Participation for improved policy making: An examination of policy roundtable negotiations in the reformed Committee on World Food Security

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Abstract: In 2009 the UN’s Committee on World Food Security (CFS) underwent a reform which sought to make it the foremost intergovernmental space for the coordination of food security policy at the international level. Two key objectives of the reform were expanding participation in the Committee and developing policy recommendations to support the eradication of hunger. The assumption has been that increased participation will result in more vigorous debate which will in turn yield stronger policies. But what happens when competing visions come together in a formal setting to negotiate policy? What is the impact on policy outcomes?

This paper begins to answer these questions by analysing the negotiations of two CFS policy roundtables: small-holder sensitive investment in agriculture; and, food price volatility. Both roundtables addressed key issues for food security policy at the global level however, the former begins from a smallholder perspective and the latter from a financial perspective. This inquiry provides empirically derived insight into how the CFS operates, with particular focus on the engagement of new participants and policy outcomes. It provides empirically-grounded reflections on the influence of civil society actors and the G20 in CFS negotiations. It concludes by examining opportunities and challenges for participant-engagement and broader policy change within the CFS.

Key words: CFS, food security, participation, food price volatility, smallholder-sensitive investment, civil society

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1. Introduction

The Committee on World Food Security (CFS) is a forum in the United Nations System for review and follow-up of food security policies. In 2009, the Committee’s 123 member countries reached agreement on reforms that would position the CFS as the foremost international and intergovernmental forum for food security and nutrition. The new vision of the CFS was defined within the emerging new architecture of global food security governance as a key part of an emerging Global Partnership for Agriculture, Food Security and Nutrition and as such would “constitute the foremost inclusive international and intergovernmental 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 food security and nutrition for all human beings” (CFS 2009:para 4).

Central to the reform was the inclusion of participants (including civil society and the private sector) across all activities of the CFS (Duncan and Barling 2012). As participants, these actors have the right to autonomously organise and participate in the sessional and inter-sessional activities of the CFS. While member states remain the final decision makers, participants participate in task teams and specific working groups and engage in CFS policy negotiations up to the point where member states reach consensus.

By 2013 there was widespread recognition of the value of the reformed CFS. The G8 stated its support for the “fundamental” reform process in the “‘L’Aquila’ Joint Statement on Global Food Security”. The Declaration from the first meeting of G20 Agriculture Ministers expressed a commitment to work closely with the CFS to promote greater policy convergence and strengthen policy linkages at the global level (G20 2011). The UN Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) negotiated outcome document “The Future we Want” reaffirmed: “the important work and inclusive nature of the Committee on World Food Security (CFS), including through its role in facilitating country-initiated assessments on sustainable food production and food security” (UN General Assembly 2012b:para 115). Most recently, at the 67th Session of the General Assembly (December 2012), in the report on Agriculture Development and Food Security, the General Assembly recognised “the important role and inclusive nature of the Committee on World Food Security as a key organ in addressing the issue of global food security, including in the context of the global partnership for food security” (UN General Assembly 2012a:para 26). While admittedly a “key organ” falls short of the reform vision of being the foremost platform, the quotes above suggest that the CFS is increasingly recognised as the intergovernmental and international platform for coordinating international food security policies.

This recognition is linked to the increasing output of the CFS. To overcome its pre-reform reputation of being an ineffective talk shop, the reform deliberately sought to make the Committee output oriented. Towards this end, at the annual sessions policy roundtables are organised on key issues with the objective of developing concrete and actionable policy recommendations. The recommendations negotiated in the policy roundtables are endorsed by the Committee and included in the CFS’s Global Strategic Framework, a “living” document aimed at improving coordination and guiding action on food security.
This paper begins by explaining the rationale and processes of the CFS policy roundtables. From there, two CFS policy roundtables are reviewed: “How to increase food security and smallholder-sensitive investment in agriculture,” and “Food price volatility”. For each of the roundtables the policy issue is reviewed and followed by an analysis of the negotiations of the specific policy recommendations. The analysis provides insight into how the reformed CFS is operating with a view to assessing whether it is achieving its reform mandate. Moreover, the review identifies opportunities and challenges facing the CFS as it works through the process of “learning while doing.” Particular attention is paid to the ways in which CSOs engaged in the roundtables and the impact they had on discussions and policy-making processes as well as the challenges related to effective participation. The article maps two specific examples of how new participants are influencing intergovernmental food security policy processes while shedding light on the internal dynamics of the newly reformed and participatory CFS. The case study concludes by considering opportunities and challenges facing the CFS.

2. CFS policy roundtables
Within the CFS, the policy roundtables function “to support the Committee’s role to promote greater police convergence and coordination”, including the “development of international strategies … on food security and nutrition on the basis of best practices, lessons learned from local experience, input received from national and regional levels, and expert advice and opinions from different stakeholders” (CFS 2011d:para 5). The objective of the policy roundtables “is to arrive at concrete recommendations for consideration by the Committee… with a view to the formulation of actionable recommendations for approval (CFS 2011d:para 6).

The CFS selects themes to focus on and requests the CFS’s independent High Level Panel of Experts to produce related reports with recommendations. In preparation for the roundtables Task Teams are formed. These Task Teams draft discussion papers and compile “decision boxes”. Decision boxes (sets of actionable policy recommendations) preface the discussion papers and form the focus of the policy negotiation so as to promote clear policy outcomes. Placed near the top of the discussion papers, they represent the broad themes that the CFS are encouraged to develop and approve as policy recommendations on the specific themes.

In line with the reform structure, the roundtables employ an innovative participatory approach to negotiation. During the roundtables the text of the decision box is projected onto a large screen in English. The Chair, the Rapporteur and a scribe sit at the front of the room. As official participants under the reformed CFS, non-state actors, including civil society actors, have the right to intervene in debates and propose wording up the point where the members have reached consensus. Participants identify themselves to the Chair and then the Chair calls on them to make interventions in the order they are seen. It is not uncommon to hear the Chair say “Civil Society Mechanism please, to be followed by Canada and then the World Bank” illustrating not only a fundamental change in the way the CFS operates but also in the ordering of intergovernmental negotiations. When changes to the text are suggested, the scribe includes them in the working document using track changes so that changes are visible to participants. Participants identify themselves to the Chair and then the Chair calls on them to make interventions in the order they are seen. It is not uncommon to hear the Chair say “Civil Society Mechanism please, to be followed by Canada and then the World Bank” illustrating not only a fundamental change in the way the CFS operates but also in the ordering of intergovernmental negotiations. When changes to the text are suggested, the scribe includes them in the working document using track changes so that changes are visible to participants. All members of the Committee have the right to make suggestions and all suggestions must be taken into account. Negotiations continue until member states reach consensus on the text. Once there is consensus amongst member states, other participants are to refrain from further interjections. The Rapporteur reviews the reworked text and presents the final text to the plenary for approval.
Attention now turns to a review of two policy roundtables that took place during the 37th session of the CFS (October 2011). Each provides insight into the organization of the reformed CFS and the ways in which the opening up of participation, particularly to civil society actors, impacts policy outcomes.

3. How to increase food security and smallholder-sensitive investment

3.1. Rationale

Over the last thirty years, investment in agriculture has steadily declined due in part to a growing perception that agriculture was unprofitable. In 1979 international aid to agriculture was 18 per cent of total assistance (IFAD 2011). By 2006, it was just 2.9 per cent. The food price spikes of 2007-8 led to widespread calls for increased investment in agriculture and increasing recognition that investments had to target and support smallholder food producers not only ensure food security but also to reduce levels of poverty. As food prices increased, the perception that investing in agriculture was unprofitable began to shift. This shift was made visible through increased speculation on agricultural commodities and investment in agricultural land through large-scale land acquisitions. The CFS recognised the need to establish best practices for increasing investment in smallholder-sensitive agriculture.

3.2. Negotiations

The roundtable on increasing food security and smallholder-sensitive investment in agriculture began by reviewing the text of the decision box contained in the background document. The decision box contained a chapeau comprised of four points that framed ten specific recommendations. The chapeau originally stated that the Committee: “recognizes that the bulk of investment in agriculture is undertaken by a multiplicity of private actors, in particular farmers themselves, their cooperatives and other rural enterprises”. Civil society actors, facilitated by the Civil Society Mechanism (CSM) Working Group on Agricultural Investment, pushed to have farmers placed at the front of the statement, effectively shifting focus away from the investment of private actors towards the recognition that “the bulk of investment in agriculture is undertaken by farmers and smallholders themselves, their cooperatives and other rural enterprises with the rest being provided by a multiplicity of private actors as well as governments”. The change is significant and represented a major win for civil society actors who were supported by the Rapporteur and Ethiopia (for the Africa Group). This intervention was strategic and reflected the long discussion and debate that had taken place amongst engaged CSOs.

The Civil Society Mechanism Working Group on Agricultural Investment spent a great deal of time reflecting on what was meant by “investment”. They questioned whether they should even use the word “investment” as it is a word that denotes and reinforces a capitalist logic which many opposed. They questioned whether it would be more useful to use language that better reflected what they meant by investment. It was argued that by (re)claiming the word, or changing to another word, “we can ensure that our language reflects and suits our purposes” (field notes, May 2012, Cordoba). Building on this, one civil society actor expressed:

when you talk about investment, you have to ask who needs investment and who is investing. The trickle-down theory of investment affects us adversely and is grabbing land from the poor… Investment is linked to the land and those who do not have title to land, fisherfolk and pastoralists, for example, do not benefit from
investment. They are completely left out of systems of investment (field notes, May 2012, Cordoba).

The CSM Working Group arrived at a general agreement around two understandings of investment. As another civil society actor emphasised: “when we talk about investment, we are talking about farmers investing in the land and this is not the same logic as multinational corporations investing in large plots of land” (field notes, May 2012, Cordoba). A social movement actor raised the issue that no one spoke about agrarian reform. Investment is needed to develop a conducive environment for small-scale food producers and developing a system of investment that incorporates the principles of food sovereignty: “this means farmer empowerment and the development of systems that allow for farmers to invest where they need to invest in order to control their livelihoods” (field notes, May 2012, Cordoba).

Returning back to the chapeau of the decision box, the final point, underwent rewording that served to weaken support for the High Level Panel of Experts report. The change was proposed by representatives from Canada and supported by representatives from Argentina, Australia, Brazil and the United States. It was opposed by representatives from EU, Eritrea and civil society actors. The proposal was for the CFS to “consider” the HLPE report, instead of “duly take notes of its recommendations”. This is illustrative of a push on the part of some member states to weaken support for the report. The role of the HLPE is to provide independent, credible scientific and knowledge-based advice to underpin CFS policy formulations. Indeed central to the reform objectives was to ensure that policy recommendations were developed in line with research that accesses multiple forms of knowledge. This is represented across the High Level Panel most visibly by the selection of a civil society actor as co-Chair. Weakened support for the report illustrates a tension between the opinion of a collective of experts and the policy objectives of key states.

With agreement on the chapeau, the member states and participants set to work on the recommendations. The original language asked the Committee to “consider” the recommendations. In the final text, there is slightly more conviction with respect to uptake, with the Committee “urging” member governments, international partners and other stakeholders to “following up” on the recommendations.

There were originally thirteen recommendations but by the end of the roundtable the Committee had come to agreement on eleven. For reasons of time and space, each proposal will not be considered. Instead, focus will be on key points.

Originally, the third proposal, as written in the draft decision box read: “iii) Ensure that public policies and investments play a catalytic role in the formation of partnerships among agricultural investors, including private-public partnerships”. Here, the Civil Society Mechanism Working Group on Agricultural Investment argued that given the theme of the roundtable, the interests of smallholders needed to be prioritised. They proposed that after
“private-public” the text be modified to include “farmer cooperative-private and private-private partnerships to ensure that the interests of smallholders are being served and preserved by these partnerships, and recognise that, in many cases, the State has a crucial role to play in facilitating access of smallholders to credit, technical and extension services, insurance and markets” (CFS 2010). Importantly, this change served to qualify the types of investment that were needed, thereby contributing to international calls for greater investment. The eventually successful CSO proposal was supported by the representative from Zimbabwe (for the Africa Group) and opposed by representatives from Canada, Guatemala and the organization representing the private sector.

The fifth recommendation addressed participation in policy-making processes, a relevant and sensitive topic within the newly reformed Committee. Originally, the recommendation was to “actively involve organizations representing agricultural producers, notably smallholders and agricultural workers”. CSOs successfully proposed to revise the text to “actively involve organizations representing smallholder agricultural workers”. The rationale for the revision was to clarify who should be participate and to create a direct link to the CFS’s commitment to ensure that the voices of those most affected by food insecurity are heard. Furthermore, the inclusion of agricultural workers is important as they are often neglected in discussions on investment.

The draft decision box included a recommendation related to a new study to be undertaken by the High Level Panel of Experts on the constraints to smallholder investment in agriculture across different contexts. The decision noted that the study should take into consideration “the work done on this topic by IFAD, and by FAO in the context of COAG, and the work of other key partners”. CSOs argued un successfully that the High Level Panel, as an independent expert body, should not be told which references to consider. It is indeed not appropriate for the Committee to prescribe what sources the HLPE need to consider. At the same time, the recommendation is a clear request for the HLPE to provide insight into a policy gap. The HLPE did indeed follow up on this issue and in 2013 launched a report called “Investing in smallholder agriculture for food security”. There will be a policy roundtable by the same name at the October 2013, 40th session of the CFS. CSOs also managed to get wording included on the assessment of the impact of partnerships on smallholders, and were supported by country representatives from Brazil, Ethiopia, the EU, the US and Zimbabwe (for the Africa Group) on the issue.

The eighth and ninth recommendation addressed to two important and related processes already underway in the CFS at the time of the 37th Session: negotiations on the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the context of national food security, and discussions around how the CFS would address the need for principles for responsible agricultural investment. The original decision box supported the launch of a CFS consultation process for the development of such principles, taking into account existing frameworks, including the UNCTAD, FAO, IFAD, and the World Bank’s Principles for Responsible Agricultural Investment (PRAI). There was strong political opposition from some countries (most vocally, negotiators from Canada) and the private sector who pushed the CFS to take up PRAI to avoid a lengthy and costly consultation process. Civil society, Argentina and Venezuela resisted. Furthermore, for CSOs it was fundamental that the discussions on the Voluntary Guidelines be completed before the Committee began considering principles for responsible investment. Only once best practices for the governance of land tenure had been established did it make sense to move on to investment. In the end, the
Rapporteur proposed compromise language which was approved by consensus and adopted in the ninth recommendation: “the consultation process will be initiated promptly after approval of the Voluntary Guidelines” (CFS 2011b:para 29.ix). Securing this chronology was of upmost importance to CSO participants. The rationale being that before principles for responsible governance could be identified, the Committee needed clarity and consensus on best practices for the governance of land tenure.

During the negotiations, the CSM Working Group on Agricultural Investment proposed a final recommendation requesting the “CFS Secretariat, in collaboration with the Advisory Group and based on the information made available by the relevant stakeholders, to prepare a general report on the state of implementation of the above recommendations to be presented to CFS” (CFS 2011b:para 29.xi). The aim was to ensure that the CFS followed-up on the topic of smallholder-sensitive investments and that civil society was able to participate in the assessment as members of the Advisory Group.

Overall, the most significant change to come from the negotiations was a fundamental shift in the terms of debate on investment, away from favouring corporate investment, public-private partnerships, and global value chains, towards recognition of the role of sustainable smallholder food production and that smallholders remain the major investors in agriculture. This shift in perspective was due to the engagement of civil society actors not only in the policy roundtable but also on the CFS Task Team and Advisory Group. This success was not repeated in the policy roundtable on Food Price Volatility.

4. Food Price Volatility
   4.1. Rationale
   Food price volatility threatens food security and deepens poverty. As made visible during the 2007-8 and 2010-11 food price spikes, food producers are confronted with increasing uncertainty, not only with respect to environmental issues but also price. Extreme food price volatility is increasingly the norm and thus increasingly cause for concern. The price spikes in 2008 “pushed an additional 80 million people into hunger, increasing the number of hungry and malnourished to one billion” (CFS 2011c:para 2).

   It is thus not surprising that food price volatility became a focus of international attention with groups like the G20 taking it on as a policy issue. At their November 2010 summit, G20 leaders requested that multilateral actors work with stakeholders “to develop options for G20 consideration on how to better mitigate and manage the risks associated with the price volatility of food and other agriculture commodities, without distorting market behaviour, ultimately to protect the most vulnerable” (G20 2010). This was followed up by a declaration for action on food price volatility by the G20 Agricultural Ministers (G20 2011). The FAO’s (2011) annual State of Food Insecurity report also focused on food price volatility: “How does international price volatility affect domestic economies and food security?” The CFS, acknowledging a policy gap, chose to host a policy roundtable on the issue.

   4.2. Negotiation
   The policy roundtable on food price volatility was arguably more controversial than the roundtable on smallholder-sensitive investment and did not conclude in the single session allotted. The timing of the policy roundtable falling between the release of the G20’s Action
Plan and the G20 Summit where the plan would be endorsed was significant and gave the policy roundtable heightened political importance. In turn, the reform values and processes that promote transparency, inclusivity and participation were challenged. For example, between the first session and the additional session G20 countries were working to secure an outcome that supported the G20 Agricultural Ministers’ Action Plan. CSO actors described the process noting that the Rapporteur, who was also Chair of the Drafting Committee “didn’t invite [CSOs] for the drafting committee he created in the second round, so it was more… and even if we were clearly opposing the text we were kind of side-lined in the process” (Interview, July 2012, Rome). This is of course not surprising and can also be seen as a way of promoting policy coherence, but the CFS adheres to a democratic and inclusive principle of one country-one vote and is committed to engaging the voices of those most affected by food insecurity. The G20 operates along a different set of principles. For the CFS to uphold its reform objectives, policies recommended through the CFS should come from the membership and participants and should not be dictated by the twenty largest economies. At the same time, that CSOs were able to gain access to these meetings once they were informed of them, illustrates the value and functioning of the reform values.

With respect to the negotiations, just as they had done in the roundtable on smallholder-sensitive investment, the Committee downgraded their support for the High Level Panel of Experts’ report. Whereas the original decision box noted that the CFS “welcomes the report… and recommends its consideration by all stakeholders”, the final text declares that the CFS “expressed its appreciation for the efforts by the High Level Panel of Experts for its work on price volatility and food security, and took note of its report on Price Volatility and Food Security and recommendations contained therein” (CFS 2011a:para 46). This statement is a clear rejection by CFS member states of their own expert panel’s work. The distinction drawn between appreciation of the work undertaken and taking note of the report is also odd. The rejection of the HLPE report becomes more obvious when contrasted with the following point wherein the Committee “welcomes the Action Plan on Food Price Volatility and Agriculture of the G20 as a positive effort to address a number of the main causes and implications of food price volatility…” (CFS 2011a:para 47). Immediately, the influence and privileging of the G20’s agenda becomes clear.

Moving from the chapeau to the recommendations, the first thing to note is that the Committee opted to develop “action points” rather than “recommendations”, creating another clear link to the G20 Action Plan. On this point, the delegate from Norway3, with support from CSOs, argued that it was not suitable from the CFS to make decisions based on outside organizations recommendations, but negotiators from G20 countries stressed the political importance of the G20’s Plan as being a primary reference on food price volatility and the paragraph stayed in the final policy box.

In total the Committee finalised 17 actions, organised into three sections: Actions to increase food production and availability and enhance resilience to shocks; Actions to reduce volatility; and, Actions to mitigate the negative impacts of volatility. The first section contained four recommendations targeted towards increasing food production and enhancing resilience to shocks. In this section CSOs managed to secure some language in the final text. For example,

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3 Norway is a vocal critic of the G20, with Foreign Minister Jonas Gahr Støre publically calling the G-20 "one of the greatest setbacks since World War II." Støre further argued the G20 is a self-appointed group composed by the world’s major powers (Ertel 2010). Norway is not an EU member state and is thus not represented at the G20.
in the first action point, they manage to include reference to strengthening smallholder production systems and fostering rural development, to an original decision that focused strictly on increasing “stable and sustainable public and private investment to boost agricultural productivity”. CSOs working through the CSM Working Group on Food Price Volatility managed to secure this wording by arguing that the reformed CFS had a mandate to promote and protect smallholders and that their proposal would enhance cohesion with the recommendations negotiated in the roundtable on increasing smallholder-sensitive investment. During the negotiations, CSOs also tried to remove the reference to “boost agricultural productivity” but they were not successful.

When compared to the roundtable on smallholder sensitive investment, CSOs were unsuccessful in the negotiations on food price volatility. They made small gains on issues of food reserves and speculation and a reference to the need to include the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and West African countries in the development of targeted emergency humanitarian food reserves in the region. However, frustrated by the systematic marginalisation of their participation and the direction of the negotiations, including the promotion of the G20 agenda and a failure on the part of the Committee to recognise key drivers of food price volatility, CSOs decided to walked out of the discussions in protest. This is discussed below.

For the rest of the action points, few changes were made to the decision box which drew heavily from the G20 Action Plan. There was the inclusion of language to support the inclusion of “all key partners” in the development of comprehensive country-led food security strategies. The same paragraph places emphasis on “evidenced based” processes. What this means in practice is that “scientific” knowledge is to be prioritised over “experiential” or “traditional” forms of knowledge. This contradicts the reform principles of the CFS and excludes the expertise of many food producers and social movements. CSOs were keenly aware of this as an exclusion strategy. Referencing the Chair of the CFS Task Team, one CSO actor noted “also, what they insist a lot upon is evidence-based and things like that, so, arguments like that were also being used [to discredit CSO proposals]” (Interview, July 2012, Rome). This stands in direct contradiction to efforts of the CFS to open itself up to “alternative” forms of knowledge as illustrated through the structure and operating principles of the HLPE and through the inclusion of CSOs as participants.

Within the policy roundtable, member states agreed that there was a need to review biofuels policy. Here again they invoked a positivist discourse, noting that the review be “according to balanced science-based assessments”. The Committee then mandated the HLPE to conduct “a science-based comparative literature analysis, taking into account the work produced by the FAO and the Global Bioenergy Partnership (GBEP), of the positive and negative effects of biofuels on food security” (CFS 2011a:para 50i). Many issues can be raised with this action point. First, as was seen in the roundtable on investing in smallholder-sensitive agriculture, the CFS member states were again attempting to dictate the content to be review by the independent High Level Panel of Experts. And again, while it is in their right to request studies, it is outside their jurisdiction to mandate sources. Second, that two reference to “science-based” work are made the same action point is telling and reinforces a discourse that serves to rationalise neoliberal policy processes while simultaneously delegitimising other forms of knowledge and expertise. During the roundtable CSOs challenged the EU – often one of their allies – on this point. CSOs claimed that the EU was using the HLPE study as a delay tactic so as to avoid the need to take policy decisions until the research was complete. The USA and
Brazil supported the EU and effectively shifted the discussion from one of mandates, subsidies and tariffs to one about what kind of research is needed.

The CFS added a new action point during the roundtable, asking “relevant international organizations, in consultation with all relevant stakeholders, to further assess the constraints and effectiveness of local, national and regional food reserves” (CFS 2011a:para 50j). This says very little but does present an opportunity to develop a study to assess the role of food reserves and stocks. This recommendation mirrors a call in the G8’s (2009:para 7) L’Aquila Joint Statement on Global Food Security that stated:

The feasibility, effectiveness and administrative modalities of a system of stockholding in dealing with humanitarian food emergencies or as a means to limit price volatility need to be further explored. We call upon the relevant International Institutions to provide us with evidence allowing us to make responsible strategic choices on this specific issue.

The action point also supports the G20 (2011:para 50) call to:

support the development of a proposal for a targeted emergency humanitarian food reserves system to complement existing regional and national food reserves, in response to the expressed needs of developing countries. We request the WFP and other international organizations to conduct a feasibility study and cost-benefit analysis with a view to developing a proposal of a pilot project for such a system, consistent with annex II of the WTO Agreement on Agriculture, focused on regional approaches, ensuring ownership by and partnership with the countries concerned, and providing evidence of added-value in terms of cost effectiveness and optimization of existing mechanisms (physical and financial).

Of prime importance will be which international organization leads the process moving forward.

4.3. Summary of Outcomes
After making several attempts to participate in the discussion and being ignored, and unable to endorse the CFS’s analysis of drivers of food price volatility, CSOs made the decision to walk out of the policy roundtable negotiations at 22:45. To be clear, this was not a case of CSOs being upset that they did not get what they asked for. There is a deep understanding and acceptance amongst CSOs that they are not decision makers in the CFS. When the CSOs left the room, their departure was not recognised officially in the Plenary nor in the interventions or final report. Discussions continued at a relatively quick pace and negotiations were closed before midnight. The walk out was a risky move given that this was the second Session of the reformed CFS and thus the relationship between member states and participants were new and arguably fragile. However, in the end, the walk out had little impact.

Overall, the negotiations worked to reinforce the G20 action plan on food price volatility. Participation from non-G20 countries was limited and civil society contributions were largely ignored. That said, their participation did manage to secure stronger support for smallholder production systems, reference to food reserves and acknowledgement of the importance of regional actors in addressing food price volatility.
5. Conclusion
The review of the policy roundtables on food price volatility and smallholder sensitive investment highlights not only how the reformed CFS has begun to operate, but has also uncovered some emerging or remaining tensions with respect to expanded participation. It identified key opportunities and challenges for participants and member states seeking to advance more progressive food security policies (i.e., not business as usual). For example, despite the Committee’s decision to weaken their support for the reports of the HLPE, CSOs in particular found greater success with their interventions when they could link them to the reports and the reports’ findings. Along similar lines, proposals that reinforced the objectives outlined in the reform, notably achieving food security, were more easily defended during negotiations.

Obvious challenges facing the CFS include the realisation that despite its restructuring and all of the good intentions, the CFS is not immune to power politics: CFS processes are susceptible to the influence of more powerful agendas. In theory, the mechanisms exist to help balance out relations of power so long as non-G20 countries engage actively. In practice, this will require greater resources for permanent representatives as well as an examination of how the CFS conducts negotiations. For example, operating parallel sessions, night sessions without interpretation and negotiating texts in English are key barriers to ensuring wide member state participation.

A related challenge is the CFS’s ongoing commitment to a productionist paradigm. Their actions and recommendations to date have focused on increasing agricultural output. This was made clear in the food price volatility roundtable when some member states refused to allow for a meaningful debate on trade and again when more studies on how to safely produce biofuels were proposed in lieu of discussions on how to change current biofuel policies to limit the impact on rising food prices.

Overall, the inclusion of civil society actors in the negotiations resulted in improvements to the recommendations. CSOs secured the inclusion of a reference to biodiversity and strengthened gender-sensitive language. The refocusing on impacts of public-private partnerships, instead of assuming immediate benefits, reflects a shift in the neoliberal logic that has dominated global food security policy since the mid-1980s (Maxwell 1996; Mooney and Hunt 2009; Shaw 2007). Respecting the chronology of completing the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the Context of National Food Security before beginning consultations on principles for responsible agricultural investment was also an important decision and suggested that in this instance the CFS was able to resist pressure to follow procedures that did not conform to CFS reform principles.

In the policy roundtable on smallholder sensitive investment, CSOs had the advantage of a positive framing: few would be willing to withdraw support from such policies or to explicitly promote policies that were not sensitive to smallholders. Furthermore, after the roundtable, the issue of smallholder investment has remained on the CFS agenda arguably in more meaningful ways than food price volatility. An HLPE report and a roundtable on investing in smallholder agriculture for food security are on the agenda of the 40th Session of the CFS (October 2013). In this respect, the CFS is focusing on issues that build on its strengths and priorities. This is perhaps a wise tactic as the CFS works through its growing pains. However, for CFS policies to have an impact in so far of advancing the goal of eradicating hunger, the CFS will need to incorporate issues of trade and climate change into CFS discussions in meaningful way.
On the more technical issue of food price volatility, and when pitted against the interests of the G20, CSOs had less influence and legitimacy and non-G20 countries played a less active role. The political weight of the issue, in conjunction with a looming G20 agenda, suggested that on issues of international trade and markets, the CFS was less willing to step back from a business-as-usual approach.

It can be concluded that the inclusion of a wider range of stakeholders in policy processes and negotiations leads to stronger policies that prioritise food security. The CFS is learning-while-doing, as are the new participants, many of whom now find themselves at the centre of policy processes in a position to negotiate and no longer on the outside playing the defensive. There are compromises that come along with this shift in location. CSOs active in the CSM agree that their participation is valuable and the outcomes of the policy roundtables reinforce this.

6. Works Cited


