

THE MONITORING CHALLENGE FOR THE COMMITTEE ON WORLD FOOD SECURITY: AN OPENING TOWARDS PLURAL PERSPECTIVES?

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In 2009, an ambitious reform of the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) transformed this inter-governmental body into an innovative global governance experiment. In the preceding years, the crisis in food prices had underscored the institutional fragmentation of the UN architecture for food security. The CFS, a technical committee of the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) created in 1974, was increasingly seen as unable to deal with the major challenges of the time. The main objective of the reform was therefore to make it “the central United Nations political platform dealing with food security and nutrition” (CFS, 2009: 1). It was thus envisioned as a space for discussion and decision-making on issues of special relevance such as the right to food, land governance or agricultural investments.

In shaping this new political space, a main objective of the reform was to broaden participation⁵. In addition to the category of Members⁶, a category of Participants now includes representatives of UN agencies and bodies; civil society and non-governmental organizations and their networks; international agricultural research systems; international and regional financial institutions; and representatives of private sector associations and private philanthropic foundations. Civil society organizations are self-organized through the Civil Society Mechanism (CSM); which was designed to guarantee the participation of those most affected by hunger and food insecurity⁷. Although they do not enjoy decision-making authority, participants have the right to intervene in plenary sessions and participate in agenda setting; they can also submit and present documents and formal proposals (CFS, 2009: 4). Negotiation processes between these various stakeholders thus gave birth to important agreements such as the VGGT (“Voluntary guidelines on the responsible governance of tenure of land, fisheries and forests in the context of national food security”) which have been welcomed as an unprecedented international agreement on the governance of land. Because of this new governance architecture, the CFS claims to be “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: 2).

More than five years after the reform, the CFS is at a crossroads. Although the importance of its achievements is widely recognized, this platform is increasingly questioned regarding the extent to which these international agreements actually alter policies and practices at country-level. Do they translate into real changes on the ground? These questions are now being discussed in a CFS Open-Ended Working Group (OEWG) that was charged with the difficult task of devising a monitoring mechanism for the CFS. Although issues of monitoring and evaluation are sometimes presented as technical ones, they are not without triggering important debates. Is the results-based approach prevailing in most UN agencies suited to the nature of the CFS? This question is particularly problematic because of the human rights-based perspective that this platform is supposed to uphold. Civil society organizations, in particular, have challenged the framing of “monitoring” as an “assessment of CFS effectiveness”. Different perspectives on monitoring are confronting each other. Thus, the CFS global governance experiment offers an interesting case to reflect on the critical issue of evaluation. Does the reform of the CFS also imply reforming the way we think about evaluation?

The CFS bureau established the OEWG on monitoring in January 2012 to respond to the call of the reform document for an innovative monitoring mechanism (CFS, 2009: 3). At its 40th annual session, in October 2013, the CFS “endorsed the conduct of periodic assessments of the CFS effectiveness in improving policy frameworks especially at country level (...) Specifically, it recommended carrying out a baseline survey to assess the current situation as the base of assessing progress”. A methodological framework was developed in a technical workshop in April 2014 and further discussed during the OEWG meetings. In the first quarter of 2015, the opinion survey was carried out. This survey is presented as an intermediary stage toward the definition of a broader monitoring framework, a task which is still pending now.

This paper explores the challenges entailed in defining an “innovative” monitoring framework for the CFS. Although a major difficulty lies in the resistance of some stakeholders to go forward with such agenda⁸, the article focuses on the problematic coexistence between the various perspectives put forward by those constructively working toward that agenda. Such analysis is based on an empirical research carried out throughout 2014 and including observation of CFS events and meetings (CFS annual session, meetings of the OEWG on monitoring); documentary analysis; and interviews with a range of stakeholders (representatives of CFS secretariat, Member States, Rome-Based UN agencies and civil-society organizations). The paper lays out two perspectives that are predominantly put forward by these stakeholders: the results-based management approach and the human rights-based approach. For each of these two approaches, attention is given to their general characteristics and to the limitations they face when applied to the case of the CFS. The paper then concludes with a proposal to look at monitoring as a space in which different views can be expressed, thus reflecting the specificity of the CFS global governance model.

⁵ On the CFS as a new global governance experiment, see among others Duncan (2015) and McKeon (2009).

⁶ The membership is composed of all the Member States of the FAO, the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), the World Food Program (WFP) or the United Nations.

⁷ To this end, eleven categories were defined: farmers, fisherfolk, landless, indigenous peoples, pastoralists, consumers, agricultural workers, urban poor, women, youth, NGOs.

⁸ Also see the debates that arose at the Rio+20 conference in relation to the nature of the CFS and its role in developing “assessments” on food security (Müller and Cloiseau, 2015).

PLURAL PERSPECTIVES ON MONITORING

A) A results-based management approach

The evaluation of development activities is now intrinsically linked to the results-based management approach that prevails in aid agencies. Following the design and implementation of projects or programmes, evaluation is intended to measure performance and to identify the necessary steps for improvement. From that perspective, performance is understood as the extent to which a partner or a development intervention “achieves results in accordance with stated goals or plans” (OECD, 2010). Thus, this approach presupposes that objectives have been clearly defined at the outset and that it is possible to identify what works and what does not. To tackle this complex problem, aid management tools are flourishing (see box 1), especially since aid agencies are increasingly asked to demonstrate impact in a context of evidence-based policy and growing demand for accountability of public spending (MacKenzie and Blamey, 2005).

The implementation of such a results-based management approach poses a number of challenges for the CFS. They concern the definition of objectives, a cornerstone of this approach, as well as issues of causality and temporality. Firstly, defining a set of specific and measurable objectives is far from evident given the nature of CFS major decisions and recommendations such as the VGGT. Resulting from long negotiations, these policy guidelines were not designed in a way that allows for a step by step implementation as would be the case of a technical guide or a strategic plan. Secondly, as the whole results-based management approach relies on a cause-effect logic, it faces a well-known attribution problem stemming from the fact that it is not easy to ascribe a causal link between observed changes and specific interventions (OECD, 2010). This problem is particularly acute for the CFS, given the multiple dimensions and scales entailed in the policy changes that this inter-governmental platform is supposed to trigger. Thirdly, temporality also constitutes an issue as long as the focus of evaluation is on measuring performance. Indeed, since the most important CFS agreements have been adopted only recently, some stakeholders claim that it is too early to measure their impact. Finally, and more fundamentally, the difficulty in adopting a technical approach to monitoring and evaluation lies in the fact that the role of CFS is not to design and implement programmes or projects. For this reason, it faces major difficulties when trying to implement a results-based approach, as illustrated by the fact that the CFS has not yet built an elaborated results-based framework with pre-identified performance indicators (CFS, 2014).

Despite these difficulties, the OEWG on Monitoring has come up with a solution by defining CFS

Box 1: Aid management tools

Over the past decades, many management tools were developed to help programme and project managers plan their activities and evaluate their performance. Among the number of methods, we can distinguish “program logical models”, on the one hand, and “theory based evaluation”, on the other. The first group of methods are used to describe a programme, generally through a simple sequence of stages. The logical framework for instance refers to the following stages: activities, outputs, purposes and goals (Gasper, 2000). Likewise, the Kellogg’s Foundation logic model uses similar categories: resources/inputs; activities; outputs; outcomes; and impacts (Kellogg-Foundation, 2004). Projects or programmes are thus fundamentally conceived as converting inputs into outputs in order to achieve higher level objectives. On the other side, “theory-based evaluation” methods are generally considered as more elaborated logical models because they attempt to provide an explanation of how the programme works, under what circumstances, by whom, etc. (Astbury and Leeuw, 2010). Among this second group of methods, the “theory of change approach” has become increasingly popular, particularly among government agencies, the UN, international NGOs and, more generally, the development arena. Initially developed by the Aspen Institute Roundtable on Community Change, this method aims at describing the intended outcomes of an initiative as well as the contextual factors that may impact the implementation of activities and the potential to bring about desired outcomes (Connell and Kubisch, 1998). Compared to logic models and logical frameworks, this approach is intended to give more space to the complexity of social, political and institutional processes. It should also build on a participatory methodology to define the desired outcomes. In sum, we find a great diversity of tools that may vary according to the level of complexity or type of participation. It should be remembered, however, that they all correspond to a results-based management approach whose focus is on measuring performance.

effectiveness as “the extent to which CFS outcomes are achieved, or are expected to be achieved” (CFS, 2014: 4). Taken from the 2014-2015 Multi-Year Programme of Work (MYPoW), the three expected outcomes are: 1) Enhanced global coordination on food security and nutrition questions; 2) Improved policy convergence on key food security and nutrition issues; 3) Strengthened national and regional food security and nutrition actions. Relying on this definition, the OEWG on monitoring has been developing a methodology for the periodic assessments of CFS effectiveness starting by “a baseline survey to assess the current situation as the base of assessing progress” (CFS, 2013b: 2). The methodological framework consists of nine assessment criteria covering the three outcomes and associated with a number of high level questions. In order to overcome the problems of causality and temporality mentioned above, most indicators focus on processes such as: coordination and engagement, participation and inclusiveness, evidence-based policy making, etc. (CFS, 2014). Based on this framework, an opinion survey was carried out during the first quarter of 2015. Future steps might include in-depth case studies at country-level.

CFS stakeholders, including governments, UN agencies and civil society organizations, raised a number of questions on the current methodological approach and its focus on the notion of “CFS effectiveness”. Their comments highlighted at least two broad issues. A first issue is: Who should be monitored? Indeed, in such a framework, the monitoring exercise primarily consists of “CFS looking at itself”, since most assessment criteria address CFS achievements on various dimensions such as decision-making processes, communication strategy or promoting policy convergence. A number of stakeholders consider this approach to be insufficient and argue that, even if all stakeholders must play a role in achieving food security and nutrition, changes ultimately depend on the policies and practices of Member States. They therefore hope for more emphasis to be placed on the country-level. The second question is: to monitor based on what criteria? Some stakeholders consider that giving more weight to processes over outcomes, as proposed in the current methodological framework, is too restrictive. Beyond policy processes such as coordination and engagement, what is at stake, as mentioned by those critiques, is changing situations on the ground, in the lives of people suffering from food and nutrition insecurity. For all these reasons, the development of a broader monitoring framework is still debated within the CFS.

B) A human rights-based approach

From a human rights perspective, monitoring is understood as a mechanism devised to guarantee the application of agreements and hold the parties accountable to it. Compared to the approach described above, this perspective touches on a higher level, a fundamental principle according to

which states have obligations to their citizens, to the people whose rights should be protected. As a result, there is a shift of focus regarding the question: who is monitored? Unlike the concept of “CFS effectiveness”, the focus is on governments that have negotiated and built agreements in the form of CFS decisions and recommendations. Another difference with the previous approach is that the focus is not on measurement. Within UN human rights institutions, despite new attempts to define and measure human rights indicators, more in-depth, qualitative and judicial assessments remain the cornerstones of human rights monitoring (OHCHR, 2012). Similarly, civil society organizations work primarily on documenting concrete cases at the local level, compiling primarily qualitative information, although this information can sometimes be transformed into quantitative data in the form of databases (Seufert and Monsalve Suarez, 2012). Thus the focus is not on measuring performance through indicators but instead on devising ways to hold states accountable, ways that can largely vary in their response to the following question: Who is monitoring? Indeed, they range from forms of monitoring by independent experts to forms of self-monitoring and peer review (see box 2).

Within the CFS, the human rights perspective has made its way as illustrated by the vision of the CFS exposed in the reform document: “The CFS will strive for a world free from hunger where countries implement the voluntary guidelines for the progressive realization of the right to adequate food in the context of national food security” (CFS, 2009). This vision has primarily been deployed within the Global Strategic Framework for Food Security and Nutrition (GSF) which provides an overarching framework with core recommendations for food security and nutrition strategies, policies and actions. Resulting from long negotiations, the GSF is the first global framework adopted by consensus that mainstreams human rights into policies at the global, regional and national levels; thus marking a difference with previous agreements such as the World Food Summits (FAO, 2013). In relation to monitoring and accountability systems, the GSF established a number of principles including the following: “1) They should be human-rights based, with particular reference to the progressive realization of the right to adequate food; 2) They should make it possible for decision-makers to be accountable; 3) They should be participatory and include assessments that involve all stakeholders and beneficiaries, including the most vulnerable” (CFS, 2013a: 47). The GSF also reaffirms the primary responsibility of national governments for the policies and strategies they put in place.

During discussions in the OEWG on monitoring, the human-rights based approach to monitoring was primarily put forward by the Civil Society Mechanism. In opposition to this approach, other stakeholders stress that CFS guidelines are voluntary and therefore not legally binding. Underlying these

Box 2: Human rights monitoring mechanisms

The UN human rights system includes a number of monitoring mechanisms that could be divided into two broad categories: the more general, charter-based, bodies and processes which include the Human Rights Council, Special Procedures and the Universal Periodic Review; and the treaty-based bodies whose mandate is to monitor the States' compliance with their treaty obligations (OHCHR, 2015). There are ten human rights treaty bodies fulfilling this function. The Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, for instance, is made of independent experts that monitor the implementation by the State parties of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. As part of the reform of the Geneva human rights system, a new mechanism was created in 2008: the Universal Periodic Review (UPR). Its mission is to review periodically the human rights situation in all UN member states and to encourage them to fulfil their obligations by asking them to describe their human rights successes and challenges during a "UPR working group". The review is based on three reports: the National Report provided by the state under review; the Compilation prepared by the secretariat of existing treaty bodies reports, special procedures and other UN documents; a Stakeholders Report consisting of a summary of reports submitted by civil society organizations and other stakeholders. Thus, multiple actors take part in the process: most notably the "State under Review" and "Participating governments"; but also national human rights institutions, multilateral organizations, UN representatives, and representatives of civil society organizations. During a three-hour session, the state under review presents its human rights situation and participating governments ask questions and make recommendations that the state can accept or reject. At the following review, the state will have to report on the implementation of the accepted recommendations. Compared to other human rights monitoring mechanisms, UPR involves peers rather than independent experts. Through its focus on constructive dialogue and examples of best practice, it is primarily conceived as a cooperative mechanism (Cowan, 2013).

debates are competing visions that play out in many international arenas, including those involving binding obligations. Indeed, there have always been tensions between national sovereignty and international oversight. Some actors also think in terms of a trade-off between economy and human rights (Cowan, 2013). For all these reasons, the issue of accountability is a sensitive issue in the CFS. Yet a clear accountability framework is needed for CFS decisions and recommendations to translate into changes on the ground (Brun et al., 2014). For the time being, the CFS policy guidelines already constitute important international agreements whose usefulness stems not from their legal nature but from the political resonance they can acquire at country level, depending on how a diversity of stakeholders use them for legal and policy change⁵.



MONITORING AS A SPACE FOR PLURAL VIEWS

The analysis presented in this paper leads to a number of conclusions. First, there is more than one perspective on monitoring. Two broad approaches were identified: the results-based management approach and the human rights-based approach. Each has given rise to different tools and mechanisms. Second, these two approaches provide different answers to a set of crucial questions: 1) who is monitored? Should the focus be on the CFS, states or other actors? 2) To monitor based on what criteria? Should the emphasis be placed on processes rather than outcomes? 3) Who should monitor? Should it be independent consultants, UN agencies, the states themselves, the representatives of civil society organizations and/or the private sector? Thirdly, these two approaches encounter a number of difficulties when applied to the case of the CFS, as its decisions and recommendations are neither technical guides or strategic plans, nor legal agreements. Thus the issue of monitoring is a major challenge for the CFS.

In line with the character of CFS as an inclusive political platform on food security and nutrition, monitoring could be seen as a space for the expression of plural views. Different stakeholders will have different answers to the crucial issue of monitoring which could be phrased in simple terms: does all this make a difference? These actors have their own priorities, expertise and methods for collecting information; such plurality of perspective would disappear if the goal of monitoring were to produce a single performance assessment. As explained above, CFS decisions and recommendations can hardly be reduced to a set of

⁵ For a detailed analysis of how these complex dynamics might play out at country level, see the case of the voluntary guidelines on the Right to Food in Nicaragua described by Muller (2013b).

consensual, and measurable, project objectives – as illustrated by the current lack of an elaborated results-based framework for CFS. More importantly, such exercise would necessarily undermine the democratic potential of this platform by restraining the field of political discussion and debate (Gasper, 2000; Mouffe, 2005; Müller, 2013a; Thévenot, 2010). If monitoring is to be considered as a space for the expression of plural views, it would imply that a range of actors would participate in the monitoring exercise by producing their independent assessments. These could take the form of reports or oral presentations during monitoring events. The challenge therefore lies in reaching a consensus on a global framework - a set of procedures - that allows for non-consensual views to be expressed, thus re-affirming the spirit of inclusiveness of CFS.

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