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Global Disorders -  
a New Global Order?

# Global food governance

## - A Rights based Approach for Local Farmers

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'Due to a lack of broad global governance structures for food security; food and agriculture is today largely managed by actors promoting a discourse of trade liberalisation and a "new green revolution", which has many drawbacks, especially for small-scale farmers (smallholders)', argues Josefin Smeds in this Paper. Many small-scale farmers and civil society actors offer a radically different approach, with an intrinsic focus on social justice and environmental sustainability. It is imperative for global governance debates to closely integrate such perspectives from smallholders and civil society, and to address the negative implications of the dominant food security discourse as well as the influence from private interests on decision-making.



## Introduction

The world is currently characterised by increasing complexity and a convergence of challenges such as food insecurity, health threats, migration flows, financial instability, inequalities, pressure for energy and resources and climate change. There is a growing recognition that present institutions and processes for global governance are unable to effectively handle these challenges, with potential hazardous consequences for human development and prosperity, including drastic planetary environmental changes. Through the programme "Global Disorders and a New Global Order", the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation aims to bring relevant actors together for cooperation and dialogue in order to advance solutions and influence policy with regards to major global challenges. This paper aims to stimulate dialogue on the necessity of establishing better and broader global governance structures for food and agriculture. In this context, global food governance refers to all the institutions, regimes, processes, partnerships, and networks at the international level that contribute to collective action and problem solving in relation to a sustainable and just future for food and agriculture.

This paper argues that policy-making processes in relation to food and agriculture are currently largely driven by private interests, which leads to negative implications for social justice and long-term sustainability. Global governance debates need to take these negative implications into account and to a larger extent incorporate the perspectives of smallholders and civil society. The paper provides a background to how food and agriculture is managed in the absence of strong global governance structures, explains why global governance is needed, highlights viewpoints promoted by smallholders and social movements, and ends with key recommendations to consider for actors involved in global governance discussions.

### How is food and agriculture managed on a global level?

The ability to ensure global food security is becoming increasingly difficult, especially in the light of pending global crises such as resource depletion and climate change. The Committee on World Food Security (CFS) in the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) has the mandate to be the foremost governing body on global food security matters, including a broad range of stakeholders, which is promising, but strong governing structures are yet to be seen. Also, FAO and its member states have been criticised by scholars for their inability to facilitate the establishment of global governance mechanisms. Instead, the management of food and agriculture on a global level is largely driven by actors such as the G8, World Bank, the World Trade Organization (WTO),

the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and businesses, promoting a discourse of trade liberalisation with the rhetoric centring around "a new green revolution" (Holt-Giménez & Altieri 2013). As such, many high-level structures have emerged such as the L'Aquila Food Security Initiative and the New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition.

The Green Revolution found its way around the globe starting in the 1960's and led to remarkable yield gains mainly through the use of improved seeds, synthetic fertilisers and pesticides, but was coupled with many social and environmental consequences. A "new green revolution" refers largely to the same approach but with the addition of transgenic technologies, international markets, some consideration for environmental impacts, and a leading role for the private sector. Thus, efficiency and productivity is ensured through the use of supposedly more sustainable farming techniques, but also through trade liberalisation and with the help of external inputs and proprietary technologies. The current food security paradigm is further characterised by an increased centralisation of food production and consumption systems.

Smallholders are increasingly targeted within this discourse as well, following the recognition of their potential to contribute to productivity gains and economic growth. By increasing their competitiveness through diversification and high-yield crops the intention is for them to participate in domestic and international trade and contribute to poverty reduction and economic growth for their communities and the country as a whole. An absolute majority of smallholders in the world farm land that is less than 2 acres. This means that they are very far from the global market and more or less exclusively concerned with their own subsistence (World Bank 2007; IFAD 2010).

There is an alarming trend of corporate concentration in the agricultural sector, with a few large-scale global actors in control of for example seeds, fertilizers, and markets. The commercialisation of food and agriculture feeds global trends of appropriation of land for large-scale export production (often referred to as land grabbing), undermining of local production in many parts of the world due to dumping of cheap produce from subsidised farmers in industrialised countries, and the spread of vertical integration where the whole supply chain (production, processing, distribution, and retail) is controlled by one single company. This approach to food security however has many negative consequences, especially for the autonomy and livelihoods of small-scale agricultural producers, which motivates the call for better global governance structures for agriculture.

## Why does food and agriculture need stronger global governance structures?

The main implications of the dominant discourse are as follows:

- » Corporate concentration in the food sector
- » Dumping of cheap produce
- » Vertical integration (the whole supply chain controlled by one company)
- » Increased risk for smallholders
- » Increased smallholder dependence on agri-businesses (for external inputs)
- » Difficulties for women to be competitive in the market place
- » Decrease in employment opportunities due to mechanisation
- » Health implications

The integration of smallholders in international trade markets might, in some cases, have benefits, but it carries with it a lot of risk given the increased volatility and vulnerability of global markets. Also, it is difficult for smallholders to compete with larger actors in the agricultural sector. Further, through the new green revolution approach the autonomy of farmers becomes limited since they are increasingly dependent on commercial seeds, fertilisers and pesticides – resources which are largely controlled by a small number of agri-businesses. This dependency on external inputs can also tie farmers in with debt.

Trade liberalisation also has gendered effects. The majority of farmers in the world are women, but often have limited access to credit and inputs compared to men and therefore have fewer opportunities to increase their competitiveness. Other impacts of the dominant discourse include consequences for employment since farm labour on larger farms are cut for mechanisation, and on consumer health as focus is increasingly on quantity rather than quality.

These negative trends and the commodification of the agriculture sector is largely driven by global agri-businesses due to their extensive influence on global decision-making processes. This further motivates the call for a global governance structure so as to limit this influence.

### What are the perspectives of smallholders and civil society?

Although smallholders constitute the majority of farmers in the world, their perspectives and those from civil society actors are often neglected in global decision-making processes. This is problematic, especially as many of these actors promote a discourse which is radically different from that of trade liberalisation, with a greater emphasis on the importance of democratic food systems, agroecology and acknowledging the complexity of socio-ecological relations. This approach has emerged largely as a response to the marginalisation

of smallholders and the increased concentration of global agri-businesses in the food sector (McMichael 2005). The dominant food security discourse is especially challenged by proponents of food sovereignty, a term which was coined by the peasant movement Via Campesina during the World Food Summit in Rome, 1996.

### Food Sovereignty

Food sovereignty is a rights-based approach and focuses on putting nations and people in the control of the production and consumption of food, in other words the rights to define “their own markets, production modes, food cultures and environments” (Tomich et al. 2011:207). Focus is on localized food production systems and the protection of rural livelihoods. The food sovereignty discourse is largely driven by social movements and peasant communities, and can be seen as “a strategy of reversing the social, cultural and environmental damage of a privatised food security system” (McMichael 2006:415). Many grass-roots movements see food sovereignty as a core component of sustainable and equitable development, and it is claimed that it can contribute to resilience and sustainability by making food production systems more “ecological, biodiverse, local, sustainable, and socially just” (Altieri 2009:103).

These actors are also some of the main promoters of agroecological practices, a term which refers to holistic and diverse farming systems with a close interconnectedness between different farm components and limited use of external inputs such as chemical fertilisers and pesticides. These practices are to a large extent based on traditional smallholder farming systems. The potential of agroecology for sustainable food systems is increasingly recognised on higher levels as well, such as within the United Nations<sup>1</sup>. Thus, incorporating these points of view in global governance discussions can have broad benefits for social justice and sustainability.

<sup>1</sup> See for example The International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD) report Agriculture at a Crossroads, available at: [http://www.unep.org/dewa/agassessment/reports/IAASTD/EN/Agriculture%20at%20a%20Crossroads\\_Synthesis%20Report%20\(English\).pdf](http://www.unep.org/dewa/agassessment/reports/IAASTD/EN/Agriculture%20at%20a%20Crossroads_Synthesis%20Report%20(English).pdf) and the UNCTAD Trade and Environment Review 2013, available at: [http://unctad.org/en/PublicationsLibrary/ditcted2012d3\\_en.pdf](http://unctad.org/en/PublicationsLibrary/ditcted2012d3_en.pdf)

## Recommendations

Global governance in the food and agricultural sector is important given the implications, for example trade policies have for farmers and communities as well as the environment. As this paper has argued, since global regulatory frameworks are lacking, the dominant food security discourse tend to promote a production-centered and neoliberal approach, with consequences for the autonomy of smallholders and long-term sustainability. In order to have ecologically and socially just food systems this situation needs to change. Thus, the main recommendations for actors and initiatives involved with global governance for food security are as follows:

### Make farmers and civil society key parts of global governance debates

Most farmers in the world are smallholders and their potential to ensure food security is widely recognised. However, instead of being the legitimate drivers of the food security agenda, they tend to be marginalised or excluded from many mainstream governance debates. Thus, for global governance to work for the majority of the global population it is imperative to closely involve farmers as well as actors from civil society and take alternative discourses such as food sovereignty into account.

### Acknowledge the negative impacts of trade liberalisation

Trade liberalisation and the “new green revolution” might be able to reduce some of the environmental consequences of agriculture, ensure short-term yield gains and economic growth, but the wide-spread social, cultural, environmental, and spatial negative consequences, especially for smallholders, cannot be ignored. Global governance structures limiting these trends are thus necessary.

### Address the influence of private interests in policy-making

Food security discussions tend to favour the involvement of global agri-business and other private actors over smallholders and other grass-roots actors, which has implications for which policies are promoted. The interests of global agri-businesses often clash with those of smallholders, and results in limiting their autonomy. Taking this influence into account is crucial for global governance structures to work for the majority, rather than only for a few.

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