

A reflection on the CFS (Committee on World Food Security) Voluntary Guidelines on Food Systems and Nutrition in advance of the United Nations Food Security Summit

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Background

Established in 1974, the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) is a multi-stakeholder platform which promotes an integrated private and public partnership to address the urgent challenges facing global food security and nutrition. While some improvements were made, the progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were offset by increasing food insecurity and environmental regressions (UN, 2020). The Covid 19 pandemic has exacerbated global food shortages where as a result an estimated 2.37 billion people are now faced with moderate or severe food insecurity, an increase of 320 million people from the previous year (FAO, 2021). The widespread economic and social impact of the pandemic has also laid bare the vulnerability of global food systems, highlighting the urgent need for a more resilient and sustainable approach to ensure food and nutrition security for all.

The aforementioned issues are presumably to be discussed at the United Nations Food Security Summit, scheduled to meet on September 23, 2021. In preparation for the summit, several reports on the state of global food security and food supply systems have been prepared and shared with member states. One of these, Voluntary Guidelines on Food Systems and Nutrition (VGFSyN), produced by the CFS, seek to promote “policy coherence, coordination and convergence” between stakeholders and to achieve healthy diets for all by encouraging actions towards more inclusive and sustainable food systems (CFS, 2021).

General content of the VG

The document of the guideline begins by presenting the rationale behind its development and the importance of inclusive consultation in its implementation. The rationale regarding the need for the guideline is well presented, and there is extensive well-linked cross referencing to important resolutions and reports feeding into the report. The content of the VG’s seven focus areas (capacity, voice, gender, youth empowerment, safety, policy coherence and accountability mechanisms) is however generally vague, lacking evidence-based implementation guidelines for specific pathways for member states to follow. For example, using phrases like *adequate food and nutrition*

is likely to have different interpretations throughout the world which may then cause difficulties in tracking progress globally. The guideline is highly descriptive where it sets out the problems being faced globally, without focusing on their scale or trends. Previous pledges and strategies to address these challenges are signposted; however, it is not clear how countries can implement these guidelines with limited financial and human resources, which may be even more scarce in the middle of the ongoing pandemic.

The guidelines do highlight essential issues, such as the importance of farmer's wages, biodiversity, exclusive breastfeeding, and the need for systems to be established to ensure that marginalized populations are actively engaged in the development, implementation and evaluation of food security policies, services and strategies. The guidelines also support biodiversity, agroecology, and accountability through legislation; however, all of the solutions tend to be inexplicit and without sufficient detail as to what such legislations should be composed of, especially in regard to land ownership and growing power and economic inequalities.

Challenges with the VG

The voluntary nature of the guideline calls for scrutiny because it lacks the urgency warranted with rising levels of malnutrition and global food insecurity. The CFS has repeatedly developed voluntary guidelines and recommendations since 2004, but many countries' governments have struggled to ensure political commitment and the resources needed for progress. Even countries like India, who have made the 'right to food' part of the national legislation, have struggled to ensure the law is implemented due to the lack of capacity and political commitment to enforce the law. Moreover, assuming the member states agree to the VG, at present there is no legal mandate or system for follow up, unlike for example the Tobacco Framework Convention (FCTC, 2003).

The VG recognizes the sovereignty of each member state to address food security challenges and highlights the need for them to be reviewed in light of local context and priorities. To this end, each country should be given two years to assess the national food security situation and put in place consultation systems to develop strategies while collecting baseline data to assess progress of the actions. However, rural and remote nations may not have the capacity to actively engage with the development, implementation, and assessment of the impact of guidelines, and this specific challenge has not been sufficiently addressed within the guideline.

Whose voice will prevail?

DeSchutter and Yambi (2021) contend that "...*talking about food systems is not enough. How we talk about them and with whom is what matters most...*" The primary strength of the VG is its relatively holistic and evidence-based approach to food systems transformation, which indicates shifts in "how" we talk about them. However, "with whom" we talk about them is less defined. On the surface, the VG encourages the active participation of small-scale farmers, indigenous peoples, local communities, peasants, youth, and women at national, regional, and international markets, in policy development and implementation throughout most of the focus areas. The CFS also advocates for food system and food security stakeholders to work together with local actors to promote voices of marginalized populations and support workers to feed into future, policies, and strategies. There is some indication of consultation with external partners in the development of the VG itself including with delegates from low-income countries such as Ethiopia, Egypt, and

Panama. However, the VG fails to make it clear to what extent the communicated ideas were incorporated into the guideline, or whether local representatives of vulnerable rural residents, such as smallholder farmers and women, were included in the consultations. The commitment for equitable voices and active participation of the less powerful seem contradictory when dominant organizations and High Level of Panel Experts (HLPE) have been heavily involved in CFS consultations. Marginalized groups do not have the systems available to ensure their voices are heard and acted upon with equal resolve and rigour. As Jeffrey Sachs stated, at the UN Food Systems Pre-Summit 2021, a transformation of the food system has to be based on the principles of “...*human dignity as per the universal declaration, sovereignty, and of economic rights...*” (JDS, 2021). Local stakeholders are the most important entities but often excluded in these processes, and without their active engagement in solutions there will not be functioning and equitable food systems transformation.

Corporate Capture

In addition to political will, global food system and nutrition transformation will require extra technical and financial resources. The IMF found that low Income countries are faced with a total annual SDG financing gap of an estimated \$528 billion (Doubia and Lauridsen, 2019). To a large extent, this financial gap has provided a justification for enhanced involvement of the private sector in CFS consultations. For example, the Private Sector Mechanism (PSM) had 120 representatives in the 43rd session of CFS on Global Food Security and Nutrition (IAFN, 2016). As a result, there are growing concerns that the over-presentation of the private sector may result in uneven playing field where the interests of the former will ultimately predominate over marginalized groups.

Although the VG assigns liability to individual governments to address the inequalities and conflict of interests connected with private sector involvement, it has not addressed the role of private actors in this context, and more specifically, how these actors should govern themselves in order to honour human rights. The principal concern here is that of ‘corporate capture’, which refers to the way in which economic elites undermine the realization of human rights by exerting undue influence over decision makers, and this has indeed tainted recent talks regarding the food system transformation agenda. It is highly possible that, despite genuine interest to commit to the VG, low-income governments may give in to proposals made by private entities, irrespective of the damage to public interests that may arise as a result.

Overall, the guideline has not gone far enough in stressing the assurance required from all actors to safeguard the less powerful from the exploitation of the ‘economic elite’. Given the growing scrutiny on multinational corporations and their strong interest in upholding the status quo, the guidelines should have addressed the importance of fair and equitable partnerships between private and public stakeholders. Since virtually no accountability mechanism is included, criticism of the UN summit is likely to be extended to the current version of the VG as well.

Final remarks

An example of poorly functioning voluntary guidelines is the UK’s obesity strategy. It relies on food producers to agree to take part of the responsibility in implementing nutrient reformulation targets to improve nutrition and health outcomes. However, this has had a low response from UK food companies and targets are not being met. Jeffrey Sachs, at the recent food security pre-

summit, warned that equitable and sustainable outcomes can only be achieved through ‘radical transformation’ of the food system (JDS, 2021). He suggested that this can only occur through the drafting of globally binding mandatory guidelines, with flexibility for progressive implementation, applicable to all member states and operating stakeholders. The authors agree with this suggestion.

At this time of rising global food insecurity and failing food systems, we are faced with global problems requiring a global solution. The VG may eventually become a vital tool for national policy makers, legislators, and advocacy agents in their work to transform food systems and nutrition in their respective countries. However, the damaging aspects of food systems are far reaching, especially for those that have environmental consequences, and voluntary guidelines will do little to curb these ever-growing trepidations.

To achieve truly transformative food systems without violating the sovereignty of nation states, CFS should also robustly link the VG to existing international law so that member states as well as other stakeholders are held accountable where they fail to act on them. The VG need to be supplemented with rules regarding engagement with private sector to ensure conflict of interests are addressed. Finally, making financial and technical resources available to low-income countries should be prioritized to ensure that evidenced-based strategies are developed and implemented in diverse contexts, with the long-term goal of achieving the right to food for all.

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