

Visions for achieving global food and nutrition security: Lessons from the FOODSECURE stakeholder scenario approach

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Key message

Consensus emerges that visions integrating health, environment and equity can drive new modes of governance for achieving global food and nutrition security. Stakeholders participating in a scenario exercise emphasized, surprisingly, the facilitating role that national governments can and should continue to play in achieving FNS in our globalized world.

Short summary

Global food and nutrition security (FNS) is a multi-faceted issue in need of a more integrated and coherent governance approach. Currently there is no clear vision by international organizations or policymakers how such an integrated approach should or could look like. In the FOODSECURE project, in a science-driven process, stakeholders of global FNS jointly developed exploratory future scenarios on FNS, along with visions for action and policy options. The results of these stakeholder workshops are indicative of a paradigm shift in visions on FNS that go beyond 'productionist' perspectives and emphasize the integration of health, environment and the role of society. Interesting highlights were the ideas to invest in nutrition education, linked to an awareness on the socio-cultural value of food, to incorporate the right to food in constitutions worldwide, and the emphasis on the facilitating role that national governments can (or should) continue to play in our globalized world. What also could be witnessed was how stakeholders brought in a socio-political and ethical dimension that questioned the limits and assumptions of the scenarios that were starting points for the discussions.

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Table 1. The four FOODSECURE scenarios and embedded perspectives on FNS governance

Scenario	Perspective on FNS governance			
	Pivotal actors	Types of Responsibility	Scales and sites of intervention	Kind of interactions
Ecotopia	Local communities (both producers and consumers), facilitating government	Consumers, producers and government all have responsibility for FNS	Local and national policies for rural and technology development; international cooperation	Public governance, open source technologies, free movement of people
Food For All But Not Forever	Governments and transnational organizations (UN, WTO, etc)	Citizens (display moral behavior), governments and especially international institutions	National and global	Through strong democracies and transnational organizations such as the WTO and the UN
Too Little, Too Late	A rich elite, spread across the world, living in protected compounds	Market forces, the small elite has responsibility only for its own food	Weak national and international governance	Mainly market interactions, institutions like the UN have been abolished
1% World	Elite of wealthy owners, concentrated in developed countries	The private sector	Intervention through markets and a 'world economic climate forum'	Investment in R&D and in availability of food (regardless of quality)

Source: de Bakker et al. 2017

Full summary

Achieving FNS demands new modes of governance, based on what vision?

Pointing at the broad array of immediate causes of malnutrition (including inadequate availability of and access to safe, diverse, nutritious food; lack of access to clean water, sanitation and health care; and inappropriate child feeding and adult dietary choices), and its multidimensional root causes that encompass the broader economic, social, political, cultural and physical environment, high-level governance is required for achieving food and nutrition security (FNS). In the eyes of some, the food crisis of 2007-2008 unfortunately revitalized the 'productionist' picture that the key of the solution lies at achieving higher agricultural productivity to solve food shortages. However, the food crisis also gave (new) impetus to discussing broader frameworks that include health, environment and the role of society. This new paradigm also puts FNS in relation to micronutrient deficiencies, sustainability, overweight and obesity, the roles of different institutions and socio-economic relations. These multi-faceted issues of FNS demand new modes of governance (e.g. Sonnino et al. 2016; von Braun and Birner 2016). Currently there is no clear vision by international organizations or policymakers how such an integrated approach should or could look like; debates on a new paradigm are not conclusive and point at many uncertainties.

Developing new visions for FNS linked with plausible future scenarios

The FOODSECURE project took up this unfinished business by means of a participatory scenario and vision development process that combined scientific knowledge and the complexity and uncertainties that are key elements of future global FNS. This brief summarizes the results of this process by zooming in on four stakeholder workshops that constituted an intensive process of science-with-stakeholders to jointly develop exploratory future scenarios on FNS, along with visions for action and policy options. The stakeholders gave the science-based scenarios, rooted in a tradition of assessing climate change impacts, a prominent push towards greater emphasis on equity and selected governance issues: the pivotal actors, their responsibilities, how are these implemented and how actors interact.

Stakeholder visions

Participants in two workshops expressed their visions on how FNS should be realized for nine billion people on this planet in 2050 bearing in mind storylines of four future scenarios (or potential worlds) that were developed in preceding workshops (van Dijk et al. 2016, van Dijk 2016). The core of what a global vision on FNS should encompass did not appear to deviate that much in both groups. Participants had been informed about the generally accepted definition of FNS and endorsed this definition. Though the stakeholders did not equate one of the scenarios with their visions, they demonstrated a shared desire for equality and sustainability that mostly overlapped with the Ecotopia scenario. The visions also promoted the idea of a broad coalition of actors operating on different levels of governance, as is also the case in this scenario. Responsibility is not concentrated within one group, but is placed with consumers, producers, governments and NGOs. The pivotal actors for attaining FNS were surely not limited to the production side of the food chain; the entire food chain matters.

Visions on governance

A prominent aspect in the discussions was the question of responsibility concerning policy implementation: who should do what, on which scale and on which level? Though governance actions should take place on multiple levels, the focus is mainly on the local and global level and less on the national level (countries). Figure 1 summarizes how each of the visions on FNS gave specific views on the operations of a broad range of actors: local communities, consumers, intergovernmental organizations and national governments. However, the way how to achieve their visions that more or less coincided with Ecotopia differed strongly across stakeholders (e.g. by means of markets as proposed by OECD, versus local production and market intervention). Moreover, within this frame a more pragmatic and a more fundamental approach became evident: the workshop with stakeholders based in Europe took a more pragmatic approach, discussing (high quality) food for all, nutrition security, food prices that reflect true costs and consumer education that can support sustainability, whereas the international group was more occupied with normative topics and inclined to take a more fundamental position regarding the value of equality.

Policy options for achieving the vision

Interesting highlights of the FoodSecure stakeholder workshops were the ideas to invest in nutrition education, linked to an awareness of the socio-cultural value of food (Briones Alonso 2015), to incorporate the right to food in constitutions worldwide, and the emphasis on the facilitating role that national governments can still (or should) play in our globalized world. Another highlight was the discussion of production in local communities and their relation to the global market system. The workshops showed that stakeholders look beyond the main primary producers by also considering the roles played by large corporations and consumers at the end of the food chain. Responsibility is not concentrated within one group, but spread across several actors (producers, industry, governments, consumers and NGOs.)

What complicates integrated FNS policies are the political and economic interests at stake: how can we avoid that taking and sharing responsibility for FNS becomes the hot potato that everyone prefers to avoid? In fact, under the surface of common visions on and suggested policy options for FNS, different views and opinions can smoulder that make the apparent consensus on striving for more equity and sustainability brittle and strife-ridden. This becomes particularly clear when we confront some of the policy options by posing more specific governance questions and link them to sensitive political issues (land grabbing, food sovereignty, interventions to increase sustainable food consumption). Though difficult as this may be, political tensions and ethical issues cannot be avoided when developing specific and differentiated governance strategies that address the broader array of issues of FNS in both the developing and the developed world.

Move forward by disentangling the contested claims in the visions for global FNS, foremost on equity and sustainability

The results of the FOODSECURE stakeholder workshops are indicative of the paradigm shift going on: FNS is more and more seen as a multi-faceted issue in need of new modes of governance that integrate health, environment and the role of society. What we also witnessed was how stakeholders added normative-qualitative values to the scientific-quantitative models proposed as starting point for the scenarios. By doing this they brought in a socio-political and ethical dimension that requires the science of “muddling through”, to paraphrase the famous term of Charles Lindblom (1959). We can draw the conclusion that both quantitative (demographic data, statistics on yields, economic models etcetera) and qualitative knowledge (social studies, consumer perceptions, political and ethical issues) are relevant for developing more integrated FNS policies. Bridging the gap between these knowledge domains is important for finding the practical wisdom needed to make progress in a more coherent way.

Pinstrup-Andersen (2009) and Pogge (2016) make us aware that the definition and measurement of FNS is never neutral. These are political issues, connected with *contested claims* (Mooney & Hunt, 2009) about what food security should involve and what not. The same applies to overarching values such as equity and sustainability. Behind the apparent consensus to commit oneself to such noble purposes one will encounter considerable disagreement concerning the roads and strategies to achieve these goals.

Embracing ambiguous terms such as ‘sustainability’ and ‘equality’ can help to bridge the gap between different stakeholders and start a discussion on how to make progress on these issues. Even though the use of these terms can lead to confusion, they allow for different beliefs and opinions to coexist without necessitating consensus or compromise (Keulartz, 2007).

The critical question is whether concepts like equity and sustainability do contribute to closing – step by step - the gap of different interests or mainly function to keep a fuzzy debate going that lingers on without parties taking responsibility for steps that should (jointly) be taken. In the latter case the world’s muddling through towards more integrated FNS policies might see the world to get the blues instead of sustained food and nutrition security.

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