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Alana Stein
alanastein1@gmail.com

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Power Play at the United Nations: The Effects of Added Stakeholders in the Committee on World Food Security

ALANA STEIN

Advisor: Dr. Jon Shefner

How have the recent reforms of the United Nations' Committee on World Food Security changed the committee's division of power? The reforms have created an important and significant shift in the dissemination of power within the Committee on World Food Security by allowing previously underrepresented stakeholders to have a much more prominent and influential role in the committee. This paper analyzes the shift in power through the perspectives of Karl Marx, Max Weber, and John Gaventa and evaluates grievances against the reforms by various sectors. The reforms have created a new space for class conflict to occur by adding groups with opposing interests to the committee. The reforms have also given a voice to groups who were previously unheard within the committee by granting them new means of participation while maintaining the bureaucratic structure of the organization. The reforms of the Committee on World Food Security were able to radically change the power dynamics of the committee, giving it a more comprehensive viewpoint on food security and providing the committee with greater clout due to its inclusion of a variety of diverse stakeholders.

The author can be reached at alanastein1@gmail.com.



Introduction

Over time, bureaucratic organizations often reform themselves. However, the reforms are not always effective at achieving their goals. This can be due to resistance to the reforms either internally or externally or due to poor implementation of the reforms. This paper examines how the 2009 reforms of the Committee on World Food Security affected the dissemination of power within the committee. The committee was reformed to bring a diverse array of stakeholders who focus on food security issues into the committee's discussions. This paper compares the reformed structure of the Committee on World Food Security to other entities of the United Nations and examines the reforms through the theoretical frameworks of Karl Marx, Max Weber, and John Gaventa.

History of the Committee on World Food Security

The Committee on World Food Security is central to the United Nations' efforts to create global food security. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the Committee on World Food Security is a part of the FAO of the United Nations, which reports to the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations (n.d.). The Committee on World Food Security (CFS) was established in 1974 (FAO, n.d.). The CFS is a body of the United Nations whose purpose is to review and follow-up on policies pertaining to the production of food and access to food (FAO, n.d.).

The CFS creates a report at each session, which reflects the recommendations and decisions of the committee (FAO, 2013). According to the FAO's Basic Texts (2013), the CFS meets every two years unless a special session is called. The CFS is unique due to its inclusive structure; the CFS is formed by not only member states but by a variety of stakeholders. This inclusive membership is shown in the Basic Texts of the organization, which state:

As a central component of the evolving Global Partnership for Agriculture, Food Security and Nutrition, the Committee shall 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. (FAO, 2013, p. 57)

Although this inclusive structure is now embedded into the framework of the CFS, the inclusion of non-governmental stakeholders is quite novel. Stakeholders only began to be included following the great CFS reforms of 2009 (FAO, 2013). The CFS now envisions itself as the most inclusive international and intergovernmental stage for debates on food security and nutrition (FAO, n.d.).

Reforms of the Committee on World Food Security

The food price spikes of 2007, coupled with the global economic recession, led to an increased focus on eliminating structural poverty and hunger worldwide (CFS, 2009). Due to this increased focus, the CFS underwent a vast reformation. The significant reforms included redefining the vision and roles of the CFS, adding a High Level Panel of Experts, and changing the composition of participation within the CFS (CFS, 2009).

To guide its new central focus, the CFS redefined the concept of food security, stating that:

Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life. The four pillars of food security are availability, access, utilization and stability. The nutritional dimension is integral to the concept of food security and to the work of CFS. (CFS, 2009, p. 1)

This new conception correlates well with the committee's desire to be central to global partnerships on food security and nutrition. Based on the first phase of the new reforms, the CFS plans to organize discussion and collaborative action at a global level between governments, international organizations, NGOs, the private sector, and other relevant stakeholders, paying special attention to the different needs of countries (CFS, 2009). They also hope to facilitate the convergence of policies and provide support and advice at the request of a country or region (CFS, 2009). The second phase of reforms calls for the CFS to provide coordination at national and regional levels as opposed to just the global level, to promote accountability for the implementation of programs and facilitate the distribution of best practices, and to create a Global Strategic Framework for food security and nutrition, which will improve coordination and synchronization (CFS, 2009).

Adhering to its goal to include more diverse perspectives in dialogue on food security and nutrition, the CFS included the creation of a High Level Panel of Experts (HLPE) in its 2009 reforms (CFS, 2009). The HLPE has a steering committee of ten to fifteen internationally renowned experts in various fields related to food security and nutrition (CFS, 2009). In addition to the steering committee, the HLPE also includes ad hoc project teams, which create a broader network of experts that can focus on specific issues (CFS, 2009). The purpose of the HLPE is to assess and analyze the state of food security and nutrition throughout the world as well as the factors that contribute to it, to offer advice founded on scientific evidence and research in response to specific problems, to identify issues of importance, and to help the CFS prioritize its actions (CFS, 2009). The creation of the HLPE vastly increases the depth of participants in the CFS by bringing experts into the committee's discourse. However, the inclusion of diverse entities in the CFS does not end with the HLPE.

According to Duncan and Barling (2012), one of the most notable components of the 2009 CFS reforms is the inclusion of a variety of stakeholders in order to broaden the participation of civil society organizations in international debates concerning food security and nutrition. This inclusion stems from a dramatic shift in the composition of entities participating in the CFS. In accordance with the 2009 CFS reform, affiliated entities can be members, participants, or observers. Membership to the CFS is open to members of the FAO, World Food Programme, and International Fund for Agricultural Development and member States of the United Nations (CFS, 2009). Member states are fully part of the CFS and are encouraged to include representation of multi-stakeholder national entities involved in food security and nutrition within their delegations (CFS, 2009). Members have the right to intervene in both committee and breakout discussions, to submit, present, and approve meeting documents and formal proposals, and to interact with the CFS Bureau between sessions (CFS, 2009). Only members are allowed to vote and make decisions, as well as draft the final report of CFS plenary sessions (CFS, 2009). Participants can be representatives of United Nations bodies with ties to work in food security, nutrition and the right to food, civil society and non-governmental organizations whose work relates to food security and nutrition, international agriculture research groups, international and regional financial institutions, and representatives of the private sector and private philanthropic groups (CFS, 2009). Participants have the right to intervene in both committee and breakout discussions and to contribute to and submit meeting documents and formal proposals (CFS, 2009). Furthermore, they commit to interacting with the CFS Bureau through the Advisory Group between sessions (CFS, 2009). Observers are

other organizations interested in the CFS, who are invited by either the committee or its Bureau to observe the entire session or specific items on the agenda; organizations can also apply to the committee for observer status if they are not invited (CFS, 2009). The bureau—with assistance from the civil society organization and non-profit organization coordinating mechanisms—determines the number of seats allocated to participants and observers with assistance from the civil society organization and non-profit organization coordinating mechanisms (CFS, 2009). Quotas are assigned in order to create equal representation of organizations by geographical region and type of organization (CFS, 2009).

These reforms dramatically changed the representation of various entities within the CFS. Through these reforms, scholars and non-governmental organizations are able to have much more involvement in the CFS. By redefining the focus of the committee, creating the HLPE, and altering the manner in which groups can contribute to the CFS, the committee has radically changed the power dynamics within the CFS. The remainder of this paper will explore how these changes have affected the distribution of power within the CFS.

Format of Other United Nations Committees

The composition of the CFS is quite different from other United Nations committees, including those within the FAO as well as in other parts of the United Nations. According to the Basic Texts of the FAO (2013), the CFS is the only committee of the FAO that grants so much power to groups that do not represent a country. The Council of FAO, Programme Committee, Finance Committee, and Committee on Constitutional and Legal Matters only allow the participation of members (FAO, 2013). The Committee on Commodity Problems, Committee on Fisheries, Committee on Forestry, and Committee on Agriculture allow for international organizations and non-member states to observe the proceedings with permission; these committees can also form subsidiary groups that include non-member nations (FAO, 2013). While some of these committees do allow minimal participation of non-members as observers, none of these committees give any substantial power in debates to non-member entities. In addition, these committees have the right to hold their meetings in private, which allows them the ability to cut off the involvement of non-members from debates almost completely.

Representation on other committees of the United Nations is much less open than the CFS. The United Nations Security Council is only composed of 15 member countries, of which five are permanent member countries and ten are rotating member countries (United Nations Security Council, n.d.). The United Nations General Assembly is open to all member nations of the United Nations (United Nations, 2007). The General Assembly has several committees within it, including the Disarmament and National Security Committee, Special Political and Decolonization Committee, Economic, and Financial Committee, and Social, Humanitarian, and Cultural Committee (United Nations, 2007). Membership in each of these committees is open to United Nations member nations (United Nations, 2007). None of these committees allows broad participation of non-governmental actors, as is witnessed in the CFS.

According to the United Nations' website, Civil Society, which is defined as the third sector of society in addition to government and business, is represented in the United Nations through consultative status to the Economic and Social Council or through association with the United Nations Department of Information ("Civil Society", n.d.). The United Nations Business Action Hub (n.d.) encourages businesses to get involved with the United Nations' projects; however, it does not mention opportunities to participate in debates with committees. In general, participation in other United Nations committees is much less diverse than what is allowed in the CFS following the reforms of 2009. Not all committees even permit all member states to participate, much less the civil society and private sector mechanisms that are allowed to participate in the CFS. The recent

reforms of the CFS created a unique compilation of various views that are not typically represented on United Nations committees.

Theories of Power

The 2009 reforms of the CFS created a shift in the distribution of power within the committee. The new power structure is not only distinct from the former structure of the CFS but also from other committees of the United Nations. The shift in power will be analyzed from the perspectives of Karl Marx, Max Weber, and John Gaventa in order to highlight different aspects of the changes.

Karl Marx

Marx argues that the disparity between social classes creates class conflict (Marx & Engels, 1978). From a Marxist perspective, the class conflict arising from the food price spikes and the accompanying global recession in 2007 forced the CFS reforms. The CFS reforms of 2009 have the potential to create greater equality in the committee between different stakeholders involved in creating world food security or to further empower capitalist interests. Prior to the reforms, the CFS was a domain controlled by the decisions and debates of member nations. Since membership to the United Nations requires affirmative votes from 9 of the 15 members of the Security Council with no opposition from permanent members (China, France, the Russian Federation, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and the United States of America,) membership to the United Nations requires approval from wealthier countries ("Member States", n.d.). These countries must agree to the UN Charter and pay dues; however, the dues are based on a country's means to pay ("Member States", n.d.). 193 countries are member nations of the United Nations, so the barrier of membership is not a significant problem for most countries ("Main Organs", n.d.). While the member nations controlled the committee prior to reforms, they do not control all of the means necessary to end food insecurity. International financial institutions, including the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, control much of the capital necessary to create food security but were not represented on the CFS. The addition of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund to the CFS gives capitalist interests much more direct control over food security issues and debates within the CFS. Civil Society Organizations represent much of the labor in the food system as well as the people who are suffering from food insecurity, yet these organizations were not previously represented in the CFS either. Through civil society organizations, labor has also gained a stronger voice within the CFS. Following the 2009 reforms, the Civil Society Mechanism (CSM) was established as a means for civil society organizations to collectivize themselves ("About Us", n.d.). The CSM is a grassroots organization that is open to all civil society organizations, giving priority to organizations and movements of the people who are most affected by food insecurity ("About Us", n.d.). Since civil society organizations are allowed to collectivize, their representation is diverse and focuses on the people who are suffering from food insecurity. Adding the CSM to the CFS has increased the representation of the proletariat; however, this increased representation has also been accompanied by increased representation of financial institutions that control capital. While the new CFS did give more power to civil society organizations than previously existed, the accompanying addition of financial institutions and the private sector created a new arena for class conflict to unfold.

Max Weber

According to Weber (2013), legitimate domination needs to be founded in one of three types of authority: rational, traditional, or charismatic. Rational authority, also considered legal authority, is based upon order established through legal means (Weber, 2013). Those that rise to

power through rational authority do so under a prescribed set of rules (Weber, 2013). Traditional authority rests in the belief of the sanctity of traditions and that those who hold traditional authority do so legitimately (Weber, 2013). Charismatic authority is much more individual and is based in the heroism, sanctity, or character of a person (Weber, 2013). Authority in the CFS is primarily distributed on a legal-rational basis. As a bureaucratic organization, the CFS has a vast structure of rules governing the organization. Based on Weber's framework of authority, reforming the rules was necessary to change the dynamic of organizations holding authority within the committee. However, the member states maintained a position of greater authority in spite of the reforms. According to Weber's theory, this results from the traditional authority that the member states hold because they have been in power since the inception of the CFS.

John Gaventa

According to Gaventa (1980), there are three dimensions of power. The one-dimensional approach to power is seen through overt conflict, subsequent policy, laws, and regulations (Gaventa, 1980). The two-dimensional approach to power adds that institutional processes can limit the political process (Gaventa, 1980). This two-dimensional approach highlights the importance of inaction and establishes that inaction does not mean consent (Gaventa, 1980). The three-dimensional approach to power adds onto the previous approaches by stating that sometimes people and groups are able to exercise power by influencing and determining the wants of the less powerful to be contrary to their real interests (Gaventa, 1980). Within this third dimension of power, power is often acquired through mechanisms, such as controlling what questions are asked or framing the possible options that are available to answer questions (Gaventa, 1980). The one-dimensional approach to power is exhibited through the proposals put forward by the CFS. Before becoming final, these proposals are debated within the committee, and in theory, the decisions represent the global views surrounding the issue. However, this singular dimension does not explain the stakeholders not represented prior to the reforms of 2009. In order for additional stakeholders to be represented, the structure of the committee had to change because many entities did not fit within the institutional framework. Despite the significant reforms, all entities are not represented equally, so there is still power inequity at the second dimension. The third dimension of power is more difficult to see within the CFS because the reforms are still quite new. At this point, it is hard to tell if stakeholders have accepted having a lesser position of power, which they believe is the best deal they will receive, or if these reforms are a stepping-stone to greater institutional change within the CFS. However, the third dimension of power is noticeable when comparing the CFS to other United Nations organizations. The sparse representation of non-governmental stakeholders in other United Nations committees had been accepted. The recent reforms have shed light on the lack of diverse representation in other committees of the United Nations. For example, much debate surrounds whether to expand membership of the United Nations Security Council, but this dialogue focuses only on adding more member states; the inclusion of non-governmental organizations is not even mentioned. In order for the CFS to include more stakeholders, the committee had to consider whether the values that the committee had held were important, and in the process of making reforms, the CFS ended up redefining its values in order to include greater representation. However, considering the implications of these reforms in practice rather than just from a theoretical perspective is important.

Outcomes of Reforms

Nora McKeon (n.d.) claims that the CFS reforms of 2009 were a victory for civil society against the G8. Indeed, the CFS reforms were a very radical shift for a committee of the United Nations to make. According to Brem-Wilson (2010), such radical changes were necessary for the functioning of the CFS, as many considered the committee inconsequential in addressing food

security prior to 2009. These opinions highlight the importance of this dramatic shift in the CFS. However, Brem-Wilson (2010) is quick to point out that the reforms alone do not guarantee a more functional CFS; the follow through, especially by civil society organizations, is crucial to creating a better CFS. Brem-Wilson proposes two outcomes of the reforms: the reforms create a “dynamic, inclusive, action-oriented authoritative body” or they create a “confused and irrelevant body.” (2010, p. 28-29) Brem-Wilson (2010) claims that three factors are essential to deciding which outcome occurs: capacity, inclusivity, and political relevance. Six years after the establishment of the reforms, we are now beginning to see the direction that the CFS has taken.

According to a 2014 external evaluation of the CSM by Mulvaney and Schiavoni, the CFS has been successful in creating an inclusive platform for civil society organizations and the people who face problems of food insecurity. Mulvaney and Schiavoni (2014) claim that the CSM has been able to actively participate in plenary sessions, negotiations, and roundtables on equal footing as other members and participants. The CSM has even participated in the Advisory Group of the CFS Bureau (Mulvaney & Schiavoni, 2014). This participation has created tangible outcomes for the CSM (Mulvaney & Schiavoni, 2014). Despite the remarkable success that the CSM has witnessed according to Mulvaney and Schiavoni (2014), they claim that improvements can be made to create an even more efficient and successful collaboration. They claim that although the CSM has been able to refocus the attention of the CFS on the root causes of hunger, small-holder farmers, and the Right to Food, the leadership within the Working Groups of the CSM needs to be stronger (Mulvaney & Schiavoni, 2014). They have also found that the CSM has greater success with proactive approaches as opposed to reactive approaches (Mulvaney & Schiavoni, 2014). Duncan and Barling (2012) also claim that the CSM has struggled, focusing too much on structure, thus creating a bureaucracy that is difficult to navigate. While room for improvement still exists, the CFS reforms have clearly been beneficial to giving a voice to previously unheard values from the point of view of Mulvaney & Schiavoni. In accordance with Gaventa’s third dimension of power, by taking into account the voice and influence that the CFS reforms of 2009 have given to previously unheard values, the reforms have made a great stride towards more equitable power distribution. From a Marxist perspective, this would indicate that in this arena of class struggle, labor has been somewhat successful.

The International Agri-Food Network (IAFN) is responsible for coordinating the Private Sector Mechanism at the CFS (“Private Sector Mechanism”, n.d.). Similar to the CSM, the IAFN, who represents farmers, input providers, cooperatives, processors, small and medium enterprises and transnational corporations, also has a position on the CFS Advisory Group (“Private Sector Mechanism”, n.d.). One of the key functions of the IAFN is to “define and deliver the private sectors’ commitment to addressing global poverty and food security.” (“About the International”, n.d.) Five principles have emerged as prominent concerns for the private sector: to make agriculture central to the push for development, to support entrepreneurship and private enterprise, to create an environment conducive to adding value to agriculture, to advance research and development services, and to utilize partnerships (“About the International”, n.d.). While these goals are not in direct opposition to the goals of the CSM, they do not match up either, which creates a difference in priorities. From a Marxist perspective, this is considered an example of class conflict, as the IAFN is made up of the owners of production while the CSM better represents labor. According to “Strengthening CFS Reform Outcomes” (n.d.), the engagement of the private sector has strengthened over time since the reforms. However, the private sector does not seem to be as satisfied with the outcome of the reforms as the civil society sector. The private sector seeks to increase its power within the CFS and diminish the power of civil society by calling for the CFS: to create an Implementation Work Group that would allow businesses to review documents between the negotiation stage and final approval at the plenary meeting, to limit the number of times that non-state actors can intervene on an issue, to provide a cut-off after which new issues cannot be added to a document, to add more private sector seats to the CFS Advisory Group so that they are equal to the seats of the CSM, to increase participation from the science and technology sector,

and to use CFS time and funds in a more efficient manner (“Strengthening CFS Reform Outcomes”, n.d.). These grievances suggest that the private sector does not feel that it holds enough power relative to the civil society sector in the CFS. From a Marxist perspective, this is an example of how class conflict is playing out within the CFS. A group that is generally considered to be wealthy and powerful is upset about the voices of the proletariat being heard, which is also consistent with Gaventa’s third dimension of power because they seek to limit what issues are discussed and who discusses them. The private sector also calls for the bureaucracy of the CFS to be strengthened through increased rules governing the efficiency of proceedings. These proposed rules suggest that the private sector values a more efficient system as opposed to a more inclusive system. From Weber’s perspective, they are using the concept of efficiency to legitimate gaining more control of the decision making process. Both the civil society sector and the private sector have witnessed a radical shift towards greater involvement in the CFS. However, their level of satisfaction with the reforms is not the same.

Conclusions

The CFS, once a nearly irrelevant organization, has made significant reforms to include other United Nations agencies, the civil society sector, and the private sector in its proceedings by allowing them to participate in plenary meetings and the CFS Advisory group, as well as establishing the High Level Panel of Experts through which they can communicate. In addition to changing the composition of participation within the CFS, the committee redefined its values and goals in order to focus on addressing the root causes of hunger and malnutrition. These reforms provide a stark contrast to the former CFS, as well as other committees of the FAO and United Nations. In contrast with the CFS’s acceptance of civil society organizations, financial institutions, and private businesses participating in its discussions in addition to member states, several other committees do not even allow all member states of the United Nations to participate. These reforms created a significant shift in the dissemination of power within the CFS. From a Marxist perspective, a new arena for class conflict was created, since an increased capitalist perspective was incorporated by institutions, such as the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and Private Sector Mechanism, at the same time that the perspective of labor was heightened by the inclusion of the CSM, which houses a range of non profit organizations and grassroots social movements. Thus far, the labor perspective seems to be having more influence than the capitalist perspective, at least insofar as they object less to the distribution of power. However, this could be related to Gaventa’s theory of power in that they do not fully realize how oppressed their position has been. While many groups whose voices were previously unheard have made great progress in gaining greater representation in the CFS, these groups have still not reached parity of influence with member states by having a vote. This disparity is likely to continue due to the bureaucratic structure of the United Nations, and its original establishment as an institution run by member-states. The legal-rational authority endowed to the member-states since the inception of the organization will be very difficult to overturn. Although not perfect, the 2009 reforms of the CFS have been successful in creating a more inclusive, authoritative body to govern the global discourse surrounding food security as Brem-Wilson suggested was possible. At this point, we must consider whether the inclusive reforms of the CFS should be mimicked in other FAO committees. Should similar reforms take place in other organizations of the United Nations? Are there some issues that are relevant only to nation-states? Where would the United Nations and international community benefit from increased dialogue between governments, the civil society sector, and the private sector?

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