



The Task of Reforming the FAO Committee on Food Security

THE COMMITTEE on World Food Security (CFS) is an inter-governmental body established in 1974 by the FAO following a global food crisis. It serves as a forum for discussion and coordination of policy and actions to promote food security.

Through the years, however, the CFS found itself ineffective in the face of a host of problems including spikes in commodity prices, poor harvests amidst higher demand, and protectionist measures taken by some governments. All of these combined to cause instability in the global food market, resulting in yet another crisis in 2007/08. Today, an estimated one billion people live in chronic hunger.

One of the weaknesses of the CFS then was its inability to coordinate national policies. Its mandate did not allow it.

It also lacked the authority to decide on and implement its policy recommendations. This prompted the CFS to rethink and re-evaluate its position, lest it become irrelevant. In 2009, it underwent a restructuring. It redefined its vision and mission in order to be a more effective forum towards achieving food security.

A CFS reform document states: 'The CFS as a central component of the evolving Global Partnership for

Agriculture, Food Security and Nutrition, will constitute the foremost inclusive and inter-governmental platform for a broad range of committed stakeholders to work together in a coordinated manner and in support of country-led processes towards the elimination of hunger and ensuring security and nutrition for all human beings.'

Purpose of this paper

This briefing paper gives an overview of the work of the CFS and the areas where the CFS engages various stakeholders on different levels to address food insecurity and hunger. This paper serves as a guide for civil society organizations in their campaign to improve the consultation process and other aspects of governance in the CFS. Included are some of the concerns of civil society groups that need to be raised in international discussions.

The Global Food Market: Then and Now

From the time of the first World Food Conference in 1974 up until the 2009 World Summit on Food Security, experts noted recurring problems in the global food market, among them high food prices, the lack of access of the world's poor to

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food and other resources, and a serious supply-demand imbalance.

While many of the problems remain, the current environment is fundamentally different from what it was decades ago. New factors have emerged which influence the direction and behavior of the market. Experts now say that no policy or action should be taken without considering the following:

- Disinvestment by governments in agricultural support services
- Continued recognition of the productive and income-generating role of small farming
- Increased role of the private sector in service provision and marketing chains
- Globalization of phyto-sanitary regulations and long-distance food chains
- Emergence of bio-energy crops as a new agricultural frontier, thereby increasing the demand for bio-fuels that compete with production of food crops
- Impacts of climate change on agriculture
- Increased capacity of governments and the expanded role of civil society
- Access to instant information due to technology

With increased access to information, it is hoped that decision-making processes within the CFS would also improve.

What is the new CFS?

In the wake of the 2007-08 food crisis, the CFS was given a fresh mandate to engage a broader group of stakeholders in order to more effectively promote policies for reducing food insecurity. (<http://www.fao.org/cfs/en/>).

The fundamental role of the CFS is to promote coordination and policy coherence to help ensure that inter-related actions are in accord with one another. Specifically, it is tasked to:

1. Provide a platform for discussion and coordination to strengthen collaborative actions among relevant stakeholders while paying attention to countries' specific contexts and needs;
2. Promote greater policy convergence and coordination, including the development of international strategies and voluntary guidelines on food security and nutrition on the basis of best practices, lessons learned from local experience, inputs received from the national and regional levels, and expert advice and opinions from different stakeholders;
3. Improve coordination and guide synchronized action through the development of a Global Strategic Framework for Food Security and Nutrition (GSF); and
4. Facilitate support and/or advice for regional and nationally-owned food security strategies, policies and programs for food security and nutrition.

The new CFS aims for greater inclusiveness to encourage an exchange of views and experiences and draw expertise and knowledge from as wide a group of stakeholders as possible. While this may result in slower and cumbersome decision-making, the CFS hopes that this will in the long run benefit the system because it will promote better transparency and governance.

New Structure of the CFS

To implement its redefined mandate in promoting policy coherence, the CFS has a new structure that allows input from different stakeholders at global, regional and national levels. It has a Bureau and Advisory Group, a Plenary, a High- Level Panel of Experts (HLPE) and a Secretariat.

The *Bureau* is the executive arm of the CFS. It is comprised of a Chair and 12 member countries that serve a two-year term.

The *Advisory Group (AG)* is made up of 14 members from five different stakeholder groups, namely:

1. Six representatives from UN agencies and other UN bodies;
2. Four representatives from civil society and non-governmental organizations particularly those representing smallholder family farmers, fisherfolk, herders, landless, urban poor, agricultural and food workers, women, youth, consumers and indigenous people;
3. One representative from international agricultural research institutions;
4. One from international and regional financial institutions (the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, regional development banks and the World Trade Organization); and
5. One from private sector associations; and one from philanthropic foundations.

The AG's mandate is to share with the Bureau expertise and knowledge of the broad range of organizations it represents and provide the vehicle through which participants can contribute to inter-sessional activities of the CFS. It is also tasked to maintain linkages with different stakeholders at regional, sub-regional and local levels and to ensure an ongoing, two-way exchange of information.

Meeting once a year, the *Plenary* is the central body for decision-making, debates, coordination and convergence by all stakeholders on a global level. Participants at the plenary, including member-governments and representatives of CSOs and non-government organizations, are accorded the same speaking rights.

The *High-Level Panel of Experts for Food Security and Nutrition (HLPE)* is the scientific and knowledge-based arm of the Global Partnership for Agriculture, Food Security and Nutrition.

The Joint Secretariat is composed of the three Rome-based agencies – FAO, World Food Program and the International Fund for Agricultural Development. Its task is to support the work of the Plenary, the Bureau, the AG and the HLPE.

Why is there a need for a panel of experts?

The creation of the HLPE is an essential feature of the reformed CFS. It was set up to provide independent and comprehensive advice and analysis on the current state of food security and nutrition and their underlying causes, as well as the latest scientific and knowledge-based analysis and advice on specific policy-relevant issues. It is also tasked to identify emerging issues and to help members prioritize actions in key areas.

The high-level panel has a two-tier structure. The first is a Steering Committee made up of 15 internationally recognized experts in a variety of food security and nutrition-related fields appointed to a two-year term. They serve in their personal capacities and do not represent their organizations or governments. The second is a roster of experts for project-specific teams who are selected and managed by the Steering Committee to analyze and report on outstanding issues.

Former CFS Chair Noel de Luna, the Philippines' Agricultural Attache to the FAO, in a conference in Paris in March 2011, said the experts panel is expected "to improve the robustness, continuity and cohesion of policy-making by providing the CFS with independent and comprehensive advice".

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A document outlining the key elements of the HLPE says: “Decisions need often to be taken in spite of a vast field of uncertainties regarding both the knowledge base, and potential effects of policies on the ground. There is also a need to overcome the fact that at the negotiating table, competing interests often confront different streams of information leading to acute controversies, and that the fragmentation of expert debates by academic disciplines and by knowledge sources is often detrimental to strong and effective policy decisions.”

The CFS, through the HLPE, has ongoing discussions on the issues of land tenure, price volatility and international investments in agriculture, social safety nets and climate change. The panel is also providing inputs on priority issues including the Global Strategic Framework for Food Security and Nutrition (GSF) and advice on the draft Voluntary Guidelines on Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the Context of National Food Security.

What is the Global Strategic Framework for Food Security and Nutrition?

A working definition of the GSF, as approved by the CFS Bureau, is found in the Annotated Outline for the GSF. It states: *“The overall purpose of the GSF is to provide a dynamic instrument to enhance the role of the CFS and promote its vision as a platform to improve coordination and guide synchronized action by a wide range of stakeholders in support of global, regional and country-led actions to prevent future food crises, eliminate hunger and ensure food security and nutrition for all human beings.”*

At its 36th session in October 2010, the CFS launched a consultative process to develop an initial draft of the Global Strategic Framework for presentation at the 38th plenary in October 2012. The consultations are guided by the following principles:

- the GSF would not create new bureaucracies and mechanisms but build on existing frameworks including the UN’s Comprehensive Framework for Action;
- to promote convergence, the GSF would select and prioritize among existing lessons and policy recommendations, and would leverage regular CFS mechanisms;
- the GSF would be a living, flexible document to be prepared and updated through broad participation at global, regional and national levels;
- it will not be prescriptive and will highlight differing views when no consensus is reached; and
- it will not be a binding instrument, but its endorsement by the CFS would reflect a commitment by member-countries and other stakeholders of its goals.

The CFS opened a moderated online discussion on the GSF (<http://www.km.fao.org/fsn/cfs>) based on the Annotated Outline in order to stimulate debate and gather suggestions and concrete inputs from different stakeholders, including CSOs, on priority issues and policy actions for the GSF.

The electronic discussion is also being hosted by the Alliance Against Hunger and Malnutrition (AAHM) (<http://km.fao.org/fsn/aa hm>) in support of the CFS initiative.

The current global electronic consultation will continue with *regional* consultations in early 2012, followed by another online discussion and a CFS-led plenary review in July 2012 before the final document is presented to the 38th session of the CFS in October 2012.

That the GSF will be a non-binding global document presents difficulties. Given the different national situations and contexts, what assurance is there that governments and other stakeholders

would comply with the instrument? Civil society groups also ask how the Framework would relate operationally *vis a vis* existing food security plans at the country level. They point out the need for a regular system to monitor, assess and update the GSF to gauge its coherence with other existing mechanisms on food security.

Challenges facing the CFS

Market Information-Sharing

The volatility of food prices is a recurring phenomenon and is an immediate concern of the CFS. Commodity price fluctuations can be avoided or minimized and markets can be stabilized if there were a system to track up-to-date, reliable and accurate information on crop supply (current crop plus stockpiles) and demand.

But such information is often unavailable. The absence of relevant data during critical periods in the past had in fact affected the ability of leaders and policy-makers to make sound decisions and mobilize responses. The practice by some governments and commercial enterprises of keeping such data confidential should be replaced by a willingness to share accurate, reliable and timely information.

Because of its importance, the issue of market information and price volatility is high on the CFS agenda and a standing item at all meetings of the Committee's Bureau and AG, where experts and analysts are expected to provide updates on price situations.

De Luna had pushed for a collaborative food data initiative called the Agricultural Market Information System (AMIS), which he says needs support from G20 economies, which are among the major producers of basic commodities and non-G20 countries whose production or consumption has an impact on the market.

Such a system will not only contribute to improving market information and transparency, but will also strengthen dialogue between exporting and importing countries, commercial enterprises and international organizations, and overcome distrust.

The bottom line, de Luna emphasizes, is that member countries should have the political will to share reliable, timely and accurate data. Without political will and a change in attitudes by all stakeholders, nothing much can be done to prevent violent price fluctuations.

Ideal versus Reality

The CFS is just one of the global forums on food security. Civil society organizations believe that the CFS can be a viable venue that can make a difference if member-states and governments exercise political will in implementing reforms. But it remains to be seen how the benefits of its policy decisions can trickle down to the most vulnerable groups. Will its actions serve the interests of the world's hungry and most food-insecure sectors?

A challenge for the CFS is how it will be able to work with various stakeholders of widely diverse views and agendas on food security and how it can sufficiently convey the discussions, debates and decisions taking place on the global level to country-level constituents. Conversely, how can the engagement processes at regional and national levels be expanded and linked to the global processes of the Committee?

CSO representation in the CFS is important, but how can CSOs actually lobby national governments to support a global framework and implement agreements when some FAO country offices are not even aware of CFS processes?

Food security is now seen as a priority in the development agenda of governments and

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intergovernmental organizations as a means to stimulate foreign direct investments and attract development assistance in agriculture. The question that needs to be asked is: how are these investments truly affecting and improving food security and livelihoods for the rural poor in the region?

For instance, governments of many developing countries encourage foreign direct investments by food importing countries. But these very investments could displace local farmers, creating social unrest and increasing the poor and hungry populations.

Observations/Recommendations of Asian Civil Society on Engaging the CFS¹:

- CFS processes are mostly driven top-down – from the global rather than from the national levels. CSOs and social movements should adopt ways or strategies so that their perspectives can influence the CFS processes.
- The mode of consultation is mainly through electronic discussion, limiting the participation of some stakeholders including those without or little access to the internet or available information.
- Food is not merely a technical issue about production and trade, but a highly political issue involving questions about resource distribution, access and control. There should be equal footing in the dialogue process. For food security to happen, reforms in power relations (e.g., agrarian reform, food sovereignty) must likewise be included in the topics for dialogue.
- There are, at the global level, a number of processes and mechanisms designed to boost agriculture and promote food security. There should be tighter coherence for all these activities among UN and other international bodies. What is more important is that reforms and actions by these global institutions should cascade to the regional and national levels. National governments must coordinate and harmonize activities for achieving food security and recognize and support the efforts of small food producers and CSOs in sustainable agriculture.
- How civil society organizations (CSOs) strategize and organize themselves at this juncture is critical. While they can be participants in the CFS, they should still be observers in the other committees. They should be very clear on the parameters of their engagement, and be aware of the realistic constraints they face given the structural issues of FAO and member governments. It is imperative that they strengthen their regional platforms while also recognizing other venues and ensuring that national discussions take place. □

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