

THE GLOBAL FOOD SYSTEM. IS IT POSSIBLE TO BUILD BETTER GLOBAL GOVERNANCE?

Martín Piñeiro
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The “Global Food System” is an idealized concept that does not have a precise definition. The concept incorporates and integrates: 1) a set of economic and social actors, of a very varied dimension and structure, that participate in the productive and commercial processes of food, 2) the productive processes in which they participate and through which exchange of goods and services is conducted (national and global value chains), 3) regional and global trade and 4) consumers.

Other productive linkages participate in this "Global Food System", in addition to agriculture or primary food production, among which are transport, logistics and storage, industrial transformation processes and trade, including restaurants and other forms of services.

Estimates made in the United States indicate that agricultural goods represent only 15% of the total value of consumer spending. In other words, there are many actors and economic interests that participate in food production chains and that have, in many cases, a global dimension.

At the global level, there is a strong interdependence between countries and regions through these economic actors and international trade. 20% of the food consumed originates from imports, which indicates the importance of trade in solving the geographical imbalances between production and consumption. International trade contributes to improving access to food at a global level and to the stability of international prices.

Additionally, there are other types of interconnection and interdependence at a global level that are manifested through the impacts that food production and consumption have on the habitat and health of consumers.

On the one hand, food production uses limited natural resources, while contributing to the emission of greenhouse gases (GHG). Therefore, the particular attributes that food production in a given country has, in connection to its relationship with the environment, will affect the rest of the countries of the world.

Second, if 20% of the food consumed in the world is imported, the quality of this food, in terms of its safety and nutritional attributes, will affect consumers in importing countries.

Consequently, the qualitative dimensions of the global food system affect, mainly but not only, through trade, all the countries that participate in it. This interdependence reveals the collective interest, not only in commercial aspects and the price of food, but also in the qualitative attributes of the global food system in relation to the three dimensions mentioned.

This global interconnection suggests the importance and need of having adequate global governance mechanisms through which agreements can be established on operating rules and minimum standards of quality and sustainability at the national and global levels. These rules should establish parameters, established by common agreement, in relation to the production and transport of food in four specific areas: a) the production and trade of food to ensure free competition and global food security, b) the conditions of environmental sustainability, c) the nutritional attributes of foods and the ways in which they are informed to consumers, and d) the conditions of production and transportation that ensure food safety.

The first difficulty in achieving these multiple objectives is that in most countries, the institutional responsibilities for guiding and regulating the operation of the national food system in the relevant aspects of these four dimensions are distributed among various ministries and other public offices. On the one hand, the Ministries of Agriculture have almost exclusive responsibilities for primary production, while agro-industrialization processes and food trade are included in the competencies of other Ministries. On the other hand, the topics related to the other three dimensions mentioned, sustainability and climate change, food safety and nutritional qualities of the same, are distributed in various ministries and public offices.

This organizational deficiency is reproduced at the international level, since most of the existing multilateral / international spaces respond to the same logic. For example, in the organization and distribution of tasks existing in the United Nations, FAO deals with agriculture and food safety, WHO with safety and its relation to human diseases, UNFCCC with environmental issues, UNCTAD with trade (although its role is minor since the governance of international trade is defined under the umbrella of the WTO), etc.

Other areas of global governance, such as the G20, have had marginal interventions on the subject. However, there was no continuity in the treatment of this issue and no attempts to advance in the direction of achieving international agreements

In this context of international weakness, two initiatives of enormous importance have emerged. The first, although regional in nature, is the European Union (EU) proposal called "From farm to fork". It establishes a conceptual framework that incorporates the concept of the food system and the four dimensions described above. The EU has expressed its willingness and intention to work so that the regulatory principles and proposals included in the proposal acquire international application.

The second is the call made by the Secretary General of the United Nations to hold the Food Systems Summit in October 2021

This second initiative, which will surely draw on the concepts and proposals presented in the "From farm to fork", will be an opportunity to reflect and advance in a comprehensive treatment of the world food system. It will also be a unique opportunity to advance proposals on the organizational elements necessary to achieve world governance that is capable of guiding and guiding the evolution and operation of the "Global Food System" in a way that is more appropriate to the needs of humanity.