

OPINION

Strategic body needed to beat food crises

The system that oversees global agriculture and food security needs an overhaul, says **Joachim von Braun**.

The world food and agricultural system is in disarray. When food prices spiked in 2008, riots broke out, hunger soared and the number of undernourished people jumped — from 923 million worldwide in 2007 to more than a billion in 2009. This was largely due, I feel, to poor global governance of agriculture, food and nutrition.

Although food prices have come down, the problems are not going away. Agricultural productivity is increasing at a rate of about 2% per year, not the 3% growth needed for food security. There is no global food reserve for emergency use; water and soil resources continue to degrade; and trade disruptions and speculation can cause food prices to change violently. About 15% of the world's population is undernourished and 25% have deficiencies in micronutrients such as iron, vitamin A and zinc caused by poor diet.

An independent strategic body is needed to make quick decisions in the face of crises and to tackle fundamental problems that currently fall between the gaps of global governance. This body needs to have the authority to make existing organizations take evidence-based action and to mobilize the necessary resources.

Such a body could also help to connect people and expertise. Global governance currently happens only partly through formal global organizations. Increasingly, it depends on a web of informal networks, in which nation states communicate through heads of state, ministers, parliamentarians and the United Nations (UN), and in which global corporations, foundations, and non-governmental organizations participate (A. M. Slaughter. *A New World Order*. Princeton; 2004). Such networks already have key roles in global policy for public health, crime prevention and energy. They should be more involved in agriculture, food and nutrition, but the structures to facilitate this are not yet in place.

A good candidate for an organization to fulfil these roles would be a reformed and fully independent Committee on World Food Security (CFS), which currently sits within the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). The G20 — representatives of the world's 20 largest economies — ought to give this committee or another, similar, body the authority to be effective.

The governance of food is a broad remit (see Box 1). If one were to design a system

SUMMARY

- The global food production and distribution system leaves a billion people undernourished
- An independent, nimble strategic body is needed to set the agenda and lead in times of crisis
- It should facilitate informal networks like those effective in global governance of health and crime

to oversee all aspects of food security from scratch, it would not look like the one that exists. Today's patchwork of organizations is unable to respond to the problems or opportunities of globalization and leaves a vacuum of governance around emerging issues.

Status quo

The current bodies (see Box 2) all serve important functions, and have made meaningful contributions. For example, the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) and the World Bank helped to create the Green Revolution. This improved crop yields and helped to feed a rapidly growing world population in the 1970s and 1980s. The main food-related UN bodies — the FAO, the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and the World Food Programme — have legitimacy thanks to their supervision by national governments.

"It is a tragedy that key food organizations entered the food crisis with major flaws."

Box 1 | The broad remit for food

Research and innovation: improving agricultural productivity and ensuring food security.

Food emergencies: monitoring, responding to and preventing crises.

Health: improving food safety and setting health and nutrition standards.

Climate change: spurring adaptation and mitigation strategies.

Prices: preventing excessive speculation in food markets and wild price volatility.

Trade and investment: setting policies for trade of food reserves and standards for foreign investment that protect the poor.

Natural resources: protecting soils and biodiversity and improving water use.

But they are bureaucratic, slow to act and lack foresight. They act separately, rather than in concert, and their resources are insufficient.

Many of these bodies have received scathing independent reviews in the past few years. The 2007 evaluation of the FAO culminated in a 403-page critique, describing a "financial and programme crisis that imperils the Organization's future in delivering essential services". The reviews of IFAD in 2005 and the CGIAR in 2008 both urged fundamental changes. The organizations are responding with reform initiatives, but too slowly. It is a tragedy that these key food organizations entered the world food-crisis years of 2007–09 with major flaws.

Because of these issues, emerging problems are not being dealt with. For example, many nations, including the United States and European member states, have established subsidies for biofuel crops that could put food security at risk. And there are only *ad hoc* procedures for dealing with infectious animal diseases. When nations such as China,

India, Vietnam and Argentina responded to rising prices and food insecurity in 2007–08 by restricting exports or increasing export taxes, there was nothing to stop them. When Korea and some Gulf states rushed to buy land in other

countries to stabilize their own food security, there was no one to help to negotiate fair deals. Although such actions may seem rational from a national perspective, collectively they cause system failure.

The shock of the food crisis prompted some positive local action. In 2010, the European Union established 'An EU policy framework to assist developing countries in addressing food security challenges', with plans for €1 billion (US\$1.3 billion) in funding for 2009–11. The US Global Hunger and Food Security Initiative of 2009 devoted \$3 billion to securing food for the developing world. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation in Seattle, Washington, expanded its food and agriculture programmes. India and China made large investments in agriculture to secure their own food resources, and the World Bank significantly expanded its support for national agriculture programmes.

Meanwhile new global efforts do not go far enough. In April 2008, UN secretary-



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general Ban Ki-moon established the High Level Task Force on the Global Food Security Crisis. This body has produced a useful framework for action for global food security, but it does not have membership from the developing regions where the food crisis hit hardest, nor from industry or non-governmental organizations.

In October 2008, the World Economic Forum established 'agenda councils' for agriculture and food security and for nutrition. These bring together relevant players from global corporations, civil society, science and international organizations to assist in an overhaul of the global food system and decide on priorities. They are holding consultations with a focus on investment and governance changes. The councils can facilitate government-to-government networks, that cut across administrative rigidities and catalyse action. Being informal, they cannot and should not fill the global vacuum in legitimate food governance.

The way forward

The establishment of global governance is a complex and sensitive political matter, so it is pragmatic to build on existing elements. The CFS was established in 1974 as a result of the food crisis of the 1970s. Long criticized as a talking shop, it has the potential to be much more. It is an ideal candidate for the overarching strategic body that is needed to

synchronize action in the world food system.

The 2009 reform plan for the CFS aims to give the committee strong coordination roles at the global level. It pictures a group with wider

Box 2 | Core global food governance groups

Food and Agriculture Organization

A United Nations (UN) body compiling information and advice for governments.

World Food Programme

A UN organization, providing food assistance to 100 million people a year.

World Trade Organization

A forum for governments to negotiate trade agreements and settle trade disputes.

International Fund for Agricultural Development

A UN group financing agriculture, primarily for food production in poor countries.

World Bank

Provides financial and technical help to reduce poverty in the developing world.

World Health Organization

A UN body leading on global health, including nutrition.

United Nations Children's Fund

A UN organization upholding children's rights, including good nutrition.

Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research

A network of more than 2,000 scientists at 15 research centres aiming to reduce poverty and achieve global food security.

Collectively, national responses to food price spikes can cause system failure.

membership, including representatives of all UN member governments, the UN organizations, international finance organizations, industry, foundations and non-governmental organizations. The committee would have a flat, non-bureaucratic structure and access to sound expert advice, enabling it to take quick, informed action.

Nothing currently stands in the way of government-to-government networks in food, nutrition and agriculture. They are simply not being created. A reformed CFS could identify people with an interest in such networking, connect them and give them access to science and policy expertise, and provide a forum in which they can meet.

The CFS reform plan, however, is not sufficient. The body remains under the control of UN organizations rather than being independent of them, and depends for funding on the very organizations it is supposed to guide. It must be independent to provide sound global governance covering all aspects of food, agriculture and nutrition.

A system is only as strong as its weakest parts. Even with a robust and independent CFS, existing global bodies would need to respond to the criticisms of their independent reviews much more quickly than they are doing.

Governments must grant the CFS the authority it needs for these roles. A good place to start would be an agreement between the leaders of the G20 to establish the CFS as an independent intergovernmental body, endowed with the resources to operate effectively. There is already strong political momentum for this issue. The G8 and G20 discussed food security extensively at their 2008 and 2009 meetings, for example, and the World Economic Forum meeting in Davos, Switzerland, this January had a greater focus on food issues than ever. The G20 meeting on 26 and 27 June in Canada has food on its agenda, and the G20 chaired by South Korea later in the year could close the deal. Such a change in global food governance is sorely needed to help avert another food crisis. ■

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