Governance: united to decide or divided to be ruled?

Little more than a year ago, hungerexplained.org was wondering whether 2021 was going to be a turning point for food … or not [read].

We had then shared two major concerns. The **first** was a fear that "in the future, solutions recommended in the field of food and agriculture may not be sufficiently inclusive, in particular for small agricultural producers, and that they may contribute to an utter domination of the sector by large private companies". The **second** was that "there may be a growing gap between citizens' aspirations and the result of institutions governing our food, which would certainly generate a greater mistrust of the population".

In both these worries, the issue of governance[1] was central. This is the topic on which today's article will focus.

A little bit of history

The progressive development of a market-based capitalist economy that has spread throughout the world, has been marked by the contradiction between the desire for capital accumulation through profit and the need to maintain social peace by containing the rise of inequalities.[2]

Food historians have divided this evolution in stages, or food regimes that are stylised historical periodisations useful for representing, analysing and understanding the global food system by examining tensions, contradictions, power relations and key underlying processes (international division of labour and trade, dominant forms of capital, rules and norms, social forces, technology, etc.).

Three main food regimes are generally being considered.[3] They help to identify a trend in the evolution of food since the end of the 19th century:

- The **first food regime** (typically around the beginning of the 20th century) corresponds to "a system of national economies governed by independent states" dominated by the United Kingdom, where family farmers in settler states of colonial branches of European States (basically North America and Australia) export to Europe their surplus of grain and meat at a relatively cheap price to feed the new industrial working classes in Europe and keep wages low, in exchange for manufactured goods, labour and capital.

[1] Governance: the way a particular domain is governed. Governance rests on a system that comprises a governance structure, processes underpinned by norms and policies, and actors or participants.

[2] Polanyi, Karl. 1957. The Great Transformation. Boston: Beacon Press 1957/2001.

[3] Some authors consider up to five different food regimes [read]

This period was the time of the “final scramble for empire” and the “rise of the nation-state system”. It was also the moment when there was a global international division of labour as industries developed and agriculture became commercial and a client of industry.

- The **second food regime** (from the end of World War II to the early 1970s), dominated by the US, corresponds to a phase when Europe, having evolved into a surplus producer through adoption of a productivist approach to agriculture, joins the US to dump their surpluses to the rest of the world, particularly Africa and the Middle East, creating import dependence and displacing, at least partly, traditional foods. This period saw an expansion of the state system following decolonisation, and the resulting new states were encouraged to participate in international trade. Meanwhile intensive meat production systems developed in rich countries, playing a key role in transforming agricultural trade, as countries such as Brazil and Argentina emerged as major sources of animal feed and vegetable oil [read].
- The **third food regime** (from the creation of WTO onwards), yet under debate, is generally characterized by the domination of large multinational corporations, the capital of which is increasingly financialised, that are proposing to address health and environmental issues by science and technology [read]. Liberalised trade and capital flows contributed to develop and diversify imports from poor and middle-income economies towards rich countries, through the establishment of international privately regulated value chains dealing with new fresh and semi-processed goods (fruits and vegetables), meat as well as with traditional tropical commodities. These value chains are increasingly managed with the help of digital technologies and they favour the growth of large production units at the expense of smaller-scale peasants, artisans and traders [read]. Contrarily to the two first food regimes, this third food regime is not dominated by one hegemonic country and is rather multipolar, with the emergence of new food powers such as Brazil and China [read].

This quick description of successive food regimes shows a steady trend towards more global economic integration based on a division of labour, an intensifying complexity and

an increasing weight of private operators. This evolution attests the growing importance and need for governance of the global food system.

Global food governance: What? Who? How?

In "Global Food Governance" Nora McKeon, well known to hungerexplained.org readers, points out "Three milestones of post-World War II global food governance- the creation of the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) in 1944, the World Food Conference in 1974, and the reform of the UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS) in 2009 … - all prompted by massive food crises" whose consequences could not be ignored. Their shortcomings, she writes, "Have lessons to teach us for the present and the future," one being that "the history of post-World War II food governance is essentially one of selling out public responsibility to markets and corporations to the detriment of the majority of the world's population" and the environment. Simultaneously, there was "the growth of an increasingly robust, diversified and articulated network of [these] producers and other social actors".

These two dynamics set the power context within which decisions are made to frame the food agenda and uphold - or not-"the rights of the vulnerable and the public interests that are fundamental to the well-being of today's and future generations".

Reflecting on what needs to be governed in the complex food issues tangle that covers the three domains of "production[4], distribution and consumption", McKeon tries to

[4] Or food generation, according to the terminology (and approach) adopted by Indigenous peoples [read].

establish what should actually be governed at global level and she acknowledges the evolution that took place since 1945, starting from an almost simply productivist view of food to the multifaceted concept of food security, first coined in 1996 with four dimensions – availability, access, stability and utilisation [read] –, later enriched in 2020 with sustainability [read] and agency [read] by the High-Level Panel of Experts, although not yet "politically debated in the CFS[5] and [is] opposed by the powerful commodity exporting countries".

The answer to "who governs food and how?" has also evolved over time, from "sovereign states engaged in political deliberation in splendid isolation" to an "inclusive global food governance within a multinational human rights framework [by] assigning priority voice to those actors most impacted by the policies under discussion while retaining final decision-making for governments and hence maintaining their accountability" that emerged from the 2009 reform of the CFS.

In contrast, the new form of multilateralism supported by the World Economic Forum (WEF), close to global business, is that of "a series of 'coalitions of the willing and able' charged with addressing burning global problems", each led "by corporate actors who are presumed to have the necessary know-how, managerial capacity and resources to make things happen, if not the willingness to be subject to accountability for the outcomes of what does happen"– i.e. some kind of spontaneous governance, in the words of G.-A. Simon on hungerexplained.org [read].

The risk of the WEF proposal, McKeon argues, is that it would likely result in private sector-led market- and technology-led quick fixes anchored in improved business as usual solutions, often through public-private partnerships, that would not reflect "on what model [needs] to be promoted" and that would be incompatible with the objective of the reformed CFS to acknowledge "the structural causes of the crisis and the need to seek policy solutions through political negotiation, with the public sphere taking responsibility for regulating private sector activities in the public interest".

Recognising current CFS shortcomings, in terms of "power relations affecting decision-making, particularly corporate influence", "spread of informal, private sector or hybrid mechanisms lacking political oversight" and "lack of effective, enforceable regulation", McKeon explores what it would take to achieve better food governance.

Why are things not moving?

After listing valuable work conducted by the High-Level Panel of Experts and IPES-Food, some of which hungerexplained.org readers know [read here, here, here and here], she identifies every time the same stumbling block that constrains the implementation of their recommendations, namely "political will".

This concept, we feel at hungerexplained.org, remains generally rather vague and ambiguous. It is often comfortably used to provide some semblance of explanation of failure to decide what, in the eyes of those who criticise, seems to be essential. However, for the sake of clarity, it is important to understand what actually hides behind this fuzzy concept and makes that individuals – e.g. political leaders – choose to stick their neck out – or not – and take – or not – a particular decision. This has much to do with their

[5] The CFS groups 138 member states, compared to the 193 member states of the UN (CFS website accessed in March 2022) [see list].

skills to assess and willingly spend, if need be, their political capital (and more generally their social capital), to achieve a given goal [read]. If this is so, political will is highly dependent on the existing balance of power on which the decision makers have to surf, and on their ability to use it for a specific purpose and decision. If the main cause of the status quo is indeed an unfavourable balance of power, then the likeliness of a particular choice being made is quite low, unless effective steps are taken to turn this balance around to make it favourable. While this is probably the most frequent case, achieving this reversal is easier said than done.

Divide and rule

Analysing the outcome of the Food Systems Summit, one could argue that the balance of power was sufficiently symmetrical to stop the attempt to impose the new multilateralism pushed by the corporate sector through the WEF.

But it was not a balance of power that could allow CFS shortcomings listed by McKeon to be properly addressed. Rather, the spontaneous governance by multiple coalitions dealing separately with specific issues as if they were disconnected can be seen as an effort to precisely divide ongoing thinking – when in reality they are strongly interrelated and part of a whole nexus of problems that results from the model underpinning the global food system. This division then prevents the emergence of a balance of power that could generate the "political will" required to address these issues in a proper and integrated manner supportive to the objectives of the reformed CFS, and thus establish the conditions for challenging the overall model underpinning the food system today.

In her paper, McKeon admits that "political will … is difficult to muster without significant levels of politically effective popular mobilization," – a way to turn around the balance of power – and she sees some signs of hope for a success that could create the circumstances required for overcoming this obstacle (and changing the model). She finds them in an increased awareness that the current food system is inadequate and in a multiplicity of initiatives aiming at implementing "alternative ways of food provisioning", despite "the corporate offensive on global governance" observed on the occasion of the Food Systems Summit" [read here, here and here]. The challenge then, of course, is to invent a method for creating a convergence of very diverse initiatives and a coalition of those who carry them out or support them.

To achieve this, she proposes to extend the existing UN human rights framework that includes the rights of Indigenous people (2007) and peasants (2018), in addition to the 1948 Universal Declaration, and complement them with the rights of nature. She also recommends to wage the battle of narratives to counter the very influential crude and reductive corporate discourse designed to have the capacity to hijack alternative language and concepts (e.g. agroecology, organic farming, fair trade)[6] and use them to the benefit of the business sector after purging them from some of their essential content as it relates to the complexity of reality [read here and here].

[6] While defending the opposite view, when the opportunity arises, as can be seen from the deluge of "experts" of all kinds speaking in the media this mid-March 2022 to criticise initiatives in support to sustainability and the protection of the environment, and to advocate in favour of industrial agriculture and the development of civil nuclear energy. See for example this critique of the EU's European Green Deal qualified as ideological and idyllic and wanting to go back to agriculture of the past [listen particularly the last 15 minutes, in French], when current events demonstrate the great vulnerability of industrial agrochemical agriculture in a crisis of the type we face today!

And now?

In her conclusion, Nora McKeon advocates for the inclusive CFS to be the place where "a new social contract within a human rights framework, based on what is deemed to be most beneficial" now and in the future for people – particularly the more vulnerable – "endowed with a participatory monitoring capacity that enables adjustments as conditions evolve", and where "the currently fragmented and often contradictory international forums that impact on food systems" can be linked up. She sees the failure of the attempt made by the corporate world through the Food Systems Summit to capture global food governance because of the popular movement that rose up to defend the CFS, as a source of hope [read for example here and here].

She is certainly correct on that last point. However, there is a long way to go before achieving a consensus on adopting a rights-based approach. Opposition is likely to come openly from some powerful countries that consider human rights as an idea of "the West" and contest its universal nature [read], as well as from those who believe that human rights are only a second-best choice that seeks to cure the evil by doing damage control, without treating its root causes, while preserving the fundamentals of the economic and political reality that produces it [read].[7] Resistance will also come, but more covertly, from a number of big corporations who are violating these right on an everyday basis [for examples, read here, here, here and here].

(Provisional) conclusion

We are now in 2022, and the game is far from being over.

The disaster that could have resulted from the Food Systems Summit was avoided because of a strong mobilisation. But the struggle is still ongoing.

On the one hand, the rapidly expanding financial, technological and communication power of an ultra-rich minority, on the other the concern for health and sustainability of food that is becoming every day more important in the eyes of a growing majority of the world population.

Who knows what the outcome will be!

To know more :

- McKeon, N., Global Food Governance, Development 64, 172–180 (2021), 2021.
- Friedmann, H., and P. McMichael, Agriculture and the state system: The rise and fall of national agricultures, 1870 to the present. Sociologia Ruralis. 29 (2): 93–117, 1989.

[7] See, for example, the conversation between Damia, the human rights activist, and Laina the trade union leader in Octuor, Tome 4, Deus ex Machina (p.167 and the following) (in French).

Selection of past articles on hungerexplained.org related to the topic:

- Private economic power in food systems and its new forms, 2022.
- Opinion: Food Systems Summit's Scientistic Threat by Jomo Kwame Sundaram 2022.
- Opinion: A strange Summit by George-André Simon, 2021.
- Responsible businesses or greenwashing? The certification industry in support of multinationals, 2021.
- Sustainable food systems: 2021 may be a turning point for food, ... or it may not, 2020.
- Are existing food and agricultural policies supportive to local sustainable food systems? 2015.
- Food Security Governance: empowering communities, regulating corporations, by Nora McKeon, 2015.
- The New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition: a coup for corporate capital? by N. McKeon, 2014.
- Food security: Historical drivers, 2013.
- The food and agricultural policy paradox, 2013.