

The World Summit on Food Security and the People's Forum: Different Approaches to Addressing Global Hunger

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The World Summit on Food Security (WSFS), held at the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) headquarters in Rome in November, 2009, did not deliver much in terms of the way forward for reducing world hunger. But then again, it didn't promise much in advance, either.

Many delegates did not look forward to attending the two-and-a-half day summit, as they knew it would be mainly an opportunity for governments to read lofty statements. Indeed, the Declaration of the World Summit on Food Security, which articulated vague aspirations void of meaningful hunger reduction targets or financial commitments, was adopted immediately on the first day of deliberations. Although it was recognized that global governance of food security was in need of repair, not much was offered up to fix it.

In short, it was not a summit where debate and exchange led to new understandings and outcomes.

That the WSFS has so little to show for itself is unfortunate, as the number of undernourished people has only climbed over the past year, reaching more than 1 billion, as the world grapples with the worst global economic crisis in more than 70 years.

As government representatives gathered for the official summit, others also descended on Rome to attend the People's Forum, a parallel civil society summit that was a less formal gathering of farmer organizations and food advocacy groups from around the world. The contrast between the two gatherings was striking.

Held in large outdoor tents in order to accommodate the high demand for participation, the People's Forum scheduled working groups over the course of four long days. While there certainly were some prepared statements read, these quickly gave way to debate and deliberation on a final declaration of the parallel meeting that was adopted at the close of the gathering. Without significant financial resources backing them up, civil society groups pledged to strengthen their alliances and to mobilize collectively.

In examining the discussion and outputs of these two very different gatherings that pondered precisely the same problem of growing hunger around the world, several key points of difference are immediately obvious. These areas of tension are worth pausing to examine as the global community seeks ways to improve the global governance of food and agriculture.

Funding vs. Participation and Decision-making

Both gatherings rejoiced over the recent reform of the Committee on Food Security. The aim of the reform of this UN committee is to make the body a more inclusive platform where key decisions on food security and nutrition would be made, and to play a central role in coordinating the emerging, but still vague Global Partnership for Agriculture, Food Security and Nutrition. The inclusion of civil society voices was seen all around to be a positive development.

The key difference, however, was with regard to whether this body would be enabled to carry out this role in practice. The People's Forum discussions centred on the fact that the G8's promised US \$20 billion for agriculture, announced last July in L'Aquila, was being channelled through a Trust Fund housed at the World Bank, effectively divorcing funding for agriculture from the decision making. This, Pat Mooney of ETC Group lamented, was, "separating the pocketbook from the brain."

The CFS did not, in fact, receive any major additional funding, which will make even its decision-making and coordination mandate very difficult to fulfill. At the same time, very little is known about the new Trust Fund, and there are major concerns about funding decisions being taken at the World Bank versus a more inclusive UN-based body such as the Committee on Food Security.

International vs. National Responsibility

Much of the discussion at the People's Forum focused on the ways in which rich countries' trade practices harmed prospects for food security in poor countries. In particular, the unbalanced trade rules of the World Trade Organization (WTO) were pinpointed by many participants as highly problematic, and noted in the forum's final declaration. Most were agreed that current global economic rules and practices played a role in creating and perpetuating food insecurity in poor countries, such that policy space regarding trade was warranted in developing countries' bids to end hunger, in order to make trade more balanced and fair (as noted in this Oxfam report released during the summit).

The frustration with the impact of global trade practices on local food security expressed by the civil society and farmers' groups was not mirrored at the official summit at the FAO. Many of the statements read by heads of state and in the panel sessions instead praised international trade as the key to ending hunger, in large part because self-sufficiency, in their view, was impossible to achieve (a sentiment echoed by the business community which met separately in a pre-summit event). Clemens Boonekamp, WTO agricultural commodities division director, noted several times in his interventions that international trade was vital for promoting food security and that the WTO's job was to "ensure that the arteries of trade were as free of cholesterol as we can make them."

So while the People's Forum stressed the ways in which international economic forces have exacerbated hunger around the world, implying that the global community holds significant responsibility for creating the crisis, the WSFS saw those same economic forces as a solution to hunger. As to where responsibility lies, the Declaration of WSFS was very clear. Its first principle

states that, “food security is a national responsibility.” Although it is important for national governments to take the lead with respect to reducing hunger within their borders, stressing only national responsibility lets the global community off too easily in terms of commitments of funds and other reform measures to address the crisis. While there are vague statements about the need for international support to address the crisis in the official declaration, no firm commitments were made.

Food Security vs. Food Sovereignty

Not disconnected from the above issues, an overarching difference between the summits was their overall take on the underlying approach to addressing hunger which should guide the way forward. The WSFS focused its attention on food security, which, according to the 1996 World Food Summit, exists “when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.” This definition does not specify where that food should come from or how it should be produced, or who should have control over agricultural resources and decisions regarding food production and distribution. International trade, the use of agricultural biotechnology, and distribution of land and rights over seeds, for example, are not considered relevant by this definition.

Much of the discussion at the People’s Summit focused on a related, but different concept: food sovereignty. In 1996, food sovereignty was defined by the international peasant organization Via Campesina as an alternative to the FAO’s focus on food security. Food sovereignty focuses on people’s and countries’ rights to decide their own agriculture and food policies. It calls for equal control over resources and decision making especially for the world’s producers of food, and stresses that food should be produced in an ecologically sound manner. Further, it prioritizes local and national markets over international ones.

Although both food security and food sovereignty stress access to safe and nutritious food, they are fundamentally different with respect to rights to access and the way in which choices are made over how to achieve access. The term “food sovereignty” was mentioned very little at the WSFS deliberations and appeared nowhere in the final declaration (although Ramon Espinel, Ecuador’s Agriculture Minister did give an impassioned speech about its importance at the WSFS), whereas it was front and centre at the People’s Forum.

Towards a Unified Approach to Global Food Governance?

While the two declarations, and their underlying approaches, still have their differences, there is perhaps room for optimism that, at least on some issues, they are inching toward one another, if very slowly and unevenly.

The push for the right to food within the UN system over the past five years could be seen as a sign that rights are becoming more enshrined into the concept of food security. The UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Olivier de Schutter, made interventions that tried to bring the two world views closer together. De Schutter’s statement, presented near the end of the WSFS, openly criticized the official summit’s declaration for ignoring the impacts of inequitable trade rules and domination of the food system by large corporations. He called for greater accountability, both nationally and internationally, in the quest for realization of the right to food. This pointed intervention could be a signal of more openness to the concerns of civil society groups within the more mainstream structure.

One of the very last presentations in the official WSFS was that of the representatives of the People's Forum. The declaration from Social Movements adopted at the parallel forum was read out to the plenary of the WSFS by Sarita Minz, a farmer and food sovereignty advocate from Orissa, India. The reading of the declaration was greeted with sustained applause and a standing ovation from the civil society observers in the room.

With the summits now over, there is still uncertainty about the way ahead for global governance of food security. The reformed Committee on Food Security at the FAO is a positive step, but without adequate funding, it risks becoming merely a talk shop. And if the major funding from the international community for global agricultural investment remains in the World Bank's coffers, a more open and transparent decision-making process regarding the use of those funds, in consultation with the CFS, will be desperately needed.