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Improving the Governance of the Food Aid Convention: Which Way Forward?

Jennifer Clapp and C. Stuart Clark

Key Points

- The Food Aid Convention (FAC), the international agreement that sets out the rules and donor commitments governing food aid for the world's hungry, is under renegotiation with a deadline of June 2011.
- The FAC's outdated governance mechanisms have damaged the Convention's overall effectiveness and legitimacy. The FAC needs to become more transparent, coordinate better with other organizations, increase stakeholder participation and strengthen arm's length monitoring and evaluation.
- Moving the Convention's governance to Paris or Rome instead of London has been proposed because of the proximity to related international organizations. Such a move, however, may not address all of the governance problems.
- The creation of a technical review committee that would foster the necessary coordination with external bodies with expertise in food aid, food security and humanitarian assistance could improve the FAC's governance and legitimacy regardless of its location.

Introduction

Informal talks began in mid-2010 on renegotiating the FAC with a view to adopting a new agreement by June 2011.¹ The FAC is an international agreement that sets out the rules and minimum commitments for member countries which donate international food aid to feed hungry people in developing countries. The existing Convention is dated and requires revision on a number of fronts (Clay 2010; Hoddinott, Cohen and Barrett 2008; Barrett and Maxwell 2006), particularly in the current context of high food insecurity and volatile world food markets (FAO 2009a; FAO 2010). The effectiveness of the FAC as a mechanism to provide appropriate and predictable minimum levels of food aid to those in need has been diminishing to the point of virtual invisibility in the midst of the recent food price crisis — a clear illustration of its fading legitimacy.

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A key issue on the table in these talks is the question of governance: how the FAC can fit into the broader global food security governance framework and how to improve the performance of the more technical governance functions carried out by the FAC. The governance arrangements of the FAC are essential for its overall performance. There are two components to governance: inputs, or what goes into the governance process (the rules and procedures associated with the technical function of governance); and outputs, or what comes out of the process at the end (the governance process achieved an effective solution to the problem it is addressing). The key components of proper governance mechanisms are widely understood to include: transparency in decision making; coordination with other organizations that address similar or related issues; participation of key stakeholders; and arms' length monitoring and evaluation. When the governance process is designed to incorporate these fundamental governance features, the legitimacy of both the organization's daily governance processes (inputs) and its effectiveness (outputs) are enhanced.²

Over the past decade, it has become clear that the performance of the FAC's governance inputs and outputs has been particularly poor. The Convention has a distinct lack of transparency in its decision-making processes, a lack of coordination with other food security bodies, an absence of participation by stakeholders beyond its donors, and a lack of open monitoring and evaluation. These input weaknesses have had a negative effect on the FAC's usefulness in fulfilling its mission.

Over the past year, there has been talk of moving the FAC secretariat from its current location at the International Grains Council (IGC) in London to Rome, where it would be better able to link to existing food security institutions such as the World Food Program (WFP) and the newly reformed Committee on World Food Security (CFS) of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) (Oxfam, 2009), or to Paris under the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Development Assistance Committee (DAC), where food aid could be more easily coordinated with other aid arrangements (Clay, 2010). These relocation suggestions recognize the need to improve the governance inputs and outputs of the FAC, particularly transparency, coordination with other groups addressing similar issues and neutral monitoring in a renegotiated agreement.

In this policy brief, we argue that reforms to the FAC's governance arrangements are urgently needed and should be included as part of the current negotiations. Careful consideration of ways to improve the governance of the agreement is required regardless of the FAC's physical location. This is true both with respect to the inputs into the Convention — its specific technical governance functions — as well as its outputs — its effectiveness as a global instrument to mitigate food insecurity. Unless the legitimacy of the Convention's governance is improved, the FAC will fade into obscurity.

Origins of the FAC's Governance Arrangements

Periodically updated by its member states, the FAC was last renegotiated in 1999. The first FAC was negotiated in 1967 alongside the Wheat Trade Convention as part of a broader International Grains Arrangement under the Kennedy Round of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (IWC 1991). The aim of the Wheat Trade Convention was to foster international cooperation in the grain trade and expand and stabilize wheat markets.

Some countries were encouraged to join the FAC as donors in exchange for concessions in the wheat agreement, which linked the two agreements.

FAC members are automatically members of its governing body — the Food Aid Committee — which meets twice a year. The Committee currently discusses emerging food aid needs and verifies the performance of individual members against their pledges, although there are no sanctions for non-compliance beyond a requirement to pay back any deficit in the following years. There is little actual management of food aid by the Food Aid Committee or the FAC secretariat office — that task is carried out through bilateral mechanisms in donor countries or through the WFP.

The origin of the FAC explains why the Convention's secretariat is hosted by the IGC in London, which oversees both the FAC and the Grains Trade Convention. This arrangement made sense for donors in the 1960s when food aid was as much a trade issue as it was an aid issue (Uvin, 1992). Although some ties to the international trade regime still remain today, and there is proposed text on food aid as it relates to trade that is a part of the World Trade Organization's currently stalled Doha Round of trade negotiations, food aid has shifted from being largely a trade issue. The development and humanitarian dimensions of food aid have become much more important for donors than its use as a trade outlet for surplus grain disposal; therefore, as the Convention is being renegotiated, the suitability of the Convention's current trade-linked governance arrangements is being examined.

Options on the Table for Reform

The main proposals put forward for reforming the FAC's governance functions and placement are reviewed in this section and a fourth option is proposed, as outlined below:

- Status quo: retaining the FAC's current governance arrangements under the IGC;
- Moving the FAC to the OECD's DAC;
- Moving the FAC to a new Rome-based structure; and
- A hybrid model: creating a technical review committee connected to the CFS, WFP and OECD, regardless of the FAC secretariat's location.

Status Quo: Retaining the FAC's Current Governance Arrangements under the IGC

The IGC secretariat has provided a central repository for aggregating data on Convention members' commitments. Cereals continue to comprise the majority of total food aid in both quantity and calories, and the IGC is a centre of expertise and information on international cereal markets. The public transparency of data on donors' fulfillment of their commitments has improved significantly in recent years, as more information is now posted on the FAC's revamped website.³ The cost for this arrangement has been minimal, as the FAC secretariat's expenses are paid for from the annual subscriptions budget of IGC members. In addition, the new donors that have expressed interest in joining the FAC are already members of the IGC, eliminating any institutional barriers to their accession to the FAC.⁴

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The effectiveness of the FAC as a mechanism to provide appropriate and predictable minimum levels of food aid to those in need has been diminishing to the point of virtual invisibility in the midst of the recent food price crisis — a clear illustration of its fading legitimacy.

Despite these advantages, this arrangement has been hampered by several features of the current governance model that have weakened the legitimacy of the FAC (Hoddinott, Cohen and Barrett 2008). Participation in meetings of the Food Aid Committee is restricted to members only, although UN agencies are sometimes invited for part of the meetings. Public reporting of Committee meeting proceedings is minimal, at best. The result is a lack of both transparency and any possibility for stakeholders to influence the decision-making processes of the agreement.

There is virtually no coordination between the FAC and other international food security bodies beyond the occasional invited observer from the WFP or the FAO, and some FAC member-state representatives also attend the WFP executive board meetings. The most serious consequence of this lack of systematic coordination is the failure of the FAC to draw upon the external expertise needed to learn from experience, improve food aid effectiveness and evaluate the overall performance of the Convention, as the small FAC secretariat lacks relevant food aid experience amongst its staff.

These governance input weaknesses — the lack of public transparency, the relatively closed relationship to stakeholders, poor coordination with other international agencies and the lack of expert-based performance evaluation—pose a serious threat to the legitimacy of the FAC.

Moving the FAC to the OECD's DAC

It has been suggested that the FAC could be moved to the OECD under its DAC (Clay, 2010). Given that some of the existing and potential new members of the Convention are not OECD members (for example, Argentina, India and South Africa), it has been suggested that this model could be considered a “DAC Plus” option.

The idea behind moving the Convention to Paris under the OECD is to situate international food aid operations more squarely within the broader international aid architecture. This would be an explicit recognition that food aid is no longer about trade promotion, but rather serves an important humanitarian and developmental assistance role. As such, it should be more fully integrated within existing international aid structures and the norms that have been established through the OECD's DAC, whose members are the principal sources of multilateral and bilateral aid.

In terms of governance functions, this proposal suggests that the governing committee of the renegotiated FAC could take the form of an OECD DAC working group and include representatives from the UN food security and humanitarian agencies, such as the CFS and the WFP, alongside signatories to the convention. To further improve coordination, the FAC would also have member status at the meetings of these organizations.

Monitoring of donor and overall Convention performance would be conducted by the OECD working in collaboration with the WFP, which already collects extensive data regarding food aid deliveries. There would also be a peer-group review process for evaluating performance of donors, such as detailed annual performance reviews of each signatory, similar to the existing DAC peer review process. Additionally, a regular evaluation of the global food security and humanitarian situation would be undertaken in conjunction with the FAO, ensuring Convention members are kept informed and can better prepare responses to emergencies.

An OECD reform model would go some way to enhancing the legitimacy and effectiveness of the Convention by putting governance mechanisms in place to improve coordination arrangements, transparency, and monitoring and evaluation of the FAC.

There are, however, several shortcomings in the proposed OECD model. The FAC would remain donor-driven, leaving the voices of other stakeholders such as recipients and civil society largely absent from the decision-making processes.⁵ This model would focus on incorporating food aid into the broader humanitarian and development assistance governance framework, potentially causing the FAC to lose its distinct focus on food security.

An OECD model would also require a new arrangement of a “DAC Plus” group, given that there is not a complete overlap between existing DAC members and current and potential new donor members of the FAC. It is also not clear how a “DAC Plus” arrangement would operate in practice. Taking these governance input weaknesses into account, moving the FAC under the OECD’s DAC is not a perfect fit.

Moving the FAC to a Rome-based Structure

There has been increasing discussion in recent years of possibly moving the FAC secretariat to Rome, allowing the FAC easier access and integration with food security organizations already based in the city (Oxfam, 2009). The UN system centralized its food-related functions in Rome shortly after the UN was established. Since that time, the original UN institution, the FAO, has been joined by the WFP and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD). Together, these institutions provide an internationally recognized centre of expertise on all aspects of food assistance and food security.

The 2007-2008 global food crisis resulted in a significant rethink of the Rome-based UN structure, and this has implications for the FAC (Oxfam, 2009; ETC Group, 2009). The FAO was already in the midst of a reform process when the food crisis erupted, the WFP had a new strategic plan in place and the IFAD had recently completed its reform. These developments, coupled with the realization that a highly integrated global food system would require oversight and coordinated responses to food crises, led to the establishment of a reformed CFS to provide these functions (FAO, 2009b). The revamped, inclusive CFS brings together the expertise of all three UN food agencies plus the member states of the FAO, increasing its ability to promote policies that reduce food insecurity. The specific functions of the reformed CFS are to:

- Coordinate a global approach to food security;
- Promote policy convergence;
- Support and advise countries and regions on food security interventions;
- Coordinate food security policies at national and regional levels;
- Promote accountability and share best practices; and
- Develop a global strategic framework for food security and nutrition.

Establishing the CFS at this time fits well with the Rome Principles for Sustainable Global Food Security (FAO 2009c), which were endorsed by both the July 2009 G8 meeting at L’Aquila, Italy, and the November 2009 World Summit on Food Security.⁶

The new CFS will be a central hub within the UN for the coordination of international food security efforts. Structured to allow for substantial stakeholder participation by including developing countries and civil society, the decision-making processes of the CFS also promise to be transparent, like other UN-based bodies. Given the role and features of the CFS, the legitimacy of any renegotiated FAC requires that specific and effective links are made to this body.

Moving the FAC to Rome might entail housing the secretariat directly under the CFS or possibly establishing a separate secretariat linked directly to the FAO and WFP. This latter model would enable closer coordination with existing governing bodies, which address certain aspects of food aid. One of these is the FAO Consultative Subcommittee on Surplus Disposal (CSSD), which was established in 1954 as a mechanism to ensure food aid does not disrupt trade. Although most food aid operations were reported to the CSSD in its early years, donors have largely failed to report their donations to it in the past decade (FAO Committee on Commodity Problems, 2010). A separate secretariat could also be linked to the WFP. This would enable closer coordination with the WFP's executive board, and the International Food Aid Information System, a sophisticated data collection and analysis operation housed at the WFP. If these existing bodies were tied more closely to the FAC, they could play a key role in monitoring and evaluating the Convention and donor performance.

Relocating the FAC to a Rome-based structure linked to existing UN bodies would resolve many governance input issues, but it is likely that the current member-state donors of the FAC would not be comfortable giving recipient countries and civil organizations any say in negotiating their food aid commitments (Clay, 2010).

A Hybrid Model: Create a Technical Review Committee

Moving the Convention's governance to Paris or Rome, as the above proposals suggest, could go some way to revitalizing the FAC's legitimacy and effectiveness. Given the tight timeline of June 2011 for concluding a new agreement, we argue that addressing the weaknesses of the current governance arrangements should take priority at this time over debates about the FAC's physical location. Regardless of the location of the FAC, substantial reforms to the technical governance functions of the Convention to improve transparency, coordination, participation, and monitoring and evaluation — key inputs into the governance process — should be implemented immediately. These changes could be addressed by the following:

- Establish a technical committee of the FAC made up of representatives of the FAC member states and the Rome-based CFS Advisory Group (which includes technical specialists from FAO, WFP, OECD DAC and civil society representatives). This would foster the necessary coordination with external bodies that have food aid, food security and humanitarian assistance expertise, and provide a forum for the annual review of total food assistance needs in relation to total FAC commitments.
- The technical committee would undertake periodic reviews, which would draw on the experience of the OECD's DAC peer reviews. A sample of FAC food assistance activities would be reviewed in order to improve the effectiveness of all food assistance activities in the context of contributing to global food security.

- The technical committee would convene regular meetings to discuss the periodic reviews noted above, which would include representatives of food assistance recipient countries and civil society organizations with relevant expertise. Such meetings could be held under the CFS. A report of the reviews and the outcomes of these meetings would form part of the FAC's annual reporting.

The hybrid model mapped out above would boost the legitimacy of the FAC, regardless of whether donors choose to keep the FAC within the IGC or move it to Paris or Rome. It would also have the benefit of keeping the focus of the FAC on food security, unlike the proposed OECD model which risks losing this important focus.

If implemented with the FAC still housed in the IGC, the proposed hybrid model would remain donor-driven and physically removed from other aid and food security organizations. It would not have the same level of multi-stakeholder participation that a Rome-based model would have, but it would provide regular consultation with the CFS through the technical review committee as well as broader policy coordination with other external bodies, including the WFP and the OECD's DAC. If, however, the FAC were to implement the technical review committee, it would only serve to strengthen the participation and coordination aspects of the Paris- or Rome-based governance models.

Conclusion

The governance functions of the FAC are urgently in need of reform. The legitimacy of the Convention has faded significantly over the years due to the weakness of the technical governance inputs — transparency, coordination, participation and monitoring and evaluation — negatively impacting the Convention's overall effectiveness and damaging its legitimacy.

Moving the site of the FAC to a new physical location offers some solutions to strengthening governance inputs and outputs, while breathing new life into the Convention; however, with the extremely tight deadline of June 2010 set out for completing the negotiations for a new FAC, it is a distinct possibility that the Convention will simply maintain the status quo with regard to both its physical location and governance functions.

The FAC could significantly improve its governance inputs and outputs immediately through the hybrid approach outlined in this brief, regardless of the location of the Convention's secretariat. This would entail the implementation of meaningful reforms to the FAC's technical governance inputs, improving the governance outputs of the agreement, thereby boosting the Convention's legitimacy. With the approach of greater uncertainty in global food security, a renewed, effective, adaptable and credible Convention would make an important collective contribution to global food security.



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Endnotes

1. FAC members have informal meetings scheduled to take place in Ottawa September 27-29, 2010.
2. For more discussion on “input legitimacy” and “output legitimacy” in governance, see Scharphf 1999.
3. See the FAC website: www.foodaidconvention.org/en/Default.aspx.
4. See the IGC website: www.igc.int/en/aboutus/default.aspx.
5. On the degree of the OECD’s inclusivity in its aid governance arrangements, see Killen and Rogerson, 2010.
6. These principles were first mapped out at the L’Aquila G8 meeting in 2009 and were later renamed the Rome Principles.

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Web Commentary

G20 Must Take Broader Economic Approach to Food Security

Jennifer Clapp

May 14, 2010

Born out of the global financial crisis, understandably, the bulk of the G20's agenda has been focused on financial reform. It is, however, important to remember that the early stages of the financial crisis coincided with sharp rises in food prices, resulting in a food crisis. Unless it explicitly incorporates measures to address food price volatility and the inequities in agricultural trade, the G20 food security strategy is likely to make only partial gains in the fight against world hunger.

Op-Ed

Canada's Chance to Lead Global Food Aid Reforms

Jennifer Clapp

July 5, 2010

The rules that govern international food aid need serious overhaul, and Canada is well placed to do something about it. In addition to hosting the G8 and G20 Summits in June, Canada also assumed the chair of the inter-governmental Food Aid Committee, the governing body of the Food Aid Convention (FAC). Canada has taken on this role, which it will hold for the coming year, right at the time its members have begun informal negotiations to reform the convention, to better take the current global food situation into account.

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