

Food security and the G20's development agenda: stop or go?

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Date : March 18, 2014



For a while there, global food security rode high on the G20 agenda, particularly under the French presidency in 2011. Over the last two years, however, it has received much less attention. With Australia at the helm in 2014, one might have expected the pendulum to swing back. After all, Australia is a major producer and exporter of agricultural commodities and technologies and has long played a disproportionate role in shaping some of the main pillars of the multilateral food security architecture, including the [Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research](#), the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation and the UN World Food Programme.

But, in fact, Australia's [articulated G20 priorities](#) [pdf] include no reference to global food security. Instead, Australia is overseeing a G20 'Food Security Review' process, inherited from its Russian predecessor, which will essentially determine whether food security flourishes or perishes as a G20 priority.

With co-authors from the ANU and the University of Queensland, I was invited to make a submission to the Food Security Review on behalf of the Think Tank 20 (T20)—one of several engagement groups, along with the C20 (civil society), L20 (labour), B20 (business) and Y20 (youth), which feed views into various G20 processes. You can find the full, though quite short, submission [here](#) [pdf]. Its main points are summarised below.

A good start, then a wrong turn

The G20's engagement in food security has passed through four phases.

- Its first phase saw the leaders' endorsement—effectively the multilateralisation—of the G8's 2008 [L'Aquila Food Security Initiative](#) (AFSI) and subsequently the creation of the [Global Agriculture and Food Security Program](#). Both these measures were largely about improving agricultural productivity, with an emphasis on smallholder productivity, and resilience to food price shocks. They were not measures in which the G20 as such had any useful role to play, beyond exhortation.
- In the second phase, the G20's development agenda took shape with the formation of a Development Working Group (DWG) and the adoption of the [Seoul Development Consensus](#). Food security figured as one of nine pillars of activity to be taken forward by the DWG, though the actions defined were generally vague. Food security was perceived to be one of the central pillars of the development agenda, along with infrastructure and financial inclusion.
- In the third and most active phase, the DWG's work on food security was for the most part subsumed by the [Action Plan on Food Price Volatility and Agriculture](#) [pdf] developed by G20 agriculture ministers under the French presidency. The latter saw the creation of the [Agricultural Market Information System](#) (AMIS) and the related Rapid Response Forum (RRF), a move (ultimately unsuccessful) to pilot a regional emergency food reserve in West Africa and a commitment (somewhat rhetorical and seemingly untested) to refrain from creating barriers to the export of food

for humanitarian purposes.

- In the fourth and still current phase, the G20's attention wandered. [AgResults](#), which delivered on a Seoul commitment to trial results-based payments in agriculture, was launched in 2012; little else happened after 2011. The emphasis shifted toward generalised calls for assistance to smallholder agriculture and away from an emphasis on systemic problems and responses. Food security was put back where it had been in the second phase, within the purview of the DWG. The DWG, however, looks increasingly like a merely technical body that ensures G20 leaders' priorities are backed up with appropriately targeted aid.

A return to the main game

The Food Security Review, mandated by the G20's [Saint Petersburg Development Outlook](#) [pdf], marks a welcome return to the main game in the G20's consideration of the food security challenges facing the world, and particularly low-income countries. The review's [terms of reference](#) [pdf] imply that food security, and nutrition, should be accorded priority by the G20 to the extent that G20-led measures to enhance food security outcomes might contribute—presumably to a globally significant extent—to economic growth and job creation. This contribution, it is important to note, might either be growth-amplifying or shock-mitigating: improving food security, like strengthening safety nets, enhances community and state resilience in the face of external shocks, and may also help to maintain global aggregate demand in times of crisis.

So food security will survive as a G20 preoccupation on two conditions: that the Food Security Review satisfactorily demonstrates its links with the core growth and employment agenda, and that the review also identifies a distinctive contribution that the G20, qua G20, can make to the reinforcement of such links.

Food security requires and contributes to sustained growth and job creation

The growth and employment impacts of investment in agriculture have been quite fully described in the [2008](#) and [2013](#) World Development Reports on agriculture and jobs, respectively. The World Bank has concluded that 'agriculture has a well-established record as an instrument for poverty reduction' and that it 'can ... also be the leading sector of a growth strategy for the agriculture-based countries' (WDR 2008, p. 6).

The specific relationship between agriculture and job creation is more complex since mechanisation can reduce labour-intensity. However, agricultural employment in low-income countries is still dominated by family farms using labour-intensive cultivation techniques. In addition, a strong agriculture sector helps to create non-farm employment opportunities in rural areas. Most importantly, it can place countries on a trajectory toward economic diversification that delivers rural and urban employment opportunities across all sectors.

The potential for a significantly negative relationship to develop between food insecurity and global growth and stability was clearly demonstrated in 2007-08 when food price spikes sparked riots in over 30 countries and led to panic-buying and the imposition of export restrictions. Food insecurity clearly has deleterious impacts on human capital: the UN has [estimated](#) [pdf] (paragraph 5), in 2009, that each year between 1.8 and 2.4 million deaths in the Asia-Pacific region might be attributed to food insecurity.

Principles for renewed G20 engagement

For the reasons just sketched, the Food Security Review should meet with no difficulty in drawing out the connections between food security and nutrition on the one hand, and growth and employment on the other. It could, however, meet with greater difficulty in establishing what specific contribution the G20, as a leader-level forum with an economic cooperation mandate, might make to the positive reinforcement of such connections. The review will need first to apply broad principles for G20 engagement, then survey the field of possible priorities, then home in on those that combine the greatest potential for impact with a reasonable degree of feasibility.

The broad engagement principles seem clear enough, even if disregarded over the last two years. The G20

should focus on measures that have the potential to yield substantial benefits on a global scale, which are not more appropriately pursued in other forums such as the Food and Agriculture Organisation's Committee on World Food Security or the World Trade Organisation. The G20's primary modes of action should be:

a) coordinated domestic policy reform, and

b) strategic policy coordination with respect to the major global institutions that invest resources in food security and nutrition, primarily the multilateral development banks (MDBs) and the international agricultural research organisations.

The universe of food security priorities

There are three, overlapping areas in which the G20 might, in principle, make contributions of systemic significance in the domain of food security and nutrition: improving policy coherence, increasing food availability and increasing food production. However, some of the measures one might consider pursuing in each of these areas are in reality off the table. In particular, it is by now entirely evident that the G20 will not achieve, and will not seek to achieve, consensus on agricultural trade policy, biofuels policy or significant food aid disciplines.

Further, the G20 has no functional capacity directly to promote cooperation or knowledge sharing between its members and low-income countries in areas such as social protection, agricultural risk insurance, the operation of national or regional food reserves, and rural infrastructure—and should not seek to acquire such a capacity. The G20 might seek to induce certain international or regional organisations to do more or operate differently in the latter areas but in general this would amount to micro-management. It would also likely cause further friction with non-G20 interests in the governing bodies of those organisations. The universe of realistic possibilities is in fact quite limited.

Policy coherence and global public goods

So how, realistically, can the G20 add value with respect to food security and nutrition, while keeping faith with its global growth and job creation objectives? We suggest it can do so in broadly two ways—namely by:

- ensuring structured and transparent appraisal of domestic policies bearing on food security at all levels, and
- creating and maintaining global and regional public goods that, by enhancing food security and nutrition, contribute materially to global growth and resilience.

The structured appraisal of domestic policies would preferably be undertaken as part of the G20's [Mutual Assessment Process](#), which is associated with the G20's Framework for Strong, Sustainable and Balanced Growth, with regular, independent and public commentary by the World Bank.

As for global public goods, one of the most relevant is the above mentioned CGIAR system. The 2010 CGIAR [reform process](#) is currently undergoing a high-level [mid-term review](#) [pdf] led by former UK Chief Scientist, Sir John Beddington. Its recommendations should be of interest to, and could be endorsed by, the G20. Other relevant global public goods include the Agricultural Market Information System, now operating but at risk of neglect when the pressure is off, and the G20-mandated but still fledgling [Global Pulse](#) initiative.

A fourth and no less important global public good would be a cross-institutional strategy for investment in food security and nutrition for the multilateral development banks (MDBs). The '[Joint Multilateral Development Banks' Action Plan for Improving Coordination on Food and Water Security](#)' [pdf] from October 2011—essentially a response to the French presidency's food security agenda—was in no real sense a joint strategy or action plan. In any case it appears to have been forgotten; there is no evidence of follow-up. The MDBs, as the major external public investors in food security and nutrition in developing countries (and as the institutions most susceptible of G20 guidance), need better individual and collective strategies for

ensuring country-specific investments contribute not only to national priorities, but also to regional and global food security objectives.

After four years or so, it is certainly tempting to doubt that the G20, qua G20, can do much to enhance global food security. It is the task of the Food Security Review to help G20 member countries determine whether such doubts are well founded. The T20 submission contends that the G20 does have a continuing role to play in this area. The G20 should avoid G8-style over-reach, which is corrosive to credibility, and should also resist piffling 'announceables'. But it would be odd, verging on bizarre, for an Australian-led G20 to jettison global food security as a priority. By all means don't shoot for consensus on difficult domestic policy reforms, but at least have a process that regularly shines a light on the international impacts of domestic policies. And don't forget that the G20 is the only body that can really drive improved coherence and effectiveness in the multilateral system, in this as in other areas.

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