



## Revamping international response to global food insecurity

*Building transparent and participatory selection processes and governance in the UN Rome-based Agencies (RBAs)*

November 2022

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### Acknowledgments

The authors are grateful to the experts at Southern Voice for their valuable support in organising the Open Consultation Forum, as well as for the inputs shared during preparation of this paper.

The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors.

This ET TG study was conducted with the support of the New Venture Fund for Global Policy Advocacy.

## INTRODUCTION

Three concurrent crises -- climate change, the COVID-19 pandemic and the conflict in Ukraine -- have combined to worsen food insecurity and malnutrition around the globe. Extreme climate events are becoming more frequent and severe, magnifying the already higher food prices caused by agricultural supply chain disruptions precipitated first by the pandemic and now by geopolitical turbulence. At the same time, asymmetrical impacts of the pandemic and lagging recoveries have widened inequalities and reduced food security, making achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) increasingly challenging, with only eight years left to the target year of 2030. Moreover, the state of food security and nutrition may deteriorate further, due to the continuing effects of the war in Ukraine on agricultural production, trade and prices.

The prevalence of undernourishment jumped markedly, from 8% to 9.8%, from 2019 to 2021, meaning that 150 million more people were affected by hunger. Regarding access to adequate food, an increasing share of the global population (11.7%, or 923.7 million people) faced severe food insecurity in 2021. The rise in hunger and undernourishment has been accompanied by a growing gender gap, indicating a deteriorating situation among the most vulnerable in societies<sup>1</sup>.





## INTRODUCTION (CONTINUED)

More recent data, based on 82 countries in which the United Nations (UN) World Food Programme (WFP) has an operational presence, points to a total of 345 million people who were acutely food insecure or at high risk of acute food insecurity in 2022 – a rise of almost 200 million compared to pre-pandemic levels.<sup>2</sup>

The data on malnutrition are similarly alarming. The number of acutely malnourished children reached 60 million in 2022 (+27.6% compared to pre-pandemic levels).<sup>3</sup> Faster progress is needed to achieve the 2030 target of reduced stunting among children under five years of age, despite declining shares between 2000 and 2020 (from 33.1%, or 201.6 million children, to 22%, or 149.2 million children). Child wasting (affecting 6.7%, or 45.4 million children in 2020) and overweight (+5.6 million children under five years of age) also show concerning trends, again casting doubt on the world's ability to achieve the SDGs.<sup>4</sup>

Amid reinforcement of major drivers of food insecurity and malnutrition – particularly, climate change, conflict and the synergistic nature of the health and social problems facing the most deprived – the global institutional architecture and, especially, the three Rome-based UN agencies (henceforth RBAs) have the potential to play a key role in promoting progress towards SDG 2, zero hunger. These three agencies are the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and the World Food Programme (WFP).

This policy paper explores issues related to the RBAs' governance and coordination that hinder their capacity to contribute to the SDGs, particularly SDG 2. The paper is organised as follows: Section 1 explores key features of the selection processes for RBAs' leadership. It identifies lessons learnt from the 2022 IFAD Open Consultation Forum, which built on previous initiatives of non-state actors as well as the ongoing trend within the UN towards greater transparency and openness. Section 2 investigates obstacles to coordination among the RBAs and in securing collaboration and cohesion between them and non-state actors. The paper concludes with several policy recommendations to enhance RBAs' contribution to the transition towards a healthier and more sustainable food system. Foremost is the recommendation to create an ad hoc partnership to facilitate both food systems knowledge and policy process brokering on food systems.



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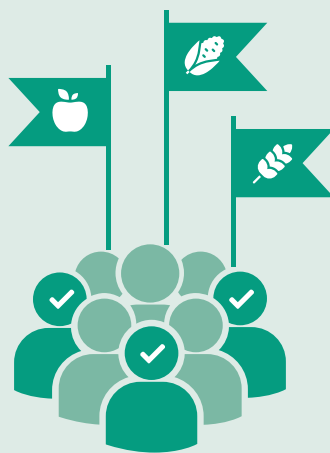
1. <https://www.fao.org/documents/card/en/c/cc0639en>

2. <https://www.wfp.org/publications/war-ukraine-drives-global-food-crisis>

3. <https://www.wfp.org/publications/war-ukraine-drives-global-food-crisis>

4. <https://www.fao.org/documents/card/en/c/cc0639en>





## TRANSPARENCY AND PARTICIPATION IN RBAS' LEADERSHIP SELECTION

Leadership selection processes within the three RBAs present differences and similarities related to these institutions' governance structure and mandate.<sup>5</sup> Regarding governance, IFAD shares comparable features with FAO. At both agencies, the highest governing body (at IFAD the Governing Council and at FAO the FAO Conference) comprises all member states and is responsible for the appointment of the institution's leadership (at IFAD the president and at FAO the director-general). The same body also nominates members of the executive boards (the IFAD Executive Board and the FAO Council). Seats on these executive bodies are allocated in line with predetermined lists or regions. The FAO Council is made up of 49 members elected for three years representing all the FAO member nations, according to seven regional groupings.<sup>6</sup> Members and alternate members of IFAD's Executive Board are elected for a three-year term within their respective lists and sub-lists, with each represented by a Convenor.<sup>7</sup> The group of Convenors (including Co-Convenors, if any) of IFAD's Executive Board represents each of the three lists of IFAD member states and acts as focal point for the respective membership.

Each member state on IFAD's Executive Board has voting rights proportionate to its financial contributions, with elections decided based on a two-thirds majority. At FAO, each member state has one vote, and appointments require a simple majority. WFP's executive director is jointly appointed by the FAO director-general and the UN secretary-general, in consultation with the WFP Executive Board, though without formal consultation with the member states.

Major limitations affecting RBAs' leadership selection processes relate to transparency and participation. For instance, candidates from richer member states may benefit from the funding of expensive campaigns (especially at IFAD and FAO). Moreover, there is a lack of participation by RBAs' staff in sessions at which candidates meet with the member states. Finally, there is an absence of open events to stimulate awareness and public debate on candidates' positions regarding key issues.

Recently, several attempts have been made by non-state actors to promote greater transparency in leadership selection processes at international organisations through public fora with the participation of candidates. For example, ahead of the 2016 election of the World Health Organization (WHO) director-general, Chatham House and the Graduate Institute of Geneva organised a forum with the candidates aimed at engaging non-state actors in the debate.<sup>8</sup> Chatham House replicated a similar public forum for candidates in the 2019 FAO director-general elections.<sup>9</sup>



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5. See Winters et al. (2022) for a comprehensive overview of RBAs' structure and rules governing leadership selection: [https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/2022-02-15-progress-towards-sdg2-winters-et-al\\_1.pdf](https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/2022-02-15-progress-towards-sdg2-winters-et-al_1.pdf)

6. The regional groups for purposes of FAO Council elections are Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, Near East, North America, and Southwest Pacific.

7. List A is OECD member states. List B consists primarily of contributing developing countries. List C is divided into sub-list C1 for countries in Africa, sub-list C2 for countries in Europe, Asia and the Pacific, and sub-list C3 for countries in Latin America and the Caribbean.

8. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2016/11/whos-new-electoral-format-could-be-model-other-un-agencies>

9. [https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/2022-02-15-progress-towards-sdg2-winters-et-al\\_1.pdf](https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/2022-02-15-progress-towards-sdg2-winters-et-al_1.pdf)





Building on the strengths and weaknesses of these forerunner processes, the International Affairs Institute (IAI), in cooperation with the European Think Tanks Group (ETTG) and Southern Voice, organised a public consultation forum with candidates for IFAD president, ahead of the appointment by the IFAD Governing Council in July 2022.


### Stakeholder participation in the appointment of the IFAD president in 2022

The IFAD Open Consultation Forum on 27 June 2022 arose from a clear demand: to make the selection process for RBAs' leadership more transparent. What lessons might be drawn from this process for the RBAs, as well as for international organisations more broadly?

Despite calls for increased transparency and accountability from a wide range of stakeholders in the global food security community, the organisation of the Open Forum faced several challenges. First, timing represented an obstacle, in terms of both logistics and the substance of the event. The final list of candidates was released at the end of May 2022, with the appointment set for 7 July 2022. This left the organisers less than 40 days to liaise with both the candidates and the relevant stakeholders – including farmers' organisations, indigenous peoples, academia, practitioners, the media and civil society organisations (CSOs). Beyond finding a suitable format and date, the ideas and priorities of these various actors for the substance of the Open Forum also had to be reconciled.

Second, gaining access to the candidates, presenting the Open Forum concept to them and convincing them of the importance of taking part proved to be a major undertaking. IFAD's mandate does not require leadership candidates to participate in public meetings of any kind to present their proposals. Appointment of the IFAD president lies only in the hands of the Fund's member states, through the IFAD Executive Board.<sup>10</sup> Hence, while candidates are required to take part in closed-door hearings before the member states, they are not obliged to engage in open public debate. This means that IFAD staff and external non-state actors have no opportunity to get to know the candidates' proposals before the appointment.

Third, to ensure the complete independence of the Open Forum, it was essential that the group of convenors not formally endorse or co-sponsor the process. This required



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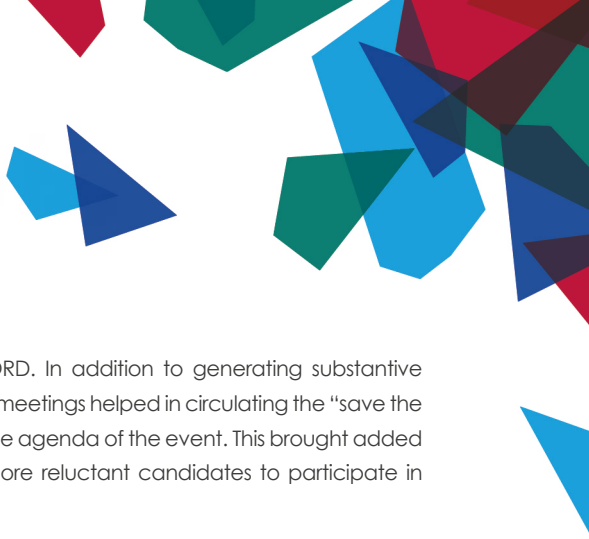
concerted effort and clear communication by the organising team, both to encourage the candidates to participate and to clarify and convey to IFAD's current leaders worldwide the objective and importance of this first Open Forum.

Fourth, and finally, there was a general scepticism among some IFAD convenors that the Open Forum would just be the same old, familiar Western-led exercise, in which European institutions monopolise the debate and without authentic representation and participation of the Global South and regions where IFAD is most active. This scepticism and assumed framing of the event as a Western process made it difficult for the organising team to promote the Open Forum among the member states, particularly developing countries.

To address these challenges in the very compressed timeline, the organising team applied a five-pronged strategy. First, to deal with the perception of the Open Forum as a Western-led event, the organising team was structured as a truly global group of analysts and experts, in all phases. To this end, the ETGT Secretariat and IAI, its Rome-based member, engaged with the Secretariat of Southern Voice, a network of more than 50 think tanks in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Together, they assembled a global team able to reach and mobilise constituencies and representatives in different geographies and regions of the world. The team formulated a joint engagement and communication strategy to identify the most relevant speakers and participants, as well as to ensure effective communication and dissemination of the event.

10. [https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/2022-02-15-progress-towards-sdg2-winters-et-al\\_1.pdf](https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/2022-02-15-progress-towards-sdg2-winters-et-al_1.pdf)





Second, the organising team maintained an informal communication channel with the IFAD team managing the leadership selection process. This aimed at facilitating involvement of the candidates and IFAD staff in the Open Forum, while preserving the independent nature of the process, despite the limited time available. The mutual trust generated by this interaction led to the IFAD team's backing to set up an informal meeting with the Convenors in the last week of May to present the initiative to them. The support also helped the organisers in getting in touch with the candidates' offices and in promoting the Open Forum among the different country lists. Ultimately, peer pressure exerted by countries that were especially interested in having a more transparent election process proved essential in persuading the candidates to participate in the Open Forum.

Third, to secure broad participation, despite the very limited timeframe, the organising team designed the consultation as a hybrid event, catering to both in-person and virtual participation. This allowed engagement and involvement of a wider range of stakeholders, including activists and representatives of farmers' organisations, CSOs, youth and women's organisations, academia and practitioners. Some 50 participants gathered physically in Rome and more than 300 participants connected online from more than 50 countries in Asia, Africa, North America, South America and Europe. To allow greater engagement in debate with the candidates, the event was conducted in English with simultaneous translation into French and Spanish. During the meeting, which was also streamed live on IAI's YouTube channel,<sup>11</sup> the moderator launched two interactive polls through Slido (a digital interaction platform). These allowed audience members to identify their key priorities and guide the question-and-answer session with the candidates, facilitating both broad participation and eliciting contributions by those preferring not to formally take the floor during the event.

Fourth, the cooperation of two influential networks from the Global North and the Global South – ETG and Southern Voice – made it possible to pool resources and engage in preparatory meetings with key groups, such as the SDG2 Advocacy Hub, Scaling Up Nutrition, the Italian NGOs network

CINI and CONCORD. In addition to generating substantive exchanges, these meetings helped in circulating the "save the date", as well as the agenda of the event. This brought added pressure on the more reluctant candidates to participate in the Open Forum.

Finally, the organising team had several exchanges with institutions and organisations that had been involved in conducting similar public consultations regarding other international organisations. These provided opportunities to share lessons learnt and best practices and to brainstorm potential experts and stakeholders to be included on the agenda, while also allowing the organisers to make the case to the actors directly involved that a consultation of this kind would not be out of the ordinary.

Thanks to this mixed approach, the IFAD Open Consultation Forum managed to involve three of the four candidates, with two keynote speakers.<sup>12</sup> In addition to the broader participation through the Slido platform, more than 10 participants engaged directly with the candidates, presenting their views in an inclusive and interactive manner. Such direct interaction is an innovation in the process of selecting the IFAD president. Hopefully, the dynamic generated by the event will be maintained, promoting similar processes in the future.

### Recommendations for future RBAs selection processes

The overall aim of the project was to bring increased transparency to the electoral process of the IFAD president, ultimately to generate positive spillovers. While certainly of interest to international bodies beyond those based in Rome, a specific objective was to push the RBAs to adopt such public consultations as part of their leadership selection. Drawing on previous experiences, including the 2019 consultation prior to the election of the FAO director-general, the IFAD Open Forum can be seen as an important test case. Throughout, the organisers sought to establish a strong dialogue, not only with IFAD but also with other RBAs on the value of such open consultations, in order to stimulate similar processes in the future. A next opportunity in this regard is the election of the FAO director-general scheduled for summer 2023. In this sense, three key recommendations can be drawn from the work.

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11. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gqTHwhG9\\_B0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gqTHwhG9_B0)

12. The participating candidates were Alvaro Lario, the official candidate of the Kingdom of Spain; Khaled A. Mahadi, the official candidate of the State of Kuwait; and Shobhana Kumar Pattanayak, the official candidate of the Republic of India. They engaged in a panel discussion moderated by Rumbi Chakamba (Devex), following keynote speeches by Esther Penunia, of the Asian Farmers' Association for Sustainable Rural Development, and Gerda Verburg, of the Scaling Up Nutrition movement. Representatives from civil society, farmers, indigenous groups' organisations, academia and development practitioners also had the opportunity to ask the candidates questions in a two-round question-and-answer session.





### **MAKE SURE THAT BOTH FORMAL AND INFORMAL CHANNELS OF COMMUNICATION ARE MAINTAINED WITH THE INSTITUTION.**



Clear and frank communication is crucial to build trust. Trust makes it easier to convince the candidates to take part and gives the organisers privileged access to internal processes (e.g., the IFAD list of Convenors), which can speed up the logistical organisation and help deliver the event within the necessarily limited timeline. It is important to note that although full formal endorsement might be useful to obtain broad participation in the event, it may also result in less independence and freedom of manoeuvre. Therefore, instead of formal backing, organisers should seek to maintain a continuous dialogue with the host institution as a means to stimulate its ownership of the otherwise independent consultation process.

### **ASSEMBLE A GLOBAL TEAM OF ORGANISERS TO ENSURE THAT ALL REGIONS AND FOOD SECURITY STAKEHOLDERS ARE ADEQUATELY INVOLVED IN THE PROCESS.**



A global team is essential, not only to overcome scepticism, such as concerns about Western monopolisation of the event, but also to facilitate access to wider networks that can help disseminate the event's agenda and objective, both prior to and after the meeting. Broader involvement can also create bottom-up pressure, pushing both the candidates and the institutions towards a more transparent and inclusive leadership appointment process.

### **FULLY HARNESS THE POTENTIAL OF DIGITAL TOOLS FOR INTERACTIVE AND INCLUSIVE CONSULTATIONS WITH LEADERS.**



The hybrid format of the IFAD Open Consultation Forum enabled a rich panel of speakers to be assembled in less than three weeks, overcoming constraints in terms of physical travel and bureaucratic hurdles. The hybrid format also enabled an inclusive audience to make themselves heard during the event. The experience, furthermore, demonstrated that with the use of open-source digital applications, a more interactive panel can be achieved, as dozens of viewers engaged in the opinion polls launched during the event. Using these applications successfully, however, requires differentiating between what can be expected from -- and is possible for -- in-person versus virtual participants.



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## RBAS GOVERNANCE AND THE ROLE OF NON-STATE ACTORS

The food and agriculture global institutional landscape is broad and diverse, including international organisations, multilateral and donor agencies, governments, CSOs, research institutions and commercial entities. These operate at the global, regional and national levels, performing different roles and acting from a public, private or semi-public rationale.<sup>13</sup> Major challenges in this landscape are institutional fragmentation and the underlying financing model for food and agriculture cooperation. As for the former, the various actors operate with overlapping mandates in different but interlinked domains (horizontal fragmentation), and they compete at every level of intervention (vertical fragmentation). Regarding funding model, gaps and financial fragmentation generate competition for the scarce resources available, reinforcing the uncooperative dynamics. These challenges affect coordination, complementarity and coherence, jeopardising capacity to achieve increasingly ambitious agendas and to integrate food and agriculture interventions with responses to other global threats, such as climate change, agricultural supply chain disruptions and conflict.

Despite a lack of consensus on which institutions are most important, the three RBAs are recognised as among the “big five” multilateral actors specialised in food and agriculture with a focus on achieving SDG 2 (zero hunger) – with the other two being the World Bank and the CGIAR network (formerly the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research). The RBAs’ potential and their exclusive focus on food and agriculture is deemed pivotal for the achievement of SDG 2. Yet, bringing this to fruition requires improved coordination and governance.

Beyond the three main UN agencies tasked with food security, agriculture and sustainable development, the Rome agrifood hub includes a complex web of other actors. For example, it is the location of the Committee on World Food Security (CFS), an intergovernmental and multi-stakeholder platform for food security and nutrition, whose secretariat consists of staff from FAO, IFAD and WFP. CFS links national governments, the private sector, farmers’ organisations and CSOs with the aim of promoting dialogue and cooperation. Another key organisation is the UN Food Systems Coordination Hub (UNFSS Hub). This hub was launched following the 2021 UN Food Systems Summit by the UN deputy secretary-general and actors from FAO, IFAD, WFP, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the UN Development Coordination Office. Its objective is to play a central coordinating role among the diverse constituencies and to support national progress on the SDGs. Both CFS and the UNFSS Hub are hosted by FAO, and most of their staff is provided by the RBAs. The sections below explore, first, how coordination among the three key RBAs could be improved and, second, how interactions between the body of UN agencies located in Rome and non-state actors might be strengthened.

### Improving coordination among the three UN RBAs

Sometimes described as the UN’s food and agriculture hub, the RBAs have related but differing characters and mandates. They share a commitment to food security and an evolving interest in sustainable food systems. However, the individual institutions differ in their more specific roles. FAO, for example, is the UN’s specialised food and agriculture agency. It combines normative and operational functions in all sectors of food and agriculture, food security and nutrition, spanning the humanitarian–development continuum.<sup>14</sup> Its funding combines assessed contributions from each member state with voluntary contributions of

13. For a detailed overview of actors, see Rampa et al. (2017): <https://ecdpm.org/work/the-global-institutional-landscape-of-food-and-agriculture-how-to-achieve-sdg-2>

14. Outline of the Medium-Term Plan (2022-2035). Rome: FAO (CL 165/3), p. 31.





extra-budgetary resources. WFP is often perceived as a purely humanitarian agency, for delivering emergency food assistance. However, in this role it increasingly incorporates a development function, too, and it now focuses more explicitly on food systems. WFP is financed entirely by voluntary contributions. IFAD is an international financial institution, funded through periodic member state replenishments, with a mandate to eradicate poverty and hunger by “investing in rural people and enabling inclusive and sustainable transformation of rural areas, notably through smallholder agriculture-led growth”.<sup>15</sup>

The need for improved coordination among these three RBAs has been recognised for many years. For example, explicit commitments to strengthen RBA coordination were set out in strategic and collaboration papers in 2009 and 2016 and in a memorandum of understanding in 2018. The drive towards greater and more effective coordination has also been propelled by resource limitations, which have pushed the RBAs to pursue greater collaboration, synergy and convergence. Since 2015, this objective has been framed in terms of strengthening the three agencies' contribution to the 2030 Agenda, particularly, achievement of SDG 2.<sup>16</sup>

Anno 2022, RBA coordination has to be seen in the broader UN context, including the war in Ukraine, which has landed global food security in the eye of a geopolitical storm. All of the RBAs play important roles in UN humanitarian operations. For example, FAO and WFP co-lead the global Food Security Cluster.<sup>17</sup> Both of these agencies, moreover, have committed to the collaborative intent expressed in the UN's “New Way of Working”,<sup>18</sup> and both are actively exploring the opportunities and approaches implicit in the humanitarian–development–peace nexus.<sup>19</sup> RBA coordination has also been stimulated by the extensive reform process that the UN development system has been undergoing since 2019, to provide more coherent and integrated support to UN programme countries, in line with the requirements of the 2030 Agenda.<sup>20</sup>

The reforms within the UN development system have particularly reshaped the drivers of RBA coordination. They have had significant consequences at the country level, such as a stronger role of the UN Resident Coordinator (UNRC).<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, each of the RBAs' multi-annual country programmes is now expected to be clearly linked to a UN Sustainable Development Cooperation framework, preceded by a reinforced UN Common Country Analysis (CCA). In this context, considering the integrated nature of the 2030 Agenda, when analysing the efficiency of RBA coordination, a key question is how relevant it is in contributing to the 2030 Agenda.

The broad scope of RBA coordination means that it relates to a range of SDGs, beyond SDG 2, and particularly, to the 2030 Agenda's pledge to leave no one behind. RBA coordination is also relevant to the strategic direction of the UN development system. The repositioning of this system makes such coordination most pertinent at the country and regional levels – although the UN secretary-general's efficiency agenda<sup>22</sup> appears to imply a lesser relevance of RBA coordination in the joint delivery of core corporate services at the country level.

In 2021, the first independent evaluation of collaboration among the RBAs was published.<sup>23</sup> This jointly commissioned and independent study points out that although competition for resources continues in some contexts, there is a general recognition of the complementarity between the three RBAs. However, the evaluation also observes that, in some cases, current collaborative management processes are not the best way to stimulate joint work, with some types of collaboration imposing higher transaction costs.

As yet, the RBAs have made limited progress in reducing overlap, competition and duplication of effort. Nevertheless, there are some projects, countries and thematic areas, in which the complementarity that the RBAs can achieve is recognised and being exploited (e.g., on nutrition).

15. IFAD (2016). IFAD Strategic Framework (2016-2025): Enabling inclusive and sustainable rural transformation. Rome: IFAD, p. 5.

16. FAO, IFAD and WFP (2021). Joint evaluation of collaboration among the United Nations Rome-based agencies. Rome.

17. <https://fsccluster.org/page/about-food-security-cluster>

18. United Nations Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs (2017). New way of working. New York: OCHA.

19. FAO, IFAD and WFP. (2021). Joint evaluation of collaboration among the United Nations Rome-based agencies. Rome.

20. Weinlich, Silke et al. (2022). New rules, same practice? Analysing UN development system reform effects at the country level. Discussion Paper 3/2022. Bonn: Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE).

21. UNGA (2018). Repositioning of the United Nations development system in the context of the quadrennial comprehensive policy review of operational activities for development of the United Nations system (A/RES/72/279).

22. UN (2020). Quadrennial comprehensive policy review of operational activities for development of the United Nations system. A/RES/75/233.





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The evaluation underlines that misunderstandings over mandates and competition for funds between FAO and WFP persist, despite good technical collaboration on certain themes and tasks. A key finding is that the operating context of the RBAs is dynamic, with significant potential, and that realism and pragmatism are important for meaningful and effective collaboration. It specifies that efforts to promote RBA collaboration are not fully grounded in an accurate understanding of the conditions in which collaboration is most effectively pursued, and formal statements of corporate commitment to collaboration reflect this.

RBA coordination, as currently designed through various agreements, is not aimed at pursuing specific global targets. Rather, the agreements are process oriented and set a framework and strategic direction to facilitate and encourage coordination at all levels. While this may be appropriate, the lack of ambition regarding targets has implications for the ability of the RBAs to make a meaningful joint contribution to the 2030 Agenda.

In general, coordination appears to be easier around thematic and advocacy work than in formal operational project settings, where transaction costs are higher and procedures are not necessarily compatible, meaning that arranging joint action may be slower. Furthermore, the formal global structure and processes in place for RBA collaboration do little to strengthen coordination. While some effort has been made towards common messaging

and communication, joint corporate services tend to be pursued only when they offer clear practical benefits, and coordination has not become stronger in this regard.

The analysis of RBA coordination points to several ways it might be improved. One way would be to restructure and reinforce the RBA coordination architecture as part of the ongoing reform of the UN development system. In parallel, administrative task coordination could be further pursued, embracing the UN efficiency agenda. Second, governments and member states, as well as emerging non-state members, could take on a more active role in promoting RBA coordination. They have a clear responsibility in improving RBA efficiency and may occasionally (perhaps unintentionally) contribute to fragmentation, by commissioning comparable projects from individual RBAs. Governments' and members' attitudes towards coordination range from strong support to indifference, or dismay at perceived duplications of effort and competition. In many cases, donor support for coordination appears weaker and less coherent in practice than their advocacy of it implies. As recommended by the evaluation, member states of the RBA governing bodies should, in particular, reappraise and adequately resource their position on RBA coordination.<sup>24</sup> For example, they could consider annual monitoring of the RBAs' progress in following up on the recommendations of the evaluation. In addition, they could encourage the RBAs to engage in "horizontal peer review" to become more knowledgeable about the convergences and differences in their management systems, to enable coordinated action.


### Improving RBAs coordination through a partnership of non-state actors

The objectives discussed above in terms of improving transparency, inclusiveness and coordination of RBAs and RBA processes,<sup>25</sup> and the effectiveness of these in contributing to global food security and sustainable food systems, can be supported by the creation of a partnership of non-state actors in Rome. This is a third way in which RBA coordination could be improved. The partnership would be independent and designed to build networks, broker knowledge and facilitate agreements between groups of countries and among relevant stakeholders around food systems policy processes. It would thus help to ensure effective and

23. FAO, IFAD and WFP (2021). Joint evaluation of collaboration among the United Nations Rome-based agencies. Rome.

24. FAO, IFAD and WFP. 2021. Joint evaluation of collaboration among the United Nations Rome-based agencies. Rome.






systematic coordination between the RBAs and non-state actors, the latter including research institutions, think tanks, civil society, trade unions and the private sector.

An ecosystem of non-state actors, with different degrees of coordination among themselves, interacting with the UN intergovernmental machinery and international civil servants, exists nearly everywhere with an important or sufficiently large body of UN agencies and processes.<sup>26</sup> However, very few non-state actors have a steady or permanent representation in Rome dedicated to formulating and refining ideas and policymaking in the context of the RBAs and their processes. Individually, external experts and researchers, including some based in Rome, do play important roles in contributing to the RBAs' work; but they do so without a permanent or formal presence and without the systematic coordination and multi-actor dialogue that takes place in other "UN capitals". The Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples' Mechanism (CSM) and the Private Sector Mechanism (PSM) of the CFS are notable exceptions in this regard. But these coordination structures represent only a single group of actors, targeting a specific platform based in Rome, the CFS, through formal seats within an intergovernmental process; and this specific architecture may demonstrate its own weaknesses.<sup>27</sup>

To strengthen a conducive Rome-based non-state actor ecosystem, we propose a food systems knowledge and policy process brokering partnership that would work with and for the scientific community, think tanks, private sector, farmers' organisations and NGOs representing the youth, indigenous peoples and women. The partnership would advance three objectives:

1. Share experiences and knowledge around food systems transformation, policymaking and investments
2. Facilitate independent thematic policy dialogues related to the RBAs
3. Enhance coordination and cross-sectoral action

The partnership would be both a producer of research and knowledge, and a troubleshooter in relevant policy processes. It would facilitate processes to dispel bottlenecks, broker common understandings and deals among the involved actors, and



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- (1) Share experiences and knowledge around food systems transformation, policymaking and investments.
- (2) Facilitate independent thematic policy dialogues related to the RBAs.
- (3) Enhance coordination and cross-sectoral action.

contribute to minimise overlaps and maximise complementarities and opportunities for joint action – among RBAs as well as with their many partners. Through these objectives and activities, the partnership would also help the RBAs overcome some of the obstacles they encounter (such as those mentioned in earlier sections), contributing to enhanced effectiveness, transparency and inclusiveness of the processes they lead.

Food systems issues have become increasingly complex in recent years, with acceleration of the climate and planetary boundaries crisis, rising geopolitical tensions and the pandemic. The issues the world faces today go well beyond the traditional purview of the RBAs, and include, for example, health, climate and trade.<sup>28</sup> A stronger presence and coordination of non-state actors within the RBAs and their processes, through the proposed partnership, would help to improve horizontal synergies across these domains, which are now often addressed in thematic silos by separate intergovernmental

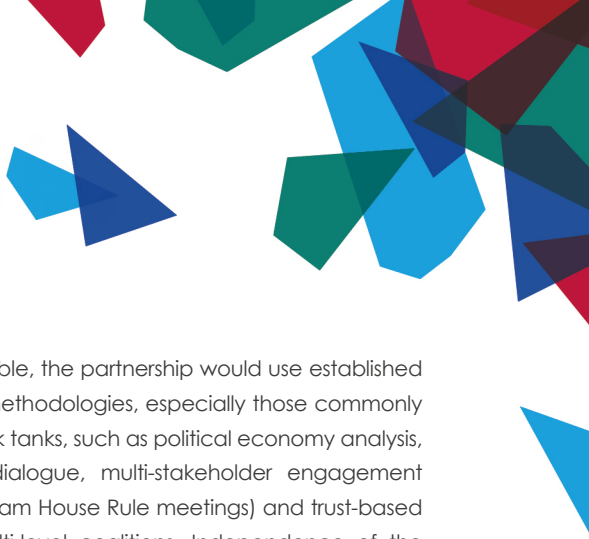
25. In this section "RBAs" and "RBAs processes", in addition to FAO, IFAD and WFP, include Bioversity\_CIAT, CFS and the UNFSS Hub.

26. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8013838/>

27. According to the 2017 CFS independent evaluation, "There were also CFS Members and stakeholders who were critical of the manner in which the CSM functions. There were groups that felt that their voices were not being heard in CFS as they were not given the space in the CSM.... The first theme related to the feeling that members of the PSM have that their issues were not given the same level of attention as issues raised by the CSM... Strong sentiments were expressed by the World Farmers' Organisation that their member organizations did not feel represented[,] neither [by] the CSM nor the PSM."

28. <https://ecdpm.org/work/the-global-institutional-landscape-of-food-and-agriculture-how-to-achieve-sdg-2>





processes. Non-state actors and their coalitions often have lessons to share on cross-sectoral work and the building of synergies. Their inclusion could furthermore facilitate the much-needed enhanced dialogue and cooperation between RBAs and other global thematic agencies, and their gradual policy convergence – as called for, for instance, by the recent CFS evaluation.<sup>29</sup>

At present, vertical coherence and complementarity between RBAs' headquarters and their global policy processes and regional and national offices and related local implementation initiatives are seen by some as weak.<sup>30</sup> By engaging strategically with the RBAs, the partnership could support synergies, share lessons and foster cooperation across the relevant levels of intervention (global-regional-national-local), as non-state actors tend to be more flexible and agile and less bureaucratic in exploiting multi-level governance arrangements and networks. This role could be facilitated by adopting a decentralised structure for the partnership, with a Rome-based secretariat and regional leads or focal points.

Other weaknesses that could be rectified by the proposed partnership are the RBAs' inability to systematically and consistently involve non-state actors in their processes and the slow pace of decision-making in important policy areas due to ideological differences and other intergovernmental bottlenecks.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, the partnership could facilitate uptake by non-state actors of the results of RBA research, and promote more adequate input by non-state actors in the research conducted by RBAs. To address these weaknesses, the partnership would have three key roles:

1. Work directly with and for a wide range of communities and constituencies, including those that lack a voice in larger and more formal intergovernmental and bureaucratic processes
2. Establish a network of mutual learning among and between relevant non-state actors and the RBAs
3. Depoliticise diplomacy and public-private discussions, towards finding faster compromises, for example, in the language of formal RBA declarations and strategies

To make this possible, the partnership would use established non-state actor methodologies, especially those commonly employed by think tanks, such as political economy analysis, informal policy dialogue, multi-stakeholder engagement (e.g., using Chatham House Rule meetings) and trust-based facilitation of multi-level coalitions. Independence of the partnership in all of these activities would be especially important, as an autonomous role is fundamental for credible brokerage of strategic but complex international and multi-actor processes and initiatives. Indeed, a series of evaluations has raised concerns that funding streams around the RBAs drive strategy rather than the other way around.<sup>32</sup>

The recent creation of the UNFSS Hub, as an outcome of the 2021 UN Food Systems Summit, is welcome and could contribute to addressing some of the abovementioned bottlenecks regarding the RBAs and their processes. It is expected to take on essential coordination functions to bring together food systems knowledge and expertise from diverse UN agencies and other constituencies. Though the UNFSS Hub "will lead engagement with the broader ecosystem of actors, including from science", it remains a UN body, with oversight in the hands of a steering group made up of principles from FAO, IFAD, WFP and other UN agencies, and staffed with their personnel, and primarily supporting countries and promoting alignment and integration of actors' efforts with country demands.<sup>33</sup> It will thus likely replicate current intergovernmental and RBA dynamics, including the correspondent weaknesses.

The partnership, in contrast, would be an independent non-state actor coalition working with, not for, the RBAs. It would be a flexible and agile partner, not a new institution, with an alliance of think tanks acting as its secretariat, ensuring application of the abovementioned methodologies. It would not duplicate the functions and activities of existing agencies; rather, it would independently support them, to help broker better understandings, agreements and collaborations among non-state actors, RBAs (including CFS and the UNFSS Hub) and between different groupings of RBAs' member states.

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29. "Even at the global level, the evidence suggests that the Committee is 'Rome-centric' and not sufficiently engaged with other global structures."

30. Lele, U., Agarwal, M., Baldwin, B.C., Goswami, S. (2021). *Food for all: International organizations and the transformation of agriculture*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

31. <https://ecdpn.org/work/the-global-institutional-landscape-of-food-and-agriculture-how-to-achieve-sdg-2>

32. See, e.g., WFP (2020). *Strategic evaluation of funding WFP's work*. Rome: WFP; see also FAO (2019). *Evaluation of FAO's strategic results framework*. Rome: FAO. This is a risk that may also affect many of the non-state actors seeking to interact with the RBAs.

33. The hub has six key functions: facilitate implementation of national pathways; strengthen strategic thought leadership, in support of countries; engage the ecosystem of support across the UN system and more widely; leverage means of implementation; communicate and advocate for a food systems approach; and prepare for the 2023 stocktaking moment. See [https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/2022/07/hub\\_faqs\\_en.pdf](https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/2022/07/hub_faqs_en.pdf)



## CONCLUSION

Progress towards SDG 2 is increasingly under threat due to a combination of increasingly daunting global challenges. While progress towards the zero hunger goal was already stagnating before the pandemic (2015-2019), severe climate events and the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and the conflict in Ukraine have further worsened malnutrition and food security. The food and agriculture global institutional landscape, especially the three RBAs, have substantial potential to support domestic strategies to end hunger. However, institutional and financial fragmentation, and major issues affecting governance and coordination of the RBAs and associated structures in the UN food and agriculture system, continue to hinder their capacity to contribute to achieving the SDGs, particularly SDG 2.

Building on the lessons learnt from the 2022 IFAD Open Consultation Forum and the fruitful cooperation between experts from ETTG and Southern Voice, three policy recommendations have been formulated with the aim of contributing to the transition towards a healthier and more sustainable food system:

- Increase the transparency of appointment processes for RBA leadership, through independent and public events with the participation of key stakeholders (CSOs, research institutions and the private sector), and including RBA staff, as in the example of the 2022 IFAD Open Consultation Forum.
- Restructure and reinforce the architecture for RBA coordination in the framework of the broader reforms of the UN development system. Coordinated administrative processes should be further pursued, embracing the UN efficiency agenda. The member states with seats in RBA governing bodies should reappraise and adequately resource their position on RBA coordination, for example, by annually monitoring progress made in following up on the recommendations presented by the 2021 FAO-IFAD-WFP joint evaluation. The RBAs should also engage in "horizontal peer review" to better understand each other's management systems and enable coordination.
- A food systems knowledge and policy process brokering partnership should be established to create and maintain a conducive Rome-based non-state actor ecosystem. The partnership would work with and for the scientific community, think tanks, the private sector, farmers' organisations, and NGOs representing the youth, indigenous peoples and women. ■

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