



## Section X

Global food governance in an era of crisis

*Special Issue: Mapping the Global Food Landscape***Thinking forward in global food governance—Synthesis  
paper**

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Global food governance is ever evolving as political leaders become increasingly aware of the complexity and dynamic nature of managing the global food system in a sustainable manner. Calls for reform of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) in the early 2000s (McKeon, 2009) were reinforced by the severity of the 2007–08 global food crisis, which prompted the reform to the Committee for World Food Security (CFS) in 2009. A related (and novel) development was the establishment of the High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition (HLPE) at the CFS to provide policymakers with interdisciplinary academic knowledge (Duncan, 2015). These developments mark an important step towards more inclusive and evidence-based global food governance. Now is an excellent time to critically assess the progress made at the CFS in the first five years and evaluate the role that these institutions may come to play in the coming years.

Below I reflect on the preceding articles by McKeon and Duncan and a presentation made by Maryam Rahmanian, Vice-Chairperson of the HLPE Steering Committee, at the workshop in Waterloo. Discussions at the workshop on the CFS and HLPE were very animated, in particular because the CFS, with its unique decision-making process that incorporates civil society organizations alongside states, offers a model of what more participatory forms of global governance can look like. Furthermore, the HLPE represents a unique interface that mobilizes knowledge to inform global food security policymaking; this is of particular interest to academics as it provides a new mechanism for bridging scholarly research and global food policymaking.

## Opening up global food governance

A common theme in the articles by McKeon and Duncan is the innovative and transformative qualities of the CFS and HLPE. In particular, the CFS has opened up global policy spaces that increase accessibility to global food policy debates and decision-making for a variety of historically unrepresented groups. This opening up of global policy spaces has occurred on both a political and epistemological level. On a political level, the structure of the CFS allows a variety of civil society and social movement actors—most notably the transnational peasant network, La Via Campesina—to be active participants in the CFS. As McKeon observes, the inclusion of voices linked to grassroots organizations is a significant and positive step for democratizing food governance. By institutionalizing a decision-making structure that actively seeks to consider the voices of those most vulnerable to food insecurity, there is hope that the CFS will serve as a forum that fosters innovative and progressive food policy.

On an epistemological level, the HLPE has increased partnerships and knowledge exchanges with academics in order to provide evidence-based policy. As such, the HLPE (and by extension the CFS) does not rely exclusively on in-house experts from the FAO or other international organizations such as the World Bank, which is the norm at the global level. In addition, the HLPE seeks to gain diverse and multiple forms of knowledge. It draws on expertise from natural and social scientists, including knowledge produced by interdisciplinary teams, in an effort to overcome the fragmented nature of discipline-specific expertise to support better food policymaking. As in the CFS, civil society representatives participate in the selection of research topics at the HLPE. Given that the politicization of knowledge is particularly acute in global forums, participation of civil society in the knowledge production process (i.e., reviewing and commenting on reports before they are officially published) ensures that states are not the sole and final arbiters of “truth”. In practice, this has resulted in the HLPE bringing a greater emphasis on social welfare, human rights, and sustainability to its research activities.

The HLPE, Rahmanian’s presentation showed, has not only opened up a space for governance, but also created conditions where states and global civil society actors are learning and experimenting in multiple ways of producing knowledge. This process of experimentalism and learning (i.e., listening to and valuing different types of knowledge such as traditional or experiential knowledge in addition to academic/scientific knowledge) not only parallels the opening of political space but, at a deeper level, has produced an epistemological shift in policy debates.

## Reflecting on initial experiences

Another key theme that emerged from the discussion during the workshop was the importance of reflection. McKeon and Duncan, as well as Rahmanian, offer a critical analysis of the progress of the reformed CFS and HLPE, specifically regarding the first years of experience as a learning

opportunity that can shape more innovative and effective governance in the future. The core strength of the CFS, which prompted a lot of discussion among the authors and workshop participants, is its inclusive and participatory structure. According to Duncan, the CFS is a more stable and adaptive institution because of its interactive and participatory approach to knowledge production and goal setting. These attributes enable the CFS to respond effectively to an increasingly dynamic social, political, and environmental context. Not only are the voices of diverse stakeholder groups heard, but also their involvement is codified and institutionalized. In the case of the HLPE, it is specifically mandated to report on controversy allowing for difficult (political) discussions to be reinforced and carried through.

On the other hand, the CFS does have major shortcomings, largely surrounding the problem of legitimacy and the capacity of the institution to achieve its desired impact. According to McKeon, the effectiveness of the CFS' normative governance is questionable. The key problem identified is that the CFS lacks delegated authority to enforce its decisions; this may prevent it from realizing its expansive mandate and lofty objectives. This is not to say that as a committee of the UN the CFS lacks legitimacy (see Koç, this issue), however, as argued by Duncan, the question remains as to how to translate legitimacy into power and impact. The other workshop participants echoed this concern. Furthermore, McKeon raises the problem of achieving the CFS' desired impact through consensus-based decision making, and Duncan notes the challenge of maintaining momentum and interest in the CFS into the future (see McMichael, this issue, on the pushback against the CFS by northern states and the World Bank). In this respect, the CFS' greatest strength is also a major challenge, as including a diverse set of voices and daring to engage in controversial aspects of the global food system do require significant commitments of both time and resources; in some cases, the CFS and HLPE have found it difficult to achieve compromise among strong competing interests. This raises concerns about institutional gridlock over time. Further critiques of the CFS included an observable disconnect between the awareness among CFS participants of critical issues but failure of these participants to advance concrete actions to address them. For example, Duncan notes that an increased awareness of the need to address sustainability in global food governance has not resulted in much action or increased work on sustainable food systems. Similarly, McKeon raises the question of whether the innovative character of the CFS is actually "changing the tune of global governance" from its foundation in neoliberal ideology to one rooted in the right to food (see Narula and Claeys, this issue). In answer, McKeon argues that we are not there, at least not yet.

### Where do we go from here?

A major focus of the discussion at the workshop was to conceptualize how the CFS and HLPE fit into the bigger picture of global governance. The consensus was that the challenges of building sustainable food systems are integrated, dynamic, and complex, and the innovative and inclusive nature of the CFS is a compelling model to begin addressing these issues in a more holistic

manner. However, it is evident that many fields and policy issues crucial to sustainable food systems are not governed by the CFS (trade, for example, remains exclusively under the World Trade Organization [WTO]; see Kripke, Murphy & Margulis, this issue). Because of this situation of fragmented governance, one participant noted that the power to prioritize sustainability often lies outside the sphere of public governance that includes private actors and civil society (see Ahmed, Clapp, Hunsberger, & Mooney and ETC Group, this issue). Whereas Duncan in her article argues that the CFS could be made more “green” to lead on sustainability issues, the challenge of establishing integrated and effective food security governance is and will remain the defining challenge of global food governance in the coming years (Friedmann, this issue). In response, several workshop participants questioned which other institutions and stakeholders ought to be invited to the global food governance table or what mechanisms might better mediate interactions between them?

Workshop participants pointed out that there are lessons to be learned from how policy discussions initiated at the CFS are being extended into other international forums. For example, issues originally raised at the CFS were incorporated into discussions at the 2014 meeting of the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP). One participant observed the importance of better understanding the CFS’ role as an incubator for ideas and the mechanisms through which ideas were transferred into other forums. Research on this issue would allow for drawing conclusions on how research and advocacy could be more effective.

There was further debate among participants on the issue of whether the participatory structure of the CFS itself could be used as a model in other international fora. One perspective was that the CFS is unique because it is a result of a long-term struggle of civil society and a specific set of factors (i.e., global food crisis, increased political importance of food security, etc.) This makes the CFS’ unique role as a coordinating space not easily replicable in other political spheres. Moreover, Rhamanian pointed out that one cannot effectively replicate the political aspect of the CFS, for example, without the accompanying knowledge-production dimension of the HLPE, because the success of the CFS relies heavily on the integrated structure between decision-making and knowledge mobilization. McKeon observes that the CFS stands as an example of collective, creative thinking and alternative modes of governance, but this is an ongoing process that must continue if the body is to achieve its ultimate goals. In other words, while the particular structure of the CFS may not be a perfect model for effective global food governance, the process of inclusive and participatory decision-making is an important example for other global institutions to follow when reflecting on their own governance frameworks.

## References

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