

The G20 and Food Security: a Mismatch in Global Governance?

Jennifer Clapp

University of Waterloo

Sophia Murphy

Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, Minneapolis

Abstract

When the G20 took up food security in 2010, many were optimistic that it could bring about positive change by addressing structural problems in commodity markets that were contributing to high and volatile food prices and exacerbating hunger. Its members could tighten the regulation of agricultural commodity futures markets, support multilateral trade rules that would better reflect both importer and exporter needs, end renewable fuel targets that diverted land to biofuels production, and coordinate food reserves. In this article, we argue that although the G20 took on food security as a focus area, it missed an important opportunity and has shown that it is not the most appropriate forum for food security policy. Instead of tackling the structural economic dimensions of food security, the G20 chose to promote smoothing and coping measures within the current global economic framework. By shifting the focus away from structural issues, the G20 has had a chilling effect on policy debates in other global food security forums, especially the UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS). In addition, the G20 excludes the voices of the least developed countries and civil society, and lacks the expertise and capacity to implement its recommendations.

Policy Implications

- The G20 has failed to tackle the structural economic dimensions of food insecurity and is therefore not the most appropriate governance body for developing food security policy.
- Other forums, such as the UN Committee on World Food Security, have the mandate to coordinate global food security policy and should be supported to fulfill that mandate.
- The G20 should limit its role in the food security arena to supporting organizations that are specifically focused on food security, particularly where it is asked to undertake regulatory reforms in the areas of agricultural trade, biofuels and financial speculation.

When the G20 took up food security as a major cause in 2011, many were optimistic that it could bring about positive change on this important policy issue. The G20 comprises the world's 20 leading economies and includes the world's biggest agricultural producers and exporters. This suggested to observers that it could provide a unique forum in which to address the various economic dimensions of the food crisis, which had sparked food price volatility and increased the already significant disparities among people dependent on international markets for their access to food. The G20 could shape financial policy in the world's major countries and better regulate agricultural commodity speculation. It could adopt trade policies that recognized the vulnerability of poor net-food-importing countries, and support multilateral trade rules that would stop trade-distorting subsidies

and renewable fuel targets, which have been associated with the shift in certain crops from food to fuel uses. As major agricultural exporters, the G20 could also consider how to coordinate food held in exporting countries to help smooth prices and lessen risks for low-income food-deficit countries, which are especially vulnerable to high and volatile grain prices.

Economic policy reforms along the lines outlined above – reforms that aim to reshape the structural and regulatory framework within which global food and agriculture markets operate – could make a substantial contribution in addressing the distributional aspects of the food crisis. Indeed, because world food production did not drop dramatically in the period of turmoil on world food markets that occurred after 2007, supply issues cannot credibly be seen as an important driver of volatility

during the crisis. Many analysts and commentators pointed instead to economic policy changes that they believe are paramount to improving global food security. The G20 countries are the most important of the countries that must make these kinds of structural economic policy changes because of their weight in the global economy and because of the many distortions some of the G20 members' existing policies create in international markets. These distortions range from biofuel subsidies, to the undisciplined use of export bans, to excessive agricultural subsidies, to the failure to adequately regulate commodity futures exchanges. And the G20 countries should have an interest in making policy changes to address these distortions, given that they are home to around half of the world's hungry people.

Despite their unique position and the strong incentives, the G20's performance on food security issues has been a disappointment. The group has shied away from tackling the broader structural economic dimensions of the food crisis with bold regulatory reforms, and instead has pressed for initiatives that smooth markets by increasing food production and encouraging information flows, and that create mechanisms to cope with volatility such as assistance and risk management. However, most of the research into the key causes of food price volatility – including that from respected international organizations – emphasized the role of economic policies in precipitating the turmoil in world food markets. In other words, addressing the crisis by smoothing and coping with price volatility within the existing system would not tackle the structural causes of the problem.

In this article, we advance three arguments. First, we argue that the G20 missed an important opportunity with respect to food security. We show that it has been highly selective in the policy direction it supports, focusing narrowly on production, information and mechanisms to cope with price volatility rather than the broader economic and regulatory measures that affect food distribution. By failing to address structural issues, the G20 food security agenda does not do much to reduce the international sources of volatility or the vulnerabilities brought on by trade imbalances in the global system for the world's poorest countries.

Second, we make the case that the G20's reframing of the food security debate away from structural issues has in turn had a chilling effect on the policy debates in other global food security governance forums. This effect is illustrated by the heavy influence of the G20's food security agenda on the deliberations of the UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS).

Third, we argue that there are good reasons to take food security issues off the G20's agenda. It lacks the kind of legitimacy of UN-based food security organizations such as the CFS because it does not include the participation of small, vulnerable developing countries or

the voices of civil society. Moreover, the G20 is using the resources of the multilateral system to do its research and to develop initial policy recommendations, which in turn risks undermining the independent input of international organizations that have been working on food security issues for decades.

Food security and the G20

The G20 first emerged as a meeting place for finance ministers in the late 1990s. The first G20 heads of state summit was held in 2008, hot on the heels of the global financial crisis. Its creation reflected changes in the balance of power among global economies and the emergence of Brazil, Russia, India and China as new powers in international trade and finance. Countries such as Argentina and Indonesia are also members. The G20 is not a formal arrangement and is too new to have much of a track record. To date, more has been said than done. Yet the G20 is an authoritative voice in international policy, commanding instant respect because of the countries involved and their importance for the global economy (see Cooper, 2010).

When the G20 put food security on its agenda – something it did from late 2010 when France began to plan for its year as the host country – it seemed possible to hope for movement on the structural issues that contribute to high and volatile food prices in international markets. The G20 includes the major agricultural exporters, houses the headquarters of the biggest commodity traders and commodity exchanges, and includes the big biofuels producers as well, including the governments that have used mandates and subsidies to encourage biofuel production and use (most notably the US and the EU). Because of their dominant role in the markets, domestic reforms within the group, as well as coordinated reforms among them, could improve the stability and reliability of international markets for all. This goal is ultimately in the G20's own interests (Birdsall and Kharas, 2011).

Persistent volatility on international agricultural commodity markets also drove the G20 agenda. France extended that preoccupation to include a look at agricultural commodity markets as well.¹ The food price crisis of 2007–08 had already triggered a flurry of activity and analysis at the multilateral level (e.g. OECD, 2008; World Bank, 2008; United Nations High Level Task Force on the Global Food Security Crisis (UNHLTF), 2008; IMF, 2008; FAO, 2008). Trade failed to provide countries with the food they needed at affordable prices, and arguments grew heated over the effects of vastly larger sums of speculative capital and new financial instruments on commodity futures exchanges. The implications of the change in policy that eliminated public stocks in most importing and exporting countries alike proved dramatic. Agricultural prices are to a large extent set by

expectations rather than actual supply (food is not harvested every day, but rather at certain times of the year). With no stocks on hand, unpredictable factors (notably the weather) became all-important and many countries started panic buying, which encouraged some private traders to hoard. The combined effect drove prices much higher than supply and demand required.

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon created the High Level Task Force on Global Food Security (HLTF) in April 2008. By then, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the World Bank were already delivering programs tailored for small-scale producers to help increase yields with input packages (seeds and fertilizer). The HLTF was one of the first responses to the crisis at the multilateral level. It was a call for coordinated action among the many UN agencies and programs, as well as with the Bretton Woods Institutions and the World Trade Organization (WTO). The HLTF produced the Comprehensive Framework for Action (CFA) in a matter of months in 2008. This program was further elaborated in a second iteration in 2010, for which broader consultations were held, including with civil society (United Nations High Level Task Force on the Global Food Security Crisis (UNHLTF), 2008, 2010). The HLTF response was structured around short- and longer-term responses. The former included emergency measures such as increased food aid as well as a call for greater agricultural investment. The latter included not only measures to increase productivity but also suggestions for reforms to address deeper structural issues at the international level such as agricultural trade policy, commodity speculation and biofuels.

Successive meetings – in Madrid in January 2009 and in Rome in November 2009 – continued the high-level UN dialogue on the food crisis. That year, too, the CFS underwent a major reform: it became the pre-eminent place in the UN system for policy discussions on food security, including at the national, regional and multilateral levels (McKeon, 2011; Wise and Murphy, 2011).

By 2010, it was clear that volatility was persisting in international markets, breaking the post-Second World War pattern of short-lived price spikes interrupting the long-term underlying trend of decreasing prices for agricultural commodities. Analysis of the 2007–08 price crisis benefited from more evidence from more sources, and more debate on the relative importance of different contributing causes, including structural problems with international commodity markets (Headey and Fan, 2008; Clapp and Cohen, 2009; Abbot et al., 2011). The implications of higher and more volatile prices in international markets for low-income net-food-deficit countries, and for people living in poverty, also came into sharper focus (e.g. Heltberg et al., 2012).

As host of the G20, France organized the first gathering of G20 agriculture ministers in Paris in June 2011. In preparation for that meeting, ten intergovernmental agencies

were asked to prepare a background report on food price volatility in international markets, referred to here as the international organization (IO) report (FAO et al., 2011).²

The IO report made ten key recommendations, which can be grouped into three broad categories (although the report itself did not categorize the recommendations as such): *smoothing measures* that sought to calm markets so as to avert further price volatility and crisis; *coping mechanisms* that sought to mitigate the damage from price volatility; and *structural reforms* that sought to effect change in the rules and norms governing markets in a way that would reduce both volatility itself and vulnerability to volatility for the world's poorest countries.

The IO report's recommendations were as follows:

Smoothing measures

- increase agricultural productivity
- institute an agricultural market transparency and information system

Coping mechanisms:

- exempt food aid from export restrictions
- consider a pilot project for emergency food reserves
- promote risk management tools – weather insurance, hedging, etc
- make financing available to help the poorest countries maintain imports in times of price volatility
- strengthen policy coordination across international organizations in the face of crisis

Structural/regulatory reforms:

- coordinate regulation of commodity futures markets
- rebalance global trade policies – reduce agricultural subsidies in rich countries and provide more policy space for poor countries
- remove subsidies/mandates for biofuels

Although it did not appear as a concrete recommendation, the IO report included a discussion of the idea of developing policy and rules to coordinate international grain reserves. Such a measure would be structural in nature, by creating new economic norms around global grain holdings, but it could also serve to smooth markets and to help the world's poorest countries to cope with volatility (Murphy, 2012; McCreary, 2011).

Narrowing of the G20 food security agenda

As an international body established primarily for coordinating economic policy among the world's leading economies, the G20 seemed uniquely placed to contribute to greater global food security by focusing on structural measures that would require reforms to its own members' economic policies: to re-regulate financial markets to stem speculation in agricultural commodity markets;

to improve international trade policies, including reducing agricultural subsidies in the industrialized countries, strengthening rules on export restrictions and ensuring proper safeguards for food-importing developing countries; and to repeal biofuel policies that are trade-distorting and provide incentives to divert grains from food to fuel uses. Each of these dimensions has been identified in analyses of the food crisis as being at least partly to blame for both food price volatility and the vulnerability to price shocks in the world's poorest countries (Headey and Fan, 2008; Mittal, 2009; Clapp, 2009; UNHLP, 2008). The G20 also includes the governments that could implement rules for coordinating grain reserves among the major exporting countries as a way to provide stability in global grain markets.

Although it had the capacity to push for coordinated economic regulatory reforms among its own membership, the G20 put most of its weight behind the smoothing and coping measures that were outlined in the IO report. These measures are largely 'add-ons' to the existing regulatory framework that governs the world food economy rather than an attempt to restructure it in a way that would better protect developing countries from vulnerability to price shocks and volatility in international markets. An early indication of the narrowing of the agenda came with the G20 agriculture ministers' final communiqué from their meeting in June 2011. The ministers agreed to an Action Plan on Food Price Volatility and Agriculture (G20 Agriculture Ministers, 2011). This plan covered five areas for action, and chose somewhat selectively from the recommendations of the IO document.

The first priority in the Action Plan was to take measures to increase agricultural productivity in developing countries. This was largely a smoothing mechanism, aimed at answering supply shocks caused by poor harvests. Many developing countries face repeated supply shocks, which are smaller but much more frequent than the shocks on international markets (Clay et al., 2011). The plan promised to strengthen agricultural research and innovation through the G20 governments' own national agricultural research systems as well as international research bodies such as the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR). The plan also welcomed the work of the FAO on capacity building for agricultural research in developing countries. It encouraged more public and private investment in the agricultural sector, especially promoting public-private partnerships. Although it promoted the idea of increased investment, the G20 was careful not to commit any new funding, and instead pressed the need for enhanced private-sector investment to fill the funding gap.

The second area the agriculture ministers highlighted was also a market-smoothing measure: they called for more market information and greater market transparency. The G20 ministers announced the launch of the

Agricultural Market Information System (AMIS), a proposal that became the centerpiece of the Action Plan. The idea behind AMIS is to gather and disseminate more information on physical commodity production and market transactions in the hope that it will help to reduce market uncertainty, and contribute to better functioning, less volatile international food markets. AMIS, housed at the FAO, is a collaborative effort among nine international organizations (FAO, 2011). There was (and remains) no clarity on how AMIS would work with the private sector, particularly the four global grain traders that control an estimated 75 per cent or more of the international cereal trade (ADM, Bunge, Cargill and Louise Dreyfus). With public stocks now eliminated in most countries, it is these traders that hold such stocks as exist and that know the most about what grain will be available when and from where (Murphy et al., 2012).

The G20 plan also called for measures to help cope with volatility that might arise despite efforts to avert it. The plan called for stronger policy coordination on food security issues within the UN system, and established a 'Rapid Response Forum' made up of senior officials from the major producing, importing and exporting countries – within the framework of AMIS. The aim of this forum is to assess the information coming out of AMIS and to take early action to prevent future food crises, and to coordinate policy at the global level with the CFS (see Annex 4 of the Action Plan). The Forum held its first meeting in April 2012, in Mexico. There they formalized the relationship between the Forum and both the secretariat and the Bureau of the CFS. The ministers also agreed to remove any export restrictions on food purchased for humanitarian purposes – a measure to ensure that food assistance agencies such as the World Food Program (WFP) would face fewer difficulties in securing food for assistance in the case of emergencies.

Another coping measure was the endorsement of market-based risk management strategies at the farm level and safety nets for the most vulnerable populations. The risk management tools promoted in the document range from weather index insurance and bank loans to hedging on commodity markets, including by developing country governments and food assistance agencies. It also endorsed a pilot project for emergency food reserves, which is now known as PREPARE. The WFP was asked simultaneously to oversee the preparation of a feasibility study and to create a pilot project for a regional emergency reserve, which was endorsed at the heads of state summit in Cannes in November 2011.

The only structural measure endorsed by the G20 agriculture ministers was the need for appropriate financial market regulation. They welcomed the work of the International Organization of Securities Commissions (IOSCO), which was at the time working on a set of recommendations for the G20 on financial regulation. But a decision

on financial regulation was not something that the agriculture ministers could formally agree upon, as it was not part of their portfolio. Instead, they encouraged the G20 finance ministers and Central Bank governors to 'take the appropriate decisions for a better regulation and supervision of agricultural financial markets' (G20 Agriculture Ministers, 2011, p. 14).

The agriculture ministers failed to take seriously two of the major structural issues identified in the IO report: the unbalanced trading system and biofuel policies in the G20 countries. Although the document noted the need for a conclusion to the Doha Round at the WTO, the document was vague on the key issues of concern for developing countries with respect to the Agreement on Agriculture. And while the ministers did agree to exempt humanitarian food assistance from export restrictions, this was not part of the Doha mandate, and eventually failed to be adopted by the WTO at the December 2011 ministerial meeting (ICTSD, 2011). Biofuels were only mentioned in the Action Plan as something that required further study and no concrete action was recommended, despite the growing weight of evidence that biofuels demand was a significant factor in high and volatile prices (Abbott et al, 2011). A third structural issue, the lack of stocks to underpin major international grain markets – an issue discussed in the IO report but that failed to secure any recommended action – remained ignored and unaddressed by the G20.

The agriculture ministers' failure to address the big structural economic issues in any meaningful way had the effect of shifting the discussion on food security back to politically 'safer' issues such as productivity, information and emergency response. The focus on these smoothing and coping measures in effect diverted attention from the G20 governments' own role in precipitating the food crisis. Food insecurity, in other words, was redefined by the G20 as a problem largely originating and experienced in the world's poorest countries. The G20 portrayed itself as a legitimate actor to tell those countries – and international organizations – what to do to improve food security without taking responsibility for the role of its own members' economic policies in precipitating the crisis.

The final G20 communiqué at Cannes in November 2011 reinforced the agricultural ministers' plan. Out of the original menu from the IOs, the G20 took up structural issues in only a marginal way. The financial regulation recommendation was its strongest: 'market regulators should have and use formal position management powers, among other powers of intervention, including power to set ex-ante position limits, as appropriate' (G20, 2011, p. 3). Some G20 members have made progress on this front, as evidenced by the passage of the Dodd-Frank Financial Reform Act in the US in 2010 and progress in discussions on reforms to EU financial

regulations in 2011–12. But in both cases, progress has been slow and critics argue that regulations are being or have already been watered down by excessive lobbying by the financial industry. Although the sentiment to regulate commodity futures markets to make them function properly has been endorsed by the G20, the efforts of the G20 countries on this front are slow, uneven and not particularly coordinated. (Clapp and Helleiner, 2012; Vander Stichele, 2011).

The G20's summit in Los Cabos, Mexico, in June 2012 took the G20's food security agenda further in the direction of productivity, information and mechanisms to cope with volatility. In Mexico, the agenda focused mainly on how to raise agricultural productivity in developing countries, and on the implementation of AMIS. The documents that came out of the summit gave little attention to biofuels, trade or speculation. Meanwhile, the operation and functioning of biofuels, agricultural trade and futures markets for agricultural commodities continue to give rise to concern in many quarters: traders, government officials, farm organizations and academics. Leaving these more complex issues aside, the G20 discussion on food security focused mainly on smallholder productivity, risk management tools and other coping strategies – priorities reflected in a new IO report issued ahead of the 2012 G20 summit (Bioversity et al., 2012). It appears that structural issues have now been dropped altogether from the G20's food security agenda.

The G20 has missed an important opportunity to rectify some of the major structural issues that have worked against global food security in recent decades. The failure to treat commodity speculation, biofuels and unbalanced trade policies seriously is especially worrying given the growing dependence of developing countries on food imports. Indeed, that dependence itself is a product of the same unbalanced trading system that has made them vulnerable to food price volatility. This system has systematically disadvantaged the world's poorest countries in agricultural markets over the past 40 years, and it is not surprising that the least developed countries have gone from being net agricultural exporters to net agricultural importers in that same period, despite their continuing lack of foreign exchange to pay for these necessities (Clapp, 2012; De Schutter, 2011; Wise and Murphy, 2012).

The big chill: the G20's impact on other multilateral food security forums

As definitions of food security have evolved over the past 40 years, so the complexity of the public policy challenges has grown, too. From ensuring a reliable supply, to considering questions of distribution and access, and, most recently, nutrition, the number of agencies and areas of policy that have become food-policy-rele-

vant has grown exponentially (Lang et al., 2009). There are three agencies in the UN system dedicated to food issues (the FAO, the WFP and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD)). Many other agencies work on aspects of food policy too, from the UN Environment Program to the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) to the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD). Voices like that of the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Olivier de Schutter, have come to be heard at a wide variety of multilateral forums, from the WTO to the CFS.³ The food price crisis highlighted the lack of an integrated international forum to discuss food and agriculture at a multilateral level. The reform of the CFS was an early response to this problem, a response that is still taking shape as governments and stakeholders establish a role for the CFS in the wider debate.

Just after the CFS emerged from its reform process in late 2009, the G20 joined the food security fray. The G20's presence has had a chilling effect on the existing food security governance architectures, for example by preventing governments at the CFS from properly discussing the structural and regulatory causes of the food price crisis. The G20 discourse on food security has thereby had a broader impact, shaping the global food security debate and the negotiations on options to cope with the crisis. Under the G20's influence, intergovernmental negotiations have focused on productivity, information and crisis response issues, with a strong emphasis on private sector funding, instead of on distribution problems and the structural economic dimensions of the crisis – dimensions that could be dealt with by the implementation of serious regulatory reforms.

The problematic role of the G20 in the global food security debate is well illustrated by what happened at the discussion on food price volatility at the CFS in October 2011. Price volatility was on the agenda and a High Level Panel of Experts (HLPE) report had been prepared to inform the debate (HLPE, 2011).⁴ The HLPE report, prepared concurrently with the IO report, discussed many of the same themes but it drew stronger conclusions. The HLPE report's recommendations on the international components of food price volatility covered five areas: trade, grain stocks, speculation, demand (including for biofuels) and investment in production. In all five areas, the HLPE report called for structural and regulatory reforms.

On trade, the HLPE report recommended that governments rethink trade rules from a food security perspective and consider distinct rules for low-income food-deficit countries. A second recommendation welcomed the AMIS information system proposed by the G20 but went further with the recommendation that the CFS look at 'forms of international cooperation regarding world food stocks and food security including the establishment of guidelines for the efficient management of such stocks' (High Level Panel of Experts (HLPE),

2011, p. 12). Concerning financial speculation on commodity and futures markets, the report proposed tighter regulation and oversight, arguing for a precautionary approach on the grounds that the benefits of the system were in private hands but the system failures were felt more broadly. On demand drivers of price volatility, the report recommended the CFS call for the abolition of targets on biofuels and the removal of subsidies and tariffs on biofuel production and processing. Also on demand drivers, the report recommended taking steps to end the high levels of waste in food systems. On investment, the report called for stable and sustained investment in agriculture and agricultural research. The detail of the report is explicit about the need to rethink agricultural production systems from an ecological perspective.

At the annual CFS meeting in October 2011, the governments negotiated text and policy recommendations that were much closer to the G20 characterization of the issues than the HLPE report proposals. A first draft text for the governments' consideration had been prepared by the CFS secretariat, and had caused some controversy within the Advisory Group (a multi-stakeholder group that works with the government-only Bureau of the CFS) because it ignored so much of what the HLPE had proposed. This debate generated a second draft that did somewhat more justice to the structural causes of volatility, and this was presented to governments at the CFS. As a procedural matter, it was decided during the negotiations that only governments that made proposals to change the draft text be included in the closed-door negotiations. Only G20 members had made proposals and only G20 members were in this closed session. Because the CSOs had also proposed amendments, two CSO delegates⁵ were also present.

CSO suggestions on the text called for more and deeper structural reforms in the areas of trade, finance and biofuels. The G20 governments, though not in concert, made proposals in the opposite direction; this systematically weakened the proposed structural measures, mainly on the grounds that these were not issues within the CFS purview. The G20 communiqué was explicitly invoked as a reference document in the negotiations, although it had no status for the vast majority of CFS member states. In the Paris communiqué, agriculture ministers said 'we support the on-going work of the CFS as the foremost inclusive international and intergovernmental platform, and recognize its important responsibility' (G20, 2011, p. 9). Nonetheless, G20 governments refused to accept that this pre-eminent role should allow the CFS to discuss structural reforms in world food markets.

Late into the negotiations on price volatility, the rapporteur of the session chose to ignore CSO inputs on biofuels, trade and grain reserves in quick succession, prompting a walkout by the CSOs. The CSOs explained themselves the following morning in plenary, saying the

walkout was the only way they saw left to them to express their dissent, given the governments' decision to ignore their voice in the negotiations. The final CFS decisions on price volatility were a meek reprise of the G20 outcomes, with the structural issues put to one side (CFS, 2011). One exception dealt with domestic price volatility and support for national food security strategies. Another created a limited mandate to evaluate grain reserves, a proposal that observers report some Bureau members have since done their best to quash.

Echoing the G20, the CFS added its support for AMIS, including the Rapid Response Forum. The CFS also called for improved transparency, regulation and supervision of agricultural derivative markets. On trade, the body called for:

... focus on building an accountable and rules-based multilateral trading system taking into account food security concerns, in particular those of the Least Developed and Net Food Importing Developing Countries. In that context, support an ambitious, balanced and comprehensive conclusion of the Doha Development Round in accordance with its mandate (Committee on World Food Security (CFS), 2011, p. 10).

Given that several G20 trade ministers had previously declared the Doha Round dead publicly, the statement only underlined how little the CFS was to be allowed to do on trade. There was no mention of LDC or net-food-importing low-income countries' stated wish to reduce their dependence on food imports.

Is it time for the G20 to step out of the food security debate?

Beyond the fact that it missed an important opportunity and created a chill in other organizations' openness to considering the structural issues affecting food security, there are further reasons to question the G20's role in global food security governance. First, small and vulnerable import-dependent countries are not part of G20 discussions. Although the G20 does include members from all regions, concerns have been raised about representation within the group. Some 90 per cent of the UN membership is excluded from the G20 membership, and as a result it is, as Vestergaard and Wade call it, a 'self-selected oligopoly' that results in 'multilateralism of the big (MOB)' (Vestergaard and Wade, 2011, p. 2). The issues of key concern in the poorest, least developed countries, including and especially the way in which those countries tend to be systematically marginalized within existing global economic frameworks, remain off the agenda.

Second, the decision-making process in the G20, which is based on consensus, limits the scope of what the group is able to achieve in any given area. On food

security the G20 has tended to focus on what member countries can easily support without too much resistance, either at home or from each other. Where there is disagreement, the lowest common denominator prevails. The failure of the G20 to recommend any changes to biofuel policies is a prime example. Despite the well-established evidence that biofuels have been a significant factor in causing high and volatile food prices, the world's largest biofuel producers happen to be G20 members and actively oppose reforms. Other G20 members, such as Mexico, have a clear interest in supporting more stringent regulations on biofuels, but have been either unable or unwilling to push the point within the group (Wise, 2012). The preference for avoiding political struggle at home and within the G20 has meant that the views of a few large countries tend to prevail.

Third, the G20 lacks an independent secretariat and as such does not have technical expertise or implementation capacity on food security issues. This weakness has led to the G20's strong reliance on the existing UN agencies to conduct its research and to implement its plans. The use of multilateral institutions for the purposes of a small subset of members undermines the accountability of those institutions to their wider membership and the vital balance that ensures that voice in international policy making is not commensurate with economic might, but with one-country-one-vote representation. Moreover, the G20 is imposing new work on multilateral organizations without providing additional financial support. The creation of a subset of chosen agencies to advise the G20 in effect bypasses the independent technical expertise of other multilateral bodies. In particular, it undermines the reach of the CFA – a UN-appointed task force with a formal connection to all parts of the UN system – as well as other inter-governmental agencies such as the WTO. For these reasons, the G20's foray into a range of policy issues has created some resentment within existing organizations and risks the replication of responsibilities, which only exacerbates fragmentation in key areas of global governance (Vestergaard and Wade, 2011; Ocampo and Stiglitz, 2011, p. 5). While the G20 no doubt sought to reduce the fractures in the food security arena by acting as an overarching coordinator, its venture into global food security policy appears only to have made those uncertainties more pronounced.

Fourth, civil society voices have been effectively shut out of the G20 dialogue on food security, while other voices, particularly those of business actors, appear to have privileged access. Although there has been some attempt to allow forums where civil society can discuss issues on the G20 agenda, the Business 20 (B20) has had more direct access to the G20 governments and process (Caliari and Alexander, 2012; Heridia, 2012). The nod of the G20 to the private sector became abundantly clear in the Los Cabos summit documents on food security, which

explicitly stressed the need for more private-sector agricultural investment. This move echoed the G8 initiative on agriculture and food security that was announced a month prior to the Los Cabos summit, and which gave a central role to the private sector (Rea, 2012; Oxfam, 2012).

Given these serious weaknesses in the G20 structure and process, there are good reasons to concentrate the global food security policy within the UN – above all with the CFS. Food security governance should be linked to the wider UN Comprehensive Framework for Action. These already-established processes have the legitimacy to act across the range of policy areas that affect food security, and do a much better (if imperfect) job of ensuring that smaller developing countries have a voice in policy development.

The CFS, and to some extent the CFA, also explicitly provide space for CSOs within both their structure and process, acknowledging the enormous role played by nongovernmental actors of all kinds in food security (De Schutter, 2012). While it is difficult to get rigorous discussion of some key issues (such as trade) in these arenas, it is possible. And it is important to continue to push for this dialogue among a wider range of actors, to move away from the big economies' dominance in these areas and to allow for a more balanced conversation.

At the same time as recentering the multilateral process within the existing food security governance framework at the UN, it is important to bolster work on national and regional food strategies. The Rome Principles for Sustainable Global Food Security, agreed at the World Summit on Food Security in November 2009, stress the need for country ownership in agricultural development plans, along with strategic coordination from the national to the regional to the global level, as well as a comprehensive (short- and long-term) approach to food security. All of this is to be supported by the multilateral system, both in terms of providing a structure and ensuring finance is available (FAO, 2009). Implementation of the Rome Principles would enable the CFS to sit at the multilateral apex as the key coordinator of global governance of food security, but with roots in national and regional strategies that, however imperfect, provide the source of multilateral legitimacy.

Conclusions

When the G20 took up the food security agenda, particularly as first formulated under French leadership, even commentators that did not initially see the merit of the G20 as a global governance institution were willing to consider the usefulness of the move. Many of the structural problems in the distributional mechanisms that circulate food in world markets could be addressed by G20 national governments through regulatory reforms. If the G20 were willing to put their own agricultural policies in

order, collectively, there could be important benefits for international markets (and the many who depend upon those markets).

In practice, however, the G20's food security efforts have been weak and only partial. Structural economic issues, especially those to which the G20 governments themselves have contributed, have received only light treatment. While some movement was made with respect to the endorsement of new rules to allow for some regulation to stem financial speculation on agricultural commodity markets, it is still unclear whether new rules in the US and EU will be strong enough to do the job. On trade, the G20 has been unable to endorse anything more than the standard pledge to complete the Doha Round, an agenda that seems to most commentators (and quite a few governments) to be dead in the water. On biofuels, the group was unable to do anything more than to call for 'further study' of the issue. And with respect to international grain reserves, the G20 has been completely silent. The G20's focus instead has been on smoothing markets within the current global economic structure by providing more information and investment, and on offering tools to help countries cope with volatility by providing more assistance and risk management tools. The G20's refusal to tackle the underlying structural causes of price volatility in international markets has had the effect of creating a chill on the discussion in other food security organizations – such as the CFS.

Apart from the content of the G20's food security agenda, one can raise questions about the group's role in food security governance based on its lack of legitimacy. The G20 does not include the voice of the least developed countries – those who are most dependent on food imports and face high levels of hunger. The G20 also lacks its own research and implementation capacity on food security issues. Moreover, it excludes input from civil society organizations while seemingly prioritizing the views of business organizations.

Some analysts have argued that despite its weaknesses on process and structure, the G20 could and should still play a constructive role in development issues more broadly, including food security (Birdsall and Kharas, 2011). We have argued that the chance has been missed, and that the weaknesses in the G20 structure and process mean that it is unlikely that the concerns of the most food-insecure people and governments will be taken seriously into account. For this reason, other more legitimate bodies should take back the helm.

Notes

1. See the France G20 [online]. Available from: <http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/global-issues/global-economy/economic-and-financial/g20/article/french-g20-and-g8-presidency> [Accessed 22 January 2013].

2. The ten agencies were FAO, IFAD, IMF, OECD, UNCTAD, the World Bank, WFP, WTO, IFPRI and the UN HLTf.
3. See the UN Special Rapporteur to the Right to Food's website: <http://www.srfood.org/>.
4. One of the authors, Sophia Murphy, was part of the team that wrote the price volatility report for the HLPE.
5. One of the authors, Sophia Murphy, was one of the two delegates.

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Author Information

Jennifer Clapp is Faculty of Environment Chair in Global Environmental Governance and Professor in the Environment and Resource Studies Department at the University of Waterloo, Canada.

Sophia Murphy is a consultant and senior adviser to the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, a nonprofit organization based in Minneapolis. She is a political economist, a widely published author, public speaker, advocate and lecturer. Her recent work includes analyses of food price volatility in international markets, the global governance of food security and the implications of corporate concentration in the global food system.