

Food systems science-policy interface: don't reinvent the wheel, strengthen it!

Why the United Nations Food Systems Summit should build on the High Level Panel of Experts (HLPE) of the Committee on World Food Security (CFS), existing global science-policy interface for food security and nutrition

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In the run up to the upcoming [UN Food Systems Summit](#), there is talk in several quarters about the potential establishment of [a new science-policy interface](#) for food systems, modelled along the lines of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), to take up the recommendations that come from the Summit.

Global summits can serve as opportunities to strengthen governance structures to address a specific challenge, such as hunger and unsustainable food systems, but proposals to establish a new science-policy interface for food have overlooked the fact that there already is a strong body in that very role: the [High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition](#) (HLPE), which serves as the scientific advisory body to the [Committee on World Food Security](#) (CFS). As members of the Steering Committee of the HLPE, we assert that more can be gained by strengthening the HLPE than trying to re-invent the wheel by establishing a new science-policy body.

The HLPE was established when the CFS underwent [reform](#) in 2009 which made it the foremost legitimate and inclusive body for the coordination of international food security and nutrition policies. This reform was made to address the lack of an effective global institutional architecture to respond to global food crises and to achieve the UN goals on the reduction of hunger and malnutrition and the promotion of the right to food. The HLPE's role is to serve as an independent scientific body to report on evidence-based scientific research to inform members of the CFS in their policymaking.

Any science-policy interface needs to have certain [key elements](#) to gain the trust of policymakers and the wider public.

Ability to provide independent scientific expertise that serves policymakers' needs. While the HLPE serves CFS, it maintains its independence by separating its scientific assessments from the political process of the Committee. Its [reports](#) provide policymakers with analyses and recommendations which are clear to understand and can be aligned to specific contexts. In addition, the HLPE neither pushes a particular agenda nor shies away from controversial topics. Rather, it explains divergences in viewpoints in a balanced way and points to the weight of scientific evidence on all sides of contentious issues.

Legitimacy with its constituents: the CFS has a high degree of legitimacy derived from its inclusive body of stakeholders, including governments, civil society, the private sector and UN agencies. Within CFS, the HLPE has strong and transparent procedures which guarantee its independence and impartiality. The priority themes for its reports are determined by CFS and its stakeholders, based on their needs. The scope and draft of each HLPE report is open to public [consultation](#), and its reports undergo rigorous peer review prior to publication. At every stage, the HLPE explicitly seeks inputs from different disciplines, knowledge bases, experiences and perspectives to inform its work.

Effectiveness: The HLPE produces high-quality, policy-relevant science-based reports and issues

papers which serve as the basis for high-profile [policy recommendations](#) which can be adopted by CFS then implemented by governments and other CFS stakeholders. An example of such a policy instrument is the recently adopted [Voluntary Guidelines on Food Systems and Nutrition](#), which are a direct product of policymakers' uptake of recommendations in HLPE's [Report #12 on Nutrition and Food Systems](#).

Transparency: The HLPE is transparent in its processes and procedures. For example, its members as well as project teams are selected in a rigorous open nomination process based on scientific excellence. They serve on a *pro bono* basis in their individual capacities, and not as representatives of any organization or country, which eliminates conflicts of interest. The Panel is also transparent in publishing the results of its [consultations](#) on the scopes and drafts of its reports, so that all inputs are visible to everyone.

While the HLPE has been strong in these respects in its first decade of operation, we recognize that it must also innovate and improve the science-policy interface for food security and nutrition going forward. The HLPE intends to work with the CFS and its stakeholders to encourage, for example, better data collection and analysis for monitoring, forecasting and modelling, something we will be examining in our upcoming [report on data](#). We will also continue to encourage more latitude for the HLPE to initiate some of its own reports in response to rapidly changing global conditions, as it did (with agreement of the CFS) with its recent [issues paper](#) on the impact of COVID-19 on food security and nutrition and [Report #15](#) on the transformative changes needed in food systems to end hunger and malnutrition and promote sustainable agriculture. Better funding would also help to improve the HLPE and its work, by enabling it to expand the range of expertise represented on its Steering Committee and the ongoing activities it undertakes. Such measures would enable the HLPE to remain a nimble organization and continue to provide high-quality scientific advice to policymakers.

Given the strengths and potential of the HLPE, we are concerned that some advocates of creating a new science-policy interface for food [claim that there is no institution](#) currently serving in the role of interface between science and policy with respect to food systems. Before any decisions are made with respect to creating a new institution to serve in this role, it is important to ascertain whether there is a genuine need for an additional institution, what its role might be, and in what ways it would operate differently from the HLPE.

Setting up a new institution will require significant funding and a great deal of time to establish and to build legitimacy and accountability. We cannot afford to lose such time in addressing global malnutrition, intensifying as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, and it would require considerable effort to convince all stakeholders to shift their loyalties – an outcome which is by no means certain. It is also important to ensure that the push from some quarters for a new science-policy interface is not driven by political interests that seek to side-step the role of the CFS as the central international policy coordinating body for addressing food security and nutrition. The rationale for any new structure should be laid out by its advocates in a clear and transparent manner for all stakeholders to consider and debate in an open process.

As we move towards the 2021 UN Food Systems Summit and anticipate its outcomes, there is a strong argument for building on and strengthening the CFS and the HLPE as its scientific advisory body to take up the Summit's recommendations and to monitor progress on food security and nutrition policy, rather than starting over from square one with a new institution. The CFS-HLPE model has worked well in the past decade, and has evolved with shifting needs, resulting in concrete policy advice and government adopted recommendations. The creation of a new science-policy interface in the context of the UN Food Systems Summit would mean losing valuable time for an uncertain outcome, not to mention further fragmentation and duplication of international food policy governance.