

Feeding the G20's Ego: Food Security and Negligence at the Hamburg Summit

REMI EDWARDS

The University of Sheffield

Executive Summary

Food security was defined by the [Food and Agriculture Association of the United Nations](#) (FAO) as the point “when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life”. This is clearly an issue that deserves significant attention by the international community and a central focus in global policy discussions, particularly given that 795 million people worldwide suffer chronic hunger, while 2 billion are insufficiently nourished. The issue’s importance is further bolstered by its intrinsic links to development, poverty and climate change. Developing countries are more prone to problems in securing food for the population as they are often net importers of food as domestic producers struggle to compete with cheap foreign imports due to farming subsidies in industrialised countries. This makes them more vulnerable to global price hikes, which has particularly devastating consequences for those in poverty, the incidence of which is also higher in developing countries. Furthermore, agriculture will be harshly affected by the impacts of climate change, as well as

animal agriculture being one of the main contributors to rising temperatures.

The G20 has, since the introduction of food security to its policy agenda during France’s presidency in 2011, taken a narrow view of agricultural and economic reform with regard to achieving food security, significantly hindering prospective success. In 2011, the G20 Agricultural Ministers produced a report of ten key recommendations for reforms that sought to smooth current economic practices and norms related to agriculture, and introduce coping mechanisms for communities and farmers affected by environmental problems and price shocks. They also suggested implementing a number of structural and regulatory economic reforms. The G20 was in a prime position to officially adopt these recommendations and bring about genuine change in agricultural production and food security in the wake of the 2007 food crisis, yet decided to pursue just one of the structural economic reforms recommended in the report. The Action Plan on Food Price Volatility and Agriculture was released identifying five main areas of importance: 1) increased productivity through technological improvement; 2) research and investment to improve yields; 3) launch of the

Agricultural Market Information System (AMIS) to reduce market uncertainty and thus prevent sudden price hikes; 4) stronger policy coordination between G20 countries and the UN, endorsing market-based risk management strategies at farm level; and 5) increased regulation and supervision of agricultural markets, the only structural reform proposed.

Narrowing the Agenda

The 2012 Mexican Presidency's treatment of the issue of food security compounded this narrow focus on productivity, risk management and financial regulations. Production featured particularly strongly, with a recommendation that productivity would need to increase by up to 100 per cent in developing countries by 2050. [Other recommendations](#) were made with regard to strengthening food market resilience, sustainable use of natural resources, particularly land and water, investment and infrastructure, reduction in food waste and harvest loss and the sharing of technology and information. Last year's G20 summit in China saw further reassertions of these themes, calling for coordinated policy, the sharing of knowledge and technology, ICT and innovation to increase productivity. However, in light of the 2016 Paris Climate Change Agreement, there has been greater emphasis put on the sustainability aspect of agricultural reform regarding CO2 emissions, water usage and antimicrobial resistance. This has also been articulated in alignment with the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), explicitly acknowledging the intrinsic relationship between

development, climate change and food security.

2017's Unremarkable Remarks

This year's German Presidency first dealt with food security at the G20 Agricultural Ministers conference in January. Again, the agenda remained largely similar, with focuses on water management and productivity enhancement, framed in terms of compliance with the SDGs, UNFCCC and Paris Climate Change Agreement. It called for greater policy coherence between G20 countries and the UN, private and public investment to ensure sustainable water management including breeding programmes, risk management and resilience and reduction of food loss and waste. In addition, the introduction of more accessible ICT and big data to be readily shared to enhance efficiency and sustainability, enhanced connectivity and Open Data initiatives to encourage the sharing of experience and good practice have been confirmed as objectives.

The G20 Leaders' [Declaration](#) has also named antimicrobial resistance as a key area to be taken forward at next year's summit in Argentina. There are commitments to "increase agricultural productivity and resilience in a sustainable manner, while aiming to protect, manage and use efficiently water and water-related ecosystems", along with commitments to more widespread usage of ICT for farmers and strengthening the AMIS to provide more transparency in agricultural markets to reduce volatility.

Hamburgers go Meatless?

Climate change and sustainable development initiatives in the Declaration also bear relevance to the food security agenda, indeed there are a number of problems with the way food security and agriculture has been dealt with by the G20, and these largely fall into two categories. The first is a series of shortcomings when it comes to radically combatting climate change and other environmental issues, and the second is a failure or reluctance to deal with structural economic issues that contribute to food insecurity. Both these areas are underpinned by an unwillingness and inability to stray too far from the status quo, partly due to a lack of global legitimacy but also an apathetic acceptance of the global system that largely serves the interests of the G20's economies, some of the largest in the world.

In terms of the environment, G20 countries have suggested that reforms should look to invest in technologies and practices that use water in the most efficient ways possible. Climate change is referred to but usually in relation to ways of improving the resilience of farmers to cope in the face of rising global temperatures. However, crucially, what is ignored is the contribution certain agricultural sectors make to climate change. Emissions from animal agriculture comprises [18 per cent of human-driven carbon emissions](#), more than global transport, yet this pressing issue is invariably left off the global policy agenda, despite frequent assertions of a

multilateral commitment to combat climate change and foster sustainable development.

The 2017 G20 Leaders' Declaration reiterates 19 countries' commitment to the full implementation of the Paris Agreement, with the exception of the United States, which the other countries were unable to convince to remain a part. It is therefore odd that such a leading contributor to human-driven climate change is being left off the agenda. Furthermore, it contradicts the G20's own explicit agricultural goals as regards the role of agriculture itself in reducing excessive water usage. Animal agriculture requires huge volumes of water to feed and sustain livestock. One kilogram of beef requires [15,415 litres of water](#), while just 1,608 is required for the same weight of bread. Yet reducing meat production is never discussed with regard to reducing agricultural water consumption. In addition, land used for grazing occupies around [26 per cent of the earth's ice-free surface](#), and feed crop production uses around 30 per cent of productive land. If the land used to produce meat, and the crops required to feed livestock, could be harnessed to grow less environmentally damaging, cheaper and more productive crops, this could make food more abundant, affordable and sustainable for humans. This would further the aims of food security as defined by the FAO.

Curbing animal agriculture would not only advance efforts to reduce the effects of climate change enormously and conserve water, but would also improve prospects for achieving food security, particularly in

developing countries. Reducing the production of meat and consumption may be done in a variety of ways. Farmers could be incentivised to diversify their output and cut down on livestock rearing in favour of crops through offering conditional subsidies to farmers in developing countries. This would have the additional benefit of making the agricultural markets more accessible for such farmers, and they may thus also benefit economically from the reform. This would aid economic development in rural areas and contribute to the advancement of other policy commitments, particularly with relation to the SDGs.

Klaus Schilder of the G20 engagement group, Civil20, failed to adequately respond to questions when pressed for his opinions on why issues surrounding animal agriculture have been omitted from the global policy agenda given their significance to both climate change and food security. These two issues are engaged with in their policy suggestions to the G20 leaders, yet they remain silent on issues of animal agriculture. He was unskilfully evasive in his answer, drawing attention instead to their support for smallholding and subsistence farmers in developing countries with no mention of livestock rearing. When pressed further, he again failed to answer, never once using the words animal agriculture, livestock or meat production.

It therefore seems strange for the G20, even its more radical advisors such as Civil20, to be so reluctant to even make reference to the industry. It may be due to

the surprisingly high incidence in the murder of people who have spoken out about the damage done by animal husbandry in attempts to silence them, [reportedly 1,100 since 1995](#). Another factor may be that encouraging populations to eat less meat is politically unpalatable, particularly in certain cultural contexts. Leaders may be reluctant to pursue such policies if it meant falling out of favour with their domestic electorates. Finally, it is unlikely that some G20 members would agree to such curbing measures as their economies benefit hugely from meat production, such as Argentina. This is not to say that they would not benefit from diversifying agriculture and subsidy-assisted crop production, but it would also be easy to assume an “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it” attitude to agricultural success.

Availability vs. Accessibility

With regard to enhancing productivity, the G20 rightly promotes the sharing of information and technologies to increase yields and reduce waste. This would increase food abundance and reduce costs for the benefit of all. However, this narrow focus misses the point that often food insecurity is not caused by an unavailability of food, but an inaccessibility. [Research suggests](#) that economic conditions are a far greater contributor to price volatility than the actual production of food, thus devising [appropriate economic policies](#) to affect food accessibility needs to go hand in hand with those to bolster production. When a combination of low incomes and high global food prices render families unable to feed their children, enhanced

productivity would only partially contribute to solving the problem of food insecurity as it may lower prices to an extent. Poverty discourse should be jointly considered along with enhanced productivity in order to improve the purchasing power of low-income families. If this were combined with cheaper, more local food products grown by subsidised farmers in the developing world, food security may become a much more achievable end for millions. Improving affordability could be done by pursuing global price controls. This could potentially involve the reduction or withdrawal of subsidies in developed economies, encouraging producers to reduce prices to maintain competitiveness, thus decreasing global food prices. This, however, might prove unpopular among the developed countries of the G20 as it could reduce profits for their domestic agricultural industries. Additionally, in terms of purchasing power, governments, NGOs and international organisations could provide cash transfers to families living in poverty on the condition they have regular health check ups to ensure they are sufficiently nourished. Such policies have been pursued in New Left governments in Latin America, for example in Bolivia and Venezuela, and have proved extremely successful in reducing the incidence of poverty and malnutrition.

Vested Interests, Inability and Inaction

The shortcomings of the G20's approach to food security says a lot for its ability to achieve, and its

sincerity in pursuing some of its main goals, particularly climate change, poverty reduction and food security. Curbing animal agriculture and increasing the purchasing power of those in poverty could potentially positively affect all three of those areas, yet they have never even reached the table. The summit has tended to shy away from politically difficult issues, instead [pursuing "safe" options](#) such as productivity and information access, while maintaining a façade of intent with broad-brush policy aspirations. It lends itself to the idea that the G20 will only ever seek to bring about moderate reform rather than structural change, and will often act in the interests of its own economies rather than putting those who do not benefit from neoliberal globalisation first. Its relentless upholding of the status quo, as well as its unaccountability and lack of implementation power render it conservative in its normative aims.

Food security in particular is an issue that effects the poorest countries most severely, so it seems perverse that a group of twenty of the world's largest economies (although, of course, some are not without their fair share of inequality and hunger) are influencing the global policy agenda in issues that disproportionately concern those they do not represent. While its implementation power is minimal,

the prestige of those involved in policy formation at the G20 lead its decisions to still [carry some weight](#), influencing NGOs and other international organisations such as the FAO. The G20 therefore has [redefined food security](#) as an issue revolving around productivity and information flows, rather than rooted in the structural inequalities of the global economy. The G20 members account for 80 per cent of global output and two-thirds of the world's population. They are in a unique position to make structural alterations to the global economy, but instead have only pushed for smoothing current practices in the form of increasing

production, encouraging information flows and creating mechanisms to cope with volatility. They have therefore exempted themselves from accepting responsibility and complicity in upholding a system that it is not in their interest to change.

Remi Edwards is a final-year BA International Relations and Politics student at the University of Sheffield.