

The new Committee on World Food Security: a lame duck or a swan?

In the wake of the global food crisis of 2007/2008 the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) underwent a profound transformation that opened it up to concerned stakeholders such as organisations of small-scale food producers. The new CFS now needs to demonstrate that it can take authoritative decisions on key policy issues and provide normative guidance to other actors that impact on food security, including the multilateral financial and trade institutions.

The food crisis in late 2007–2008 unveiled a vacuum in global governance. In the absence of an authoritative global body deliberating on food issues, decision-making was being carried out – by default – by institutions like the WTO and the World Bank for whom food security is not core business, by restricted membership groups like the G8/G20, and by economic actors like transnational corporations and financial speculators subject to no political oversight.

global food policy forum was the object of a fair amount of skirmishing. The proposal that won out in the end was to revamp an existing institution – the dormant Committee on World Food Security (CFS) – rather than inventing something new. The reform process got underway in April 2009. It was led with passion and sagacity by the CFS Bureau Chair, who opened it up to concerned non-state actors. Organisations of smallholder food producers and poor urban consumers – those most

affected by food insecurity – were on the front line, facilitated by their global IPC network (International Civil Society Committee for Food Sovereignty). Along with other stakeholders, they were enabled to interact with governments on an equal basis and made a fundamental contribution to the reform. Despite their diversity, the

Opening of the first session of the new CFS mid-October 2010 in Rome.

■ The process and the product of reform

The crisis sparked a number of international initiatives with objectives ranging from better UN system co-ordination to increased investment in agriculture. How best to establish a

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The reform document of the Committee on World Food Security – beyond “business as usual”:

- Acknowledges the structural causes of the food crisis and that the primary victims are smallholder food producers.
- Defines the CFS as “the foremost inclusive international and intergovernmental platform” for food security.
- Includes defending the right to adequate food in the CFS’s mission.
- Empowers the CFS to seek convergence on key food policy issues, and promotes accountability by governments and other actors.
- Enjoins the CFS to adopt a Global Strategic Framework for food security providing guidance for national action plans and for multilateral institutions.
- Recognises non-state actors as full participants, intervening in debate on the same footing as governments. Affirms the right of civil society – with the accent on those most affected – to autonomously self-organise to relate to the CFS.
- Foresees activities throughout the year, overseen by the CFS Bureau aided by an Advisory Group of non-state CFS participant representatives.
- Recognises the principle of “subsidiarity” and emphasises the need to establish strong linkages between the CFS and the regional and country levels.
- Establishes a High-Level Panel of Experts to support the CFS and recognises the value of “knowledge from social actors and practical application”.
- Extends the secretariat of the new CFS beyond FAO to include the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and the World Food Programme (WFP).

majority of the participants came to feel a sense of ownership of the final proposal, which was adopted by acclamation on the 17th October 2009.

■ From paper to practice

The first session of the new CFS, in mid-October of 2010, proved that the reform has made a difference in practice as well as on paper. The new Bureau Chair had built consensus around the renovated scenario, which unrolled with remarkable smoothness. Heads of delegations abandoned the stultifying practice of interminable “country statements”, leaving space for presentations by other global initiatives and innovative national practices. Key policy issues were at the heart of the programme, and hotly negotiated decisions were taken regarding how to carry them forward over the coming months. Stakeholder participation functioned without a hitch. Civil society participants had prepared their positions in a consultation just prior to the session, where they had also

endorsed a proposal for their autonomous “civil society mechanism” open to all interested organisations. As the head of a key delegation put it at the end of the session, “When this whole exercise got underway, we felt the CFS was a lame duck. Now it may not be a swan yet, but it certainly is up in the air and flying.”

The reformed CFS has gotten off to a good start, but it is only a start. In order to secure respect for its authority, it needs to progressively demonstrate that it can address controversial issues – like price volatility and large-scale investment in land – in a timely fashion and make decisions that could not be taken elsewhere. It needs to forge agreement on a strategic framework for achieving food security as a tool for building accountability and for learning from experience, ensuring that the paradigms that guide action evolve in function of their impact on the ground. It needs to succeed in promoting co-ordination around the strategic lines that emerge from its deliberations. Policies and programmes aimed at

attaining food security and Right to Food targets should be formulated at national and regional levels through verifiable participatory processes and fast tracked for support.

■ Reaching outward and downward

The CFS should evolve into a system-wide forum whose policy guidance informs the operations of all actors that impact on world food security. Beyond the Rome-based agencies, close relations need to be built with other key components of the UN system that work towards food security goals, like the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food and the UN Standing Committee on Nutrition. Coherence should be sought between the emerging global food governance system and proposals for global environmental governance under discussion in the context of the Rio+20 Conference.

Building effective relations between the CFS and multilateral financial and trade institutions will be essential, if more difficult. Trade regimes should progressively be subject to the principle of the right to food, but this will not happen overnight. A first step could be a review by the CFS High-Level Panel of Experts of current global trade regulations to ascertain their effects on food security. Such a study would make an important input to the Global Strategic Framework. Reform of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has been under discussion for several years. The current attention to price volatility, also on the G20’s agenda, provides an opportunity to address an important aspect of the international monetary system from a food security standpoint. The G20’s acknowledgement of the CFS’s status as the foremost inclusive global policy food forum is encouraging.

A review of the food security implications of different strategies of agricultural investment could provide nor-

mative guidance for the multilateral banks and other development partners. Although the food crisis unveiled serious inadequacies in the dominant agricultural development and food security strategies, there is little evidence of adequate rethinking thus far. There seems to be consensus on the need to prioritise support for small-holders in the context of increased investment in agriculture, but what kind of support is most opportune is still open to debate. A contribution to clarity carried out under the auspices of the CFS with input from organisations of small producers themselves would provide another timely contribution to the Global Strategic Framework and a basis for debate.

Bringing the operations of private sector actors under oversight from a food security viewpoint is a formidable task given their power and the present deficient regulation of their activities. Up to now, the private sector has been largely absent from the reformed CFS. There is understandably concern to bring it into the room, but this should be done in full cognisance of the different forms and dimensions of private sector enterprise and of the impact of agri-food corporations and financial operators on food insecurity. A CFS-commissioned study on this topic could be a useful first step.

The orchestration of this progressively broadened global governance

High hopes are placed in the newly structured CFS. Including civil society is considered a major sign of progress.

outreach needs the support of the UN Secretary General with the Rome-based food agencies at the centre and the High-Level Task Force promoting co-ordination among the programmes of UN system institutions at country level. Progressive vertical articulation will be as important as horizontal global outreach. A key part of the CFS programme is to put the principle of subsidiarity into practice by building links between multistakeholder food policy spaces at national, regional and global levels. The challenge is to bridge the gap between global policy pronouncements and changes at national and local level that make a difference in peoples' lives.

■ Civil society and social movements in the vanguard

No reflection on the prospects for the reformed CFS can conclude without dedicating the last word to social movements and civil society organi-



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sations. The decisive role that they have played in challenging inequitable systems and destructive paradigms and proposing alternatives cannot be overstated. At the close of a late night negotiation during the CFS session in October 2010, the head of a delegation not particularly enraptured with the positions that civil society participants were championing took the floor to affirm that the strong presence of civil society in the renewed Committee had proved to be the most important aspect of the reform. "They call our bluff and say it like it is. We need them in the room." Sustained civil society advocacy – with small food producers in the front line – will continue to be indispensable to build the political will and contribute the alternative experience that an effective CFS requires.

Zusammenfassung

Nach der weltweiten Nahrungsmittelkrise 2007/2008 begann für den Ausschuss für Welternährungssicherung (CFS) ein umfassender Strukturwandel. Dieser Reformprozess ist vielversprechend, da er den CFS als wichtigstes globales Forum für Nahrungssicherung anerkennt und ihn für betroffene Interessengruppen wie Organisationen von Kleinerzeugern und armen städtischen Verbrauchern öffnet. Jetzt muss der neue CFS beweisen, dass er in der Lage ist, bindende Entscheidungen zu wichtigen politischen Themen zu treffen und normative Leitlinien für andere Akteure zu verabschieden, die die Nahrungssicherung

beeinflussen, einschließlich multilateraler Finanz- und Handelsinstitutionen. Und schließlich muss er verlässliche Verbindungen zwischen der globalen Politik und den Veränderungen auf nationaler und lokaler Ebene schaffen, die das Leben der Menschen positiv verändern.

Resumen

En las postrimerías de la crisis alimentaria mundial de 2007/2008, el Comité de Seguridad Alimentaria Mundial (CFS) ha pasado por una profunda transformación. El proceso de reforma resulta prometedor, dado que reconoce al CFS como el foro mundial más importante de deliberación

sobre la seguridad alimentaria y lo abre a la presencia de las partes interesadas afectadas, como las organizaciones de productores a pequeña escala y los consumidores urbanos pobres. El nuevo CFS necesita ahora demostrar que puede tomar decisiones autoritativas sobre temas clave de política y establecer parámetros normativos para otros actores que tienen un impacto sobre la seguridad alimentaria, incluyendo las instituciones multilaterales de finanzas y comercio. Finalmente, necesita crear vínculos significativos entre la política mundial y los cambios a nivel nacional y local que establecen una diferencia en la vida de las personas.