The Committee on World Food Security: moving the reform forward

Matthieu Brun, Sébastien Treyer

IDDRI

SciencesPo.

POLICY BRIEF

N°02/14 JANUARY 2014 | AGRICULTURE

The Committee on World Food Security: moving the reform forward

Matthieu Brun, Sébastien Treyer (IDDRI)

In a context characterized by a large spectrum of international responses to the dramatic 2007-2008 food crisis, the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) embarked upon an ambitious reform in October 2009. While recognizing that the CFS reform is an ongoing process not yet fully completed, this policy brief might be used as a contribution in order not to narrow down any evaluation effort of this mechanism and to diversify the types of expectations and outcomes to be evaluated. Drawing attention on the critical issues to ensure the full development of the reform appears necessary while "the Committee is ready for the next step", according to Gerda Verburg, the new CFS Chair.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Any attempt at evaluating the CFS reform should take into account the diversity of outputs and outcomes it generated.
- Defining the criteria and processes in order to prepare the conditions for a proper evaluation of the CFS reform needs to be discussed through a relevant participatory process.
- Considering the CFS as a policy formation process will help identifying critical steps where there are margins of progress to move the reform forward.

- The role of the HLPE has to be considered as of a strategic nature, in so far as knowledge production ensured in the CFS has a key role to play in advocating for changes in current policies. It is therefore necessary to strengthen HLPE's institutional capacities.
- Considering diversity of knowledge systems and approaches rather than focusing on credential diversity in terms of scientific expertise is necessary to promote a more complete coverage of the complex issues studied by the HLPE.
- Adjusting CFS guidelines for implementation in national context and monitoring locally the effects of the CFS workstream with specific indicators for each region is key to ensure continued engagement by local civil society organisations.
- Capacity building of local civil society organisations is needed in order for them to stay involved in the processes and interact with enough expertise with other larger organisations.

This article is based on research that has received a financial support from the French government in the framework of the programme « Investissements d'avenir », managed by ANR (French national agency for research) under the reference ANR-10-LABX-14-01.

Institut du développement durable
et des relations internationales
27, rue Saint-Guillaume
75337 Paris cedex 07 France

www.iddri.org

THE CONTEXT OF THE CFS REFORM

The CFS was created in 1974 as an intergovernmental forum to review food security policies. Its 2009 reform came at a time when the institutional context was changing: the Doha trade round was unable to move forward, key agriculture organisations such as the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) underwent external reviews, the World Bank's 2008 World Development Report focused on agriculture, a topic largely ignored since their 1982 report, and the G8/G20 put food prices volatility on their agenda.

However, the CFS reform was not only fostered by the changing institutional context but also by a profound transformation of the nature of food security issues. The framing of these issues has been broadened from increasing food production to including both economic and social access to food and more recently the sustainability of agricultural systems, increasingly challenged by climate change and nutrition issues. Besides, civil society, and more particularly Via Campesina since 1996, has been drawing attention to new issues such as food sovereignty and the right to food. And recent evolutions in the international development agenda put the stress on the importance of institutions like the CFS that could play the role of a policy dialogue forum about food and agriculture objectives and policies.

The reform in 2009 has resulted in new institutional arrangements within a UN framework. The two major outputs of this reform are the inclusion of civil society organisations (CSOs) as active participants to the CFS and the creation of a science-policy interface, the High Level Panel of Experts on food security and nutrition (HLPE). The reform was intended to be a two-phase process: the first phase (2009-2013) focused on policy coordination at a global level and support to countries and regions, whilst the second phase (starting from 2013 onward) is envisioned to include increasing national and regional involvement of the CFS as a facilitating accountability mechanism which promotes best practices with regard to global food security.

A UNIQUE DIVERSITY OF OUTPUTS AND OUTCOMES

Although the reformed CFS has no power over individual States' domestic strategies nor is it endowed with the prerogatives to produce public policies, a recent survey[1] shows that the CFS, four years after it was reformed, has generated a diversity of outputs and outcomes. Overall, it has to be noted that contrary to environmental conventions, the signing of a global binding agreement is not considered as the main purpose of the CFS. This major difference and the specific direct and indirect effects of the CFS reform need to be taken into account in order to cautiously prepare the conditions for a proper evaluation of the CFS reform.

The diversity of outputs and outcomes are as follows:

- *Production of non-binding norms.* The CFS has a key role in producing international and non-binding norms regarding food security such as the principles for Responsible Agricultural Investment (RAI). The production of guidelines has also the potential to be incorporated into national policy making. This is the direct output that justifies why CSOs do engage in the CFS policy formation forum.
- *A common understanding of food and nutrition security (FNS)-related issues.* The HLPE helps to creating a common understanding of FNS-related issues before they are discussed in the CFS. The creation of such interface between science and policy was necessary to clarify and structure debates in the CFS due to the complexity and politicization of FNS issues. This usable knowledge is produced by science but also built in the interaction between science, civil society and other stakeholders.
- *Increased legitimacy of CSOs at both national and global levels.* The reform has established a unique formal space for CSOs' active participation in the CFS and has provided them with a greater voice at the global level. This may lead to greater recognition of their involvement in global issues. The reform also has effects on the national stage; not only are CSOs encouraged to participate more in national debates (for instance, using HLPE reports or CFS guidelines directly in their domestic policy forum), but their legitimacy is also reinforced.
- *A new institutional culture centered on policies for food and nutrition security.* The existence of the HLPE, the Civil Society Mechanism (CSM) and the Private Sector Mechanism create an inclusive environment where ideas and feedbacks can be expressed, and addressed properly in the policy formation process of the CFS by means of the clarification and structure given to the debate by HLPE reports. The substance and the processes of such a policy debate are building up a new institutional culture centered on policies for food and nutrition security. The innovations in terms of policy processes could also be an example for other arenas, like multilateral environment negotiations.

THE CFS AS A POLICY FORMATION PROCESS

The renewed institutional framework of the CFS allows a large number of actors to interact on a

1. Eklin, K. *et al.* (2014). "The Committee on World Food Security reform: impacts on global governance of food security ", IDDRI, *Working Papers* N°03/14.

deeper level and to do so more frequently. The context in which ideas are shaped and expressed is also a major consideration to be taken into account when addressing the issue of CFS outputs and outcomes. Therefore, we propose to consider the CFS as a policy formation process. Such a perspective is useful to clarify the different stages at which the scientific discourse of the HLPE and civil society interventions can impact policy formation (agenda setting, formulation of a problem, assessment of options, evaluation of policies). Depending on the stages of the policy formation process, these interventions are different in nature: the HLPE helps clarify the debate while CSOs intend to influence it. Based on the current functioning of the CFS, assumptions can be made about possible CSOs and HLPE contributions in the future, on stages of the process where each of them are not intervening for the moment. However, it raises the issue of the legitimacy and relevance of such interventions, which is grounded on different criteria for HLPE as a science/policy interface and for CSOs as groups of interests.

Analysing the CFS as a policy formation process has also provided the opportunity to identify the mechanics between science and civil society contribution and how these mechanics could be improved. The agenda setting and the exploration of policy options is a very good example of CSOs and science inclusiveness' added value in the CFS. CSOs themselves stated that their most important contribution thus far has been that of problem identification and (re)definition since they have been responsible for highlighting issues previously marginalized in the CFS agenda. By using HLPE reports and commenting processes, they provide a specific understanding of each topic and steer the discourse toward controversial subjects they find to be most relevant. However, there is a consensus within the CSOs that social movements and vulnerable groups, such as indigenous people, landless peasants and the urban poor are currently not participating in the CSM or the CFS to the degree that is envisioned and wanted.

The CSOs rationale to focus on putting new topics on the agenda of the CFS process emphasizes their vision that the CFS mandate to eradicate food insecurity and hunger is impossible to achieve without also discussing interlinked or systemic topics such as food sovereignty. Those topics can be different in nature, and in the level of opposition to their inclusion into the CFS agenda. For example, many Member States and other stakeholders have been reluctant to discuss trade-related issues since they are being discussed in other global institutions. Nevertheless, the report on climate change illustrates that the HLPE can handle rather controversial topics that might interfere with the work of other negotiation forums; the scientific nature of the HLPE report makes it possible to manage such interference.

ADJUSTING POLICIES: OPPORTUNITIES FOR FUTURE INTERVENTIONS

The CFS reform primarily focused on policy coordination at a global level. The second phase is envisioned to include increasing national and regional involvement of the CFS as a facilitating accountability mechanism which promotes best practices. food security. Involvement in the implementation of CFS recommendations or voluntary guidelines to fight hunger in their respective geographical areas of intervention is the single largest priority that civil society representatives have for the future. CSOs expect to be able to use CFS guidelines to influence national policies and tilt them in favor of the hungry and the marginalized.

The issue of monitoring is currently discussed in the CFS. The main questions to be addressed are: Who will be responsible for developing indicators and collecting the data? How will the results be benchmarked and at what geographic scale? Suggestions have been put forward including regional peer-reviews, a delegation of monitoring to FAO regional offices or carrying out national assessment within the CFS. A clear interest in being involved in any future monitoring process has been expressed by civil society representatives. The potential role of the HLPE in the monitoring and evaluation part of the CFS policy cycle needs to be discussed. As a matter of fact, the effectiveness of this science policy interface might be an asset in any intent to structure such an accountability framework.

By opening the global debate on food security issues to a variety of stakeholders that had been previously not as formally included, the CFS has gained international attention and recognition in a relatively short amount of time. There are critical issues that must be addressed to continue moving the CFS reform forward.

CONSOLIDATING THE INSTITUTIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE HLPE

Using a demand-driven approach to produce usable knowledge on food security is considered by many HLPE parties good and necessary in that it ensures that the reports produce policy-relevant information. HLPE legitimacy also relies on strict observance of the mandate it is being given by the CFS. However, some researchers involved in project teams highlighted the relatively strict nature of mandates they are given, and went so far as to advocate for the HLPE being given the ability to propose and write its own reports. To ensure its legitimacy and its credibility, the HLPE, as a science

policy interface, should probably never decide to look into a question on its own initiative. Nevertheless, under the CFS reform document, one of the HLPE's key functions is to identify emerging issues in order to prioritize future actions and reports' topics. It has already been the case for fisheries, but such option should be guided by specific processes and guidelines to maintain HLPE credibility and legitimacy. Moreover, due to the diversity of expertise within the Steering Committee, members have noted difficulty in reaching consensus on the definition of new topics that could be dealt with. The lack of written procedures and detailed explanation regarding how the HLPE should go about identifying those "emerging issues" can therefore be seen as an opportunity for further improvement.

The researchers involved in the HLPE reports writing process, who come from a wide variety of institutions and disciplines, expressed their interest in participating in this new science-policy platform. However, they considered their contribution as a time bound exercise and identified a risk concerning the capacity to motivate and capture the best research talents for further reports. A longer term involvement of project team researchers in a form of institutionalized scientific network attached to the CFS/HLPE would imply cultivating the engagement of researchers through promotion and dissemination of reports. Given the complexity of managing such diverse teams, complementing the existing capitalization of experiences by a process of mentorship from former to new project team leaders would enable to leverage institutional learning. On top of pragmatic but important questions of management of interdisciplinary teams, some formalization of how diversity (sources of knowledge, geographical distribution of researchers, etc.) is considered in the HLPE might be helpful in the future.

The commenting process also strengthens the use of different forms of knowledge. It is the first time a science-policy interface uses an open commenting procedure, as early as when the scope of the report is being defined. But it may be too open and therefore make it difficult for project teams to organise in the face of the proliferation of comments. Designing an electronic form could be helpful to require commenters to clarify their affiliation and could also set a maximum length for comments. Whatever the choices made on limitation of comments and accountability, making the comment process smoother will likely require additional funding from different sources, either to increase the size of research teams or to increase the administrative capacity from the Secretariat or the HLPE.

ENSURING THE CONTINUED ENGAGEMENT OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE CFS

CSO's further engagement, and particularly concerning smaller local CSOs, is partly linked to their capacity to see how their action at the CFS can help them have an impact locally. It is therefore crucial to encourage the implementation of CFS guidelines at the national level: to do so, there will be a need to adapt these guidelines to specific regional contexts. This adaptation process is critical as governments might be reluctant to implement guidelines that do not seem locally relevant, especially if States are to be evaluated on implementation. So far the CFS has not designated those responsible for the adaptation of its guidelines to regional contexts, but it is an area that requires reflection in the general discussion on monitoring. For such monitoring to involve CSOs, the process needs to take into account the regional disparities in terms of the political legitimacy that different organisations possess, so as to delegate them appropriate roles in each region. Monitoring should also consider that Member States are skeptical about a peer-review system, unless it is done at a regionally relevant scale, using specific area indicators.

CSOs have so far been active in the agenda setting phase of the CFS policy formation process. But in the more downstream phases, it is mostly international CSOs who are able to intervene. It requires specific skills as well as experience in international negotiations that smaller or local CSOs often lack, while in the same time they have in-depth knowledge on specific and local concerns. CSOs have come to measure the importance of this knowledge and skills gap putting them at disadvantage in the negotiation process. They thus emphasize the need for this gap to be addressed through internal capacity building in interaction with international CSOs. They also highlight that more CSM funds should go towards organising regional preparation and topic discussions, in order for CSOs that are not participating directly in the CFS to provide quality inputs for discussion and participate in the commenting and feedback processes.

CONCLUSION

In order to maintain stakeholders' interest, to increase their level of commitment and to ensure its saliency so as to be unequivocally recognised as the preeminent forum on food security, the CFS needs to continue progressing in its envisioned role of creating a common understanding of FNS issues, formulating diverse types of norms, and promoting accountability at all levels. The 2009 reform led to key innovations that have made it a very specific and interesting case in terms of global governance. But the momentum has to be kept in order not to jeopardize such significant progress.