lessons from early achievements

CFS achievements depend on outcomes in three successive steps. The first is the issues that the CFS chooses to address and hence the reports that it requests the HLPE to prepare. The second is the recommendations and guidelines that the CFS proposes to its members based on discussion of these reports and additional evidence. The third is implementation of CFS recommendations and guidelines. Three years of operation of the HLPE-CFS give a glimpse at achievements at these three levels of performance.

Emerging in the context of the 2008 food price spikes and volatility, and the global land grab that food security concerns induced, the first two HLPE reports requested by the CFS were dictated by circumstances. The first addressed the issue of "Price Volatility and Food Security" (2011). The ensuing CFS debates and resolutions led to the creation of AMIS (Agricultural Market Information System) hosted by the FAO, the Rapid Response Forum to promote early discussion among decision-level officials about critical market conditions to encourage the

coordination of policies and the development of common strategies, and the adoption of recommendations for better international coordination of policy responses to food price shocks. The second report addressed the issue of "Land tenure and international investments in agriculture" (2011). CFS debates on the subject led to adoption of voluntary guidelines for the responsible governance of land tenure.

Reports submitted by the HLPE in 2012 on "Food security and climate change" and "Social protection for food security" were debated at the 2012 session of the CFS attended by more than 1000 delegates. On climate change the CFS agreed to interact more closely with the UNFCCC to raise concerns with food security in climate change negotiations and to press the need for an agreement on climate change for the sake of the food insecure. On social protection, the CFS recognized the importance of the approach championed by ILO of a Social Protection Floor basically concerned with income and health, and to work collaboratively with the ILO and other UN institutions to include food security in the Social Protection Floor to explore the idea of a Food Security Floor. Important here is to make a minimum food security coverage a legally enforceable right.

Reports in progress address the issues of "Biofuels and food security", and of "Investment in smallholder agriculture and food security". Planned future reports for 2014 will concern the roles of fisheries and aquaculture for food security and nutrition, and of food losses and waste in the context of sustainable food systems. Possible future themes include water, genetic resources, and agro-ecology, all in the perspective of food security.

► How to make the CFS approach more effective?

Based on three years of experience, we can say

that the CFS approach has been procedurally successful in putting into practice its original approach: achieving broad stakeholder inclusiveness and grounding its decision-making process on scientific evidence. But can this process be translated into improved governance for food security? We conclude with the following four recommendations to make the CFS approach to world governance more effective. They concern (1) the CFS capacity to manage a comprehensive approach, (2) the role of the HLPE in providing high quality and objective scientific support, (3) the CFS influence over implementation of its recommendations, and (4) the process of learning-by-doing toward improved world governance for food security and beyond.

1. CFS capacity to manage comprehensive approaches

A major lesson from three years of HLPE-CFS analysis of world food security and what can be done to improve it is that achieving food security requires a broad comprehensive approach at both the national and international levels. Food security itself is multidimensional (availability, access, use, and continuity) and the instruments that can be used to achieve food security for all and at all times are very multidimensional, requiring the mobilization of instruments that range from production, to trade, purchasing power, social safety nets, health, and environmental sustainability. Much has been learned from the successful approach to food security followed by Brazil in its Zero Hunger strategy, a comprehensive multidimensional strategy. For this, coordination must be achieved across sectors and institutions at the national and international levels, a huge challenge. This raises the following issues :

a. Going beyond the agricultural mandate of the sponsoring institutions

The three sponsoring institutions -FAO, IFAD,

WFP- only cover a limited range of expertise necessary to achieve food security, mainly grounded in agriculture and food availability. Important additional dimensions are growth and income generation, health, the implementation of social safety nets, environmental sustainability and climate change, energy policy, etc. The CFS will need to reach beyond the expertise of the sponsoring institutions. Membership in CFS of international organizations with expertise in these broader determinants of food security is part of the answer. Coordinating their own activities with CFS recommendations is yet largely to be achieved.

b. Coordinating with other international forums

Discussions on price volatility immediately bring policy debates toward issues of trade (and hence WTO, UNCTAD, G20). Discussions on social safety nets raise issues of social welfare and human rights (and hence ILO, UNDP). Discussions on climate change to raise issues of international negotiations on global emissions (and hence UNFCCC). Discussions on land tenure and land grabbing raise issues on the role of international organizations such as the World Bank. It is thus essential that bridges be built to international fora where these issues are debated, and where CFS recommendations can be voiced and heard. Formal recognition of the importance of cross-forums coordination for food security is still largely to be constructed.

c. Elaborating national comprehensive approaches

Countries themselves need to develop comprehensive food security strategies, similar to their development of comprehensive poverty reduction strategies as demanded by donors under the PRSP (Poverty Reduction Strategy Programs) process. For this, CFS country guidance would need to be provided for the process to be well supported by data, based on solid diagnostics and indicators, and broadly owned according to the political regime in place

and the thickness of civil society organizations. Adapting the PRSP process (at least according to the way this process should be performing) to the question of food security is an important contribution that the CFS can make to help countries better help themselves in achieving food security.

2. Quality and objectivity of HLPE scientific support

It does not take long to realize that HLPE recommendations can easily be ignored, but also that they can be hugely influential if properly designed for CFS consideration. It is also clear that few recommendations are wins for all, and that there are more likely tradeoffs with winners and losers in the recommendations made. This raises several issues:

a. Quality and objectivity of the recommendations

The model hinges very importantly on the selection of HLPE committee members and indirectly of project teams for the reports to be prepared and of HLPE capacity to work with these teams. It is consequently of utmost importance that members be selected in terms of their own scientific capacity to work on reports, and that the HLPE chair (as was the case with Professor Swaminathan, the current first chair) be a personality of broad international respect for his/her scientific excellence and integrity. It is essential that the FAO-IFAD-WFP member selection committee take in close consideration this capacity beyond country and gender representation. To help this process, some performance report card on individual members should be available to the selection committee.

b. Continuing feedback between HLPE and CFS

The role of the HLPE should not just be a one-time report-submitting and presenting process, but one of continued dialogue with the CFS as

.../... issues emerge, both over past reports and for the prioritization of future reports. For the moment, the operation of the HLPE is one step removed from that of the CFS. It is likely the case that scientific expertise cannot be just a one-time input, but requires closer feedback and continued interactions, a process that is currently not in place.

3. CFS influence over implementation of its recommendations

The CFS has been effective at providing its members with voluntary guidelines and principles of responsible behavior toward food security. An important issue here is that most of the policy interventions to achieve food security actually occur at the national level, and only some at the international level. It is easy to see the existence of conflicts of interest between use of national policies (such as export taxes and export bans to stabilize domestic prices in exporting countries when there is a price hike) and negative impacts on food dependent countries. Can guidelines and principles be sufficient to reconcile private (national) and social (international) interests when crises hit? This raises the following issues :

a. Role of guidelines and principles

These can be very useful to members in providing expertise on efficient and socially desirable behavior. Countries do not have to rediscover the wheel when there exist well-recognized approaches to food security. However, will these suffice to deter policy responses that have negative externalities on others? An important role that the CFS can play here is to document policy interventions and share the information broadly and rapidly among CFS members. Knowledge that this information will be publicly available may influence country behavior conscious of maintaining international image. Because of inter-linkages across countries, defaulting on responsible behavior

on the food security front is likely to have costs in other transactions and collaborative ventures. Monitoring and diffusing information on policy responses to food insecurity should thus be a routine function of the CFS, helping countries implement its recommendations. It should put into place the mechanisms through which this information sharing process can be implemented.

b. Rewarding worldly responsible behavior

Asking for altruistic behavior when a country is itself in a food security crisis is unrealistic. Governments cannot be asked to take chances with their own survival on behalf of the welfare of non-constituents. There is for this a need for credible reciprocity, backed by a commitment device, as there is an obvious time consistency problem in cashing on future reciprocity for today's costly altruism. The HLPE needs to address this to make its own recommendations to the CFS. The multilateral development banks—IFAD, World Bank, and regional development banks—could commit preferential treatment (such as credit for projects) in reward for demonstrated policy altruism. It is in a sense their roles to internalize positive social externalities, very much in analogy with a system of payments for environmental services for unrewarded carbon capture by forest owners in the REDD mechanism. CFS member countries could also pledge inter-linked transactions in reward for global altruism. This is an important policy area that remains to be explored and would benefit from HLPE recommendations.

4. Experimenting with a new approach to global governance

The CFS-HLPE model is under construction. By-laws are gradually being developed based on learning-by-doing. Formalizing this learning process raises the following issues :

a. Self-evaluation and external evaluation

With three years of experience and partial renewal of the HLPE team by mid-2013, this is a good time to derive lessons from what has been learned about advantages and limitations of this approach to global governance. The HLPE could be charged with undertaking this self-evaluation before the initial chairman and team are replaced. Appreciation of the experience should be not only in terms of the specificity of what has been done and not done, but also of the generic value of the governance model put into place.

b. Comparative analysis of approaches to global governance for specific issues

The objective of the CFS is to construct international rules that will help coordinate how national governments and other stakeholders address the issue of food security at the national and international levels. Originality of the approach is its inclusiveness and reliance on expertise. The expectation is that coordination will gradually go beyond the CFS plenary sessions toward various institutionalizations that formalize coordination (following the example of AMIS), give it a real time basis, and endow it with support from personnel and financial resources. There has been a multiplicity of initiatives to organize world governance on other specialized issues, such as trade, climate change, and biodiversity. Useful will be to do a comparative analysis of the various global governance models put into place to assess how differentially effective this approach may be.

achieve this purpose, betting on the ideas of inclusiveness and scientific expertise as the two pillars for the construction of an effective response. Three years of operation have shown encouraging results. Member participation has been impressive. Scientific expertise has been provided to the CFS and voluntary guidelines and codes of conduct have been developed. Important questions remain as to whether these will suffice to make a difference when a food crisis returns. Several gaps remain for this to occur. Coordination of comprehensive policy responses both within and between countries remains incipient, quality and objectivity of scientific advice could be improved, rewards for national policy reforms that take into account international spillovers are missing, and evaluation of what has been achieved to make it into a learning process with generic value for global governance should be implemented. The CFS approach to world governance for food security is promising, but it is in need of further improvements and support to be truly effective in avoiding future food crises.

► Conclusion

Motivated by the 2008 food crisis, the world community has been seeking to achieve better coordination in international policy responses in order to reduce the occurrence of shocks and avoid use of national policies that impose negative externalities on other, usually poorer and more food-dependent, countries. The 2009 reform of the CFS was meant to



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