Chapter 1: Food governance: a rapid historical review

The levels of decision-making seem to be jumping around like frogs, from the national scene on up. The temptation of just huckling down to work in one’s own field is strong. But it is no longer an option.

Interview with Ndiogou Fall, West African farmer leader, 2002.

Reviewing the experience of the post-World War II decades in addressing food issues is a fruitful prelude to reflecting on the present. This chapter will trace simultaneously the evolution of three strongly interconnected elements: the institutions and the informal spaces in which global decision-making has been exercised; the paradigms on which strategies and actions have been based; and the actors and interests that have played a significant role in the governance game. Placing trends and ideas in the historical contexts in which they have developed helps to guard against their “naturalization”, their widespread acceptance as “just the way things are” rather than as products of specific time-bound social, economic, cultural and political conjunctures.

The concept of food regimes is an effective tool for contextualization since it situates food within global power systems as they evolve over time. As described by one of its original framers, the food regime concept refers to “the political structuring of world capitalism, and its organization of agricultures to provision labor and/or consumers in such a way as to reduce wage costs and enhance commercial profits” (McMichael 2013b, p. 8). The rules-setting involved is legitimated by ideologies such as “free” trade, free enterprise, and development aid aimed at achieving “modernization”. Thanks to these discursive justifications, the way in which the regime operates appears not to be an imposition but just the natural state of affairs, until such time as the equilibrium that has allowed it to function breaks down. ‘Food regimes emerge out of contests among social movements and powerful institutions, and reflect a negotiated frame for instituting new rules. The relationships and practices of a regime soon come to seem natural. When the regime works really well, the consequences of actions are predictable and it appears to work without rules’ (Friedmann 2005, p. 234). Three successive food regimes have been identified. These correspond to geopolitical-economic conjunctures of which the first two were state-dominated, first by the British state in the 1870s-1930s and then the U.S. state in the 1950s-1970s. These two regimes were succeeded by a third one dominated by corporate-financial power in the 1980s-2000s that is currently undergoing a period of crisis (McMichael 2013b, p. 8). We will refer to these regimes as we conduct our review. The survey will be a cursory one, intended to provide an illustrative historical overview. The food-related actors and interests, paradigms and institutions and governance processes briefly presented here will be examined in greater detail in successive chapters, respectively in Chapters 2, 3 and 4. The composite time line at the close of the chapter illustrates the evolution of these three components of food governance, with no pretense to being comprehensive, along with the flow of successive food regimes. The box below provides a brief introduction to food regime analysis.

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<th>Box 1.1 Food regime analysis</th>
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<td>The food regime project is an ongoing analysis by scholars and activists of the political geography of the global food system....It emerged in the 1980s as a methodological initiative to specify relations between world ordering and agro food trade. It claimed that episodes of restructuring and transition are bounded by periods of stable patterns of capital accumulation. It is an intrinsically comparative approach to recent world history, insofar as food regimes come and go with political</td>
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re-ordering, in a mutually conditioning dynamic. The distinctiveness of the first two food regimes lay in the instrumental role of food in securing global hegemony – in the first, Britain’s ‘workshop of the world’ project linked the fortunes of an emergent industrial capitalism to expanding cheap food supply zones across the world; in the second, the United States deployed food aid to create alliances, markets and opportunities for its intensive agro-industrial model. Market hegemony defines the third food regime and its role in a broad neo-liberal project dedicated to securing transnational circuits of money and commodities (including food) – displacing smallholders into a casual global labor force for capital...Each period, and the transitions between them, have reframed the politics of development and the scope and significance of agricultural and food technologies. In this sense, the food regime concept offers a unique comparative-historical lens on the political and ecological relations of modern capitalism writ large. The food regime conceptualizes how particular food complexes (from seed technologies through cropping systems to food processing/manufacturing) and food circuits in each regime support the exercise of particular forms of power in expanding and sustaining fields of market and ideological dominance.
Adapted from McMichael (2013b, pp. 1-12)

The 1940s and 1950s: a new multilateral architecture and a bottomless faith in science and technology

Food policy was the purview of institutions located essentially at national or local level before World War II. The co-existence in the world of widespread malnutrition and global over-availability of food had, indeed, become evident by the ‘30s and the League of Nations had entertained acrimonious debate about how to address it. However, war broke out before remedial measures could be taken (McKeon 2009a, p.17, Shaw 2008, p.7-8).

This global unbalance was a sign of the breakdown of what has been termed the first truly integrated world food regime (1870-1930s). Centered on Britain and its empire, it involved imports to Europe of colonial tropical products along with basic grains and livestock imports which provided cheap food for the emerging European industrial classes. The benefits that accrued to the West were achieved at the cost of famines and disruption of local economies and societies in other parts of the world (Davis 2001). This operation was legitimized by the “civilizing narrative” that accompanied empire and colonization. It was justified also by the free trade ideology ushered in with the repeal in 1846 of the Corn Laws that had protected British agriculture but hampered the rising industrial class’s need to provision cheap food for its workers. The balance of interests that had sustained this food regime broke down in the early 20th century due to a combination of factors. These included anti-imperial counter-movements on the part of the colonized, inter-state rivalry among European states, and the collapse of the gold standard which had acted as the foundation for a world wheat price. Economic nationalism in Europe, post WWI depression and the ecological disaster of the U.S. dust bowl rang down the curtain on the first food regime as the winds of WWII began to blow (McMichael op.cit. p.32).

The establishment of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) in 1944, was an institutional watershed so far as global inter-state food governance was concerned. Situated within the emerging UN system, it was heralded as a contribution to building a better post-war society and guarding against another global conflict. The founding members of FAO shared the objective of combating hunger as both a moral and a security imperative. Consensus broke down, however, on the role of international institutions in this regard, especially where food security impinged on trade and what were seen to be “national interests”.

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Conflict between political commitment to long-term public collective goals and contrasting short-term particular national or private interests is a constant in the history of global food governance and a leit-motif of this book. A reaction of moral indignation to such incoherence may well be justified but does not suffice. It is necessary to read beneath the rhetoric and understand the interests at play. In Boyd Orr’s own assessment, “Britain and America were not prepared to give either funds or authority to an organization over which they had not got full control. Britain might have lost her advantage of cheap food imports, while the US thought that she could do better for herself as a world power through bilateral aid to other countries” as an outlet for its recurrent surplus stimulated by post-depression policies and WWII production efforts (Boyd Orr and Lubbock 1953, p. 57 quoted in Shaw op.cit., p. 27). Opposition by these two governments was all it took. Global food governance decision-making in this period was dominated by a few powerful Western countries. Much of the South, of course, was still under colonial rule. The purview of global rules-making was limited, however. State sovereignty was defended against global encroachment and within national boundaries the state’s role in stabilizing prices and ensuring food supplies was acknowledged. Although governments were the formal decision-makers, commodity traders were a strong lobby force and, as we have seen, contributed significantly to U.S.-Great Britain opposition to the World Food Board’s potential interference in their commercial interests.

Scientists were playing an important role in building the paradigms on which decision-making was based. Foundations entered the scene as actors with the start-up of the Green Revolution when the Norman Borlaug – Rockefeller Foundation partnership was established in 1944. The challenge of fighting hunger in the post-World War II period was framed essentially as one of growing more food by applying an agricultural productivism approach based on science and technology (Lang et al. 2009, p.27-29). This, indeed, was the era in which President Truman pronounced his Point Four inaugural speech: “Greater production is the key to prosperity and peace. And the key to greater production is a wider and more vigorous application of modern scientific and technical knowledge” (Truman 1949). In two short sentences this speech enunciates several of the key terms and concepts that we will be critiquing in this book: the cause-effect link postulated between “greater production” and “prosperity and peace”, the uncomfortably undefined term “modern”, and the implication that science and technology can be viewed as objective given that are not subject to conditioning by mindsets or economic incentives. Truman’s Point Four speech has also been identified as the launch of “the age of development” (Sachs 1992, p. 2). This much unpacked concept is viewed by many critics, beyond its declared humanitarian objectives, as part of the post-war reaction to the security threat of Third World poverty and the rising influence of the Soviet Union, the first country that had industrialized outside of capitalism. Discourse lauding the push for the “development” of those countries deemed to be losers in the race, rooted in the “idea of progress” (Bury
1960) that has played such a foundational role in the West, has served to sanctify the role of the “developers” and to legitimate their often self-serving recipes for addressing the problems of the “developing world” (Cush 1995, p.xiii; Escobar 1995, p.5).

This complex of institutions, actors, interests and paradigms is understood in food regime analysis as constituting the second regime, centered around the U.S. The U.S. government had reacted to the combined adversities of the depression and the dust bowl disaster with a program of state-subsidized, input and energy-heavy stimulation of agricultural commodity production complemented by food aid as an outlet for the resulting surplus production. Food aid was used ostensibly to fight world hunger. In fact it served to contain communist overtures to countries of the South as they attained independence and to open up their markets to American agro-exports while promoting the dispossession of their patently “un-modern” peasantry (Patel and McMichael 2010, p.15). As candidly described by President Eisenhower when he signed the bill first establishing it into law in 1954, food aid was intended to “lay the basis for a permanent expansion of our exports of agricultural products with lasting benefits to ourselves and peoples of other lands” (US Food Aid and Security nd). As such it has been a successful instrument. By 1986, 7 of the 10 leading importers of US farm goods were previous Food for Peace recipients (Hancock 1989, p.168 quoted in Schanbacher 2010, p.33).

In parallel, developing countries were encouraged to adopt the Green Revolution technical package of high yielding hybrid seed dependent on agri-chemicals and irrigation, touted as key to agricultural productivism (Patel 2012). At the same time they were induced to profit from the easy credit available at that time to engage in capital and technology intensive development schemes parroting the West’s agricultural modernization and industrialization-based path to development. This bubble burst in the late ’70s when interest rates rose sharply, leaving the countries that has taken the bait saddled with debt as well as inappropriate and un-utilizable industrial complexes.

The 1960s and 1970s: institutional global food governance vacillates in the face of a global crisis...and corporations pick up the slack.

The balance of power within the UN was revolutionized by the coming to independence of a host of former colonies in the early ’60s. The group of developing countries – G77 – was established in 1964, introducing North-South rivalry alongside of East-West. The G77, numerically superior in the UN, championed a more equitable New International Economic Order (NIEO) of which the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) and the UN Center on Transnational Corporations were two of the institutional centerpieces. The NIEO sought to move towards more symmetrical world trade and finance arrangements involving measures such as improved terms of trade, particularly for the commodities that the developing world exported, and greater control over the operations of multinational corporations in their territories. These objectives clearly clashed with US and European efforts to keep raw material prices low and to maintain developing country dependence on imports of food and manufactures. In this conjuncture FAO was an agency to which the developing countries attached importance as an instrument that could help them valorize their agricultural commodities and achieve food security.

A world food crisis in the mid ’70s turned the spotlight on the FAO, under fire from the powerful economies of the West. Pulling in the opposite direction to the G77, the OECD countries reacted to the crisis by dismantling the various functions that FAO exercised as the UN’s “Ministry of Agriculture” (ETC 2009). The establishment in 1971 of the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) had already excised agricultural science from the UN family and headquartered it at the World Bank. A World Food Conference was held in 1974 to address the crisis, under the auspices of the UN rather than the FAO. This represented a big power gesture of lack of confidence in the capacity for effective action of the agency that
they themselves had castrated at its foundation. The Conference failed once again to address the real issues, such as the need for a global system of food reserves and regulation of agricultural trade in the name of food security (Aziz 1975). It proposed instead the creation of a top-heavy policy body - the World Food Council - that had no authority over the myriad of UN system bodies concerned in some way with food, but which nonetheless eroded FAO’s normative power until it was discontinued in 1993 (Shaw 2007). As for the financing of agriculture, it was hived off from FAO and entrusted to the newly established International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD). Finally, the World Food Program with its responsibilities for reacting to food emergencies, a strategic area for the US given its surplus production, was progressively separated out from its original home in FAO and established as an independent UN agency.

In paradigmatic terms, the optimistic post-war phase was shaken by famines that hit the Sahel and Ethiopia in the ‘70s and by the rise in the cost of oil leading to escalating fuel and food prices. The food crisis heralded the breakdown of the equilibrium on which the food regime centered on the U.S. had been based and opened the way to the progressive emergence of a third regime, led by corporations. The U.S. hegemony had prepared the way for this handover by facilitating the international re-organization of agricultural provisioning around transnational commodity complexes covering the entire chain from production to consumption. The freedom of enterprise that the U.S. regime touted set the scene for an increasingly private regime of global trade managed by transnational corporations (McMichael op.cit. p.40). Indeed, the crisis was seized by the growing body of neoliberal advocates as an occasion to argue that the world’s food system was overly dependent on subsidies and states and to push for market liberalization and privatization as the way forward (Johnson 1973).

### Box 1.2 Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism advocates freer movement of goods, resources and enterprises and reduction of the policy role of the state and its interventions in the economic sphere. To achieve this involves removing controls deemed to hamper free trade, such as tariffs, regulations, certain standards and legislation (including those protecting workers and the environment), restrictions on capital flows and investment. Guiding principles behind this ideology include:

- Sustained economic growth is the way to human progress.
- “Free” markets without government “interference” would ensure the most efficient and socially optimal allocation of resources.
- Economic globalization would be beneficial to everyone.
- Privatization is a more efficient way of providing services (water, education, research, etc.) than through the public sector.

Adapted from Shah (2010).

At the same time, the Green Revolution narrative reached its apex in this period with its emphasis on a particular technical package as the solution to hunger. Synergetic with the political and economic interests of its promoters and supported by foreign aid and policy advice, the Green Revolution proved to be an effective means for exporting the industrial agricultural model to countries in Asia and Latin America and for seeking to contain agrarian unrest that might otherwise have taken a more revolutionary turn (Clapp 2012, p. 33). The paradigm of productivism was just as comfortable with a market-led orientation as it had been with Truman’s vision of a greater role for state-led development programs.
The Western powers’ fear of rural uprising was not paranoid. This period was one in which popular mobilization for agrarian reform was strong in Latin America and in Asian countries like the Philippines. Occupations of land that would lead to the establishment of the Brazilian Landless Workers Movement (MST) in 1984 got underway already during the ’70s. Independence struggles in some African countries, like Mozambique and Algeria, had agrarian reform and support for peasant agriculture as basic planks in their platforms. In post-WWII Italy, peasants in Sicily and other regions began to occupy and cultivate land left fallow by absentee landlords setting off what would become a major land reform program. In all regions, national struggles and organization laid the foundations for what would become global mobilization in the ’80s.

In terms of dominant actors, despite the rise of market liberalization solutions a considerable role continued to be recognized for the state in regulating and supporting agriculture at national level through mechanisms such as food stocks, supply management, commodity boards and price support. However, urban bias – then as now – pushed developing country governments to favor cheap food for the urban population over the interests of the scattered rural producers who were much less likely to rise up in protest. Alongside of governments, commercial interests became increasingly strong contenders on the global scene in this period. “Upstream” agribusiness profited from the Green Revolution-promoted seed varieties and related input packages thanks to corporation-promoted initiatives to protect intellectual property rights. The first international treaty introducing intellectual property into agriculture – the International Union for the Protection of New Varieties of Plants (UPOV) - entered into force in 1968 and inaugurated the protection of the products of corporate investments over the eons-old right of farmers to plant their own harvested seeds (Tansey and Rajotte 2008, pp. 32-34).

From the 1980s up to 2005: triumph of economic globalization and the “free” market...and the emergence of alternatives

From the early ’80s on the global governance of food has been dominated, in formal institutional terms, by the international financial organizations – the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) – and successively the World Trade Organization (WTO). Developing countries that had been strangled by debt with the credit crunch of the ’70s were obliged to turn to the WB and the IMF for bailout loans. These came accompanied by neoliberal structural adjustment regimes which drastically reduced the policy space of national governments, opened developing country markets to unfair competition with subsidized products from abroad, and cut back severely on state support to and regulation of agriculture. Developing countries were encouraged to abandon their national and regional grain reserves on the grounds that integrated global markets would provide stability (Lawrence et al. 2010, p.232). Here too, as in the case of the push for “development”, we find a marriage between sincere conviction of the well-foundedness of the neoliberal recipe, on the one hand, and adherence to the particular interests it promoted on the other. This increasingly unconvincing union has endured in the face of growing evidence of structural adjustment’s negative impacts on poverty and food security.

The establishment of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1995 and the promulgation of global trade regulations regarding agriculture did the rest (Weis 2007, FAO 2006, pp.75-76). The call for freer trade in agriculture – previously excluded from global liberalization negotiations - was supported by the U.S. as a way of reducing the costs of its agricultural support system and pushing its main competitor, Europe, to cut back its export subsidies. It was also promoted by a group of other agro-exporting countries, including some emerging economies like Brazil, that have a strong comparative advantage in the sector based on their commercialized farming classes (Weis 2007, p.131, Clapp 2012, p.66). Other developing countries
were totally unprepared to understand what they were getting themselves into when they signed onto the complex WTO Agreement on Agriculture (AoA). The negotiated text made it possible for developed countries to maintain their support for and protection of their agricultural sectors in a disguised fashion, while developing countries were obliged to further open their markets. It is worth noting that the AoA was framed without even a rhetorical nod towards the interests of the peasant producers who constituted the majority of the world’s population.

The Doha Round of WTO negotiations, launched in 2001, was declaredly intended to cater to the concerns of developing countries but failed to do so. It progressively ground to a halt until a very minimal agreement was finally reached in December 2013. The space has been filled by a myriad of bilateral trade agreements like the US-Canada-Mexico North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) denounced by Mexican demonstrators in our opening paragraph and the fraught Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) that the European Union has been attempting to negotiate with the ex-colonies of European countries since 2002. These agreements have gone even further than the WTO in prying open markets in the Global South to foreign corporate investment and enterprise and reducing national government capacity to regulate them.

A parallel result of this take-over by the financial institutions was the reduction of the policy weight of the UN system, concentrated on “soft” policies such as peace and human rights in contrast to the “hard” economic realms in which liberalization prevailed. “Corporations are left free to profit from the production of food, leaving the governance structure to feed those that the market bypasses” (Rosin et al. 2012, p.6). The end of the Cold War marked by the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 gave rise to hopes that the resources that had been invested in armaments could be reallocated to constitute a “development dividend” and that the attention that had been focused on bi-power competition might be recast into collective attention to emerging global problems. The 1990s were the decade of UN global summits and of reflection on global governance, to which we will return in Chapter 2. However, this same period, during which the UN sought to recuperate authority, saw a multiplication and further fragmentation of negotiation forums impacting on food security. Some of these were situated within the UN family – such as the multitude of conventions stemming from the 1992 Rio Conference on environment and development. Others were outside. In the latter category, the G7/8 constituted itself in this period as a powerful and exclusive alternative forum for addressing world problems, championed by its advocates as a more effective alternative to what they viewed as a cumbersome and argumentative UN.

One of the most significant phenomena impinging on food governance in this period took place outside of the world of intergovernmental institutions. It was the galloping growth of corporate ownership, concentration and integration in the food system that translated into a disproportional corporate impact on global food decision-making (ETC 2008, McMichael 2005, MacMillan 2005, Clapp and Fuchs 2009). The Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property (TRIPS) adopted in 1994 as part of the establishment of the WTO, a key factor in stimulating corporate control of the food system, was pushed by the U.S. under pressure from a group of large corporation lobbyists against the wishes of the developing countries (Roffe 2008, pp.50-51). If states had managed markets in the context of the development vision announced by Truman in 1949, the tables were now turned and states were put at the service of markets. The resulting “corporate food regime” has been described in the terms reproduced in the box below.

**Box 1.3 The corporate food regime**
Under the corporate food regime cheap food depends on the union of North Atlantic grains and 
southern fruits, vegetables and seafood in an international division of agricultural labor coordinated 
by transnational corporate supply chains, with trade relations governed by International Financial 
Institutions (IFIs), structural adjustment policies and WTO protocols. With the combined effect of 
intellectual property protection, agribusiness centralization and subsidization, and private quality 
standards for global retailing, the agro-export model fostered a “world farm” phenomenon, 
demanding standardization from producers for world supermarkets. Farmers unable to meet 
certification requirements or compete with cheap grain flows face displacement and dispossession, 
exacerbating world hunger. It is this fundamental contradiction, in a now global food regime, that 
defines the corporate food regime.

McMichael (2013, p. 60)

The institutionalization of structural adjustment and free trade was accompanied by the pervasive 
neoliberal thesis that economic growth and global market integration constitutes the infallible recipe for 
addressing all the world’s ills, including food insecurity. The term “Washington Consensus” coined in 1989 
was shorthand for the standard package of market-based reforms prescribed for debt-ridden developing 
countries by major Washington-based institutions like the IMF, the WB and the US Treasury Department. 
Within this paradigm, hunger eradication was downplayed as a specific global objective, despite the 
declarations of the World Food Summits (WFS) convened by FAO in 1996 and 2002 (McKeon 2009). It took 
a determined lobby effort led by FAO to get a “hunger” objective incorporated into the Millennium 
Development Goals that emerged in 2000 from the UN decade of global Summits. Alongside of the 
dominant neoliberal economic recipe, the indefatigable productivist paradigm continued to dominate so far 
as discourse regarding food supply was concerned.

At the same time, however, the sustainability of industrial agriculture was progressively called into question 
throughout this period and the negative impacts of structural adjustment and market liberalization on 
poverty and hunger also became increasingly evident. Alternatives to the dominant neoliberal, productivist 
paradigm began to emerge. In 1981 Nobel prize winning economist Amartya Sen published his influential 
essay on Poverty and Famines, which introduced the idea that what counts is not so much the supply of 
food as peoples’ “entitlements” to obtain access to it (Sen 1981). The concept of food as an undeniable 
human right, not as a possible side effect of increased production and free trade, had already been 
enshrined in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the 1966 Covenant on Economic, Social 
and Cultural Rights (ESCR). It received renewed attention, however, thanks to the 1996 and 2002 World 
Food Summits. On another front, the damage inflicted on the environment by the chemical input-intensive 
agriculture of the Green Revolution – of which Rachel Carson’s Silent Spring (1962) had been an early and 
explosively controversial herald - prompted increasing attention to the relation between agriculture and 
ecology.

Contestation of the dominant regime and the paradigms that accompanied it was far from being exclusively 
a matter for intellectuals. On the contrary, the increasingly devastating impact of globally determined 
structural adjustment policies, trade rules and market flows on the small-scale producers of the world 
stimulated a progressively articulated movement of resistance, denunciation and alternative proposals. 
The right to food, food sovereignty, agro-ecology were championed by civil society actors who entered the 
global governance scene for the first time. Among these the most politically significant were the rural 
social movements – the majority of the population in many countries of the Global South - that mobilized in
reaction to the effects of neo-liberal policies on agricultural production and rural livelihoods (McKeon 2012). The birth of the WTO gave an additional stimulus to networking among the primary victims of economic globalization and liberalization. The decision to set up the global peasant network La Via Campesina (LVC) in 1993 was triggered by the Uruguay Round of the GATT and the realization, in the words of a LVC leader, that “agricultural policies would henceforth be determined globally and it was essential for small farmers to be able to defend their interests at that level.” (McKeon and Kalafatic 2009, p. 3, Desmarais 2007). The regional Network of West African Peasant and Agricultural Producers’ Organizations (ROPPA) was established in 2000 with similar motivations (McKeon et al. 2004). Evolutions along the same lines have taken place in other regions both in the Global South and in the North (Edelman 2003). We will hear more about these actors in Chapter 2 when we analyze the local food systems of which they are proponents, in Chapter 3 when we discuss the origin and development of the food sovereignty paradigm they espouse, and in Chapter 5 when we review concrete alternatives to the corporate-led food regime that they are developing. Mobilization by rural actors, along with mounting indignation on the part of a broad range of civil society, was expressed in the Seattle demonstration against the WTO ministerial meeting in 1999 and in the World Social Forums inaugurated in January 2001 as a counter-meeting to the World Economic Forum which brings the cream of the financial actors together in Davos each year.

The civil society forums held in parallel to the two World Food Summits convened by FAO in 1996 and 2002 gave a strong impetus to global networking by rural social movements. The organizers of these forums made a deliberate effort to ensure that small-scale food producers and indigenous peoples were in the majority by applying a quota system for delegates and mobilizing resources to cover their travel costs. Introduced by LVC in 1996 the principle of food sovereignty - “the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems”- had become the forum’s rallying point by 2002. The Forum mandated the network that had emerged from the preparatory work, the International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty (IPC), to carry forward the Action Agenda it adopted, based on four pillars: the right to food and food sovereignty, mainstreaming agroecological family farming, defending people’s access to and control of natural resources, and trade and food sovereignty. This mounting movement – the other side of the globalization coin - expressed a politicization and deep questioning of the dominant food regime and, progressively, a capacity to propose alternative approaches to addressing the food needs of the world. It signaled a contestation of the corporate food regime, which was clamorously proving incapable of ensuring world food security in a sustainable and equitable fashion.

From 2005 on: systemic failure exposed and the international community faces the food crisis
From 2005 on three of the major agricultural institutions – IFAD, FAO, CGIAR - underwent external evaluations that exposed serious institutional failures and, successively, entered into reform processes (ETC 2009). For its part, the World Bank devoted its 2008 World Development Report to Agriculture and Development for the first time in 25 years and recognized that it had made a strategic error in neglecting agriculture as a motor of growth (World Bank 2007b). The independent evaluation of the Bank’s assistance to agriculture in Africa published the same year acknowledged the negative impacts of two decades of structural adjustment policies (World Bank 2007a, p.67). 2005 was also the year in which the WTO Doha Round ground to a resounding halt in Hong Kong on agricultural issues. The Food Aid Convention (FAC), due to expire in 2007, was under redefinition with a view to shifting the emphasis from food as an instrument to the problems that food assistance is expected to address (Hoddinott and Cohen 2007). Intergovernmental institution instability has been accentuated by the contestation of long-standing equilibria on the international scene on the part of the so-called “emerging powers”. The BRIC (Brazil,
Russia, India, China) held their first formal forum in 2009 and South Africa joined the group in 2010. In food system terms, the arrival on the scene of new major food exporters has consecrated a polycentric food regime which has destabilized previous equilibria.

In this atmosphere of institutional re-thinking, the eruption in late 2007-2008 of the food price crisis with which this book opened unveiled a vacuum in global governance, to which we will return in Chapter 4. The food crisis – and concomitant attention to energy, environment, health and climate change - has jolted dominant paradigms as well as the governance system. There is now widespread recognition that the world market has failed to ensure the food security of the developing countries. The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund - international institutional kingpins of the neoliberal, “free” market-based approach to solving whatever ills society – have been under pressure to admit that they made a bad mistake in counseling African governments to exploit their “comparative advantage” by exporting raw commodities and purchasing food for their populations on the world market. This advice, accompanied by heavy conditionalities and WTO regulations, transformed African countries from net food exporters to net food importers in the space of a decade, leaving them out on a limb when food prices shot up and started to fluctuate wildly. Concepts which had been considered taboo or laughable over the past two decades are now being seriously entertained in policy discussions: protection for developing country markets, food reserves and supply management, agroecology as a climate-friendly approach to agricultural production.

Africa’s food import and export trends
FAO 2011c, p.1

Civil society organizations and people’s movements promoting these alternative paradigms have come into their own and have built up their outreach and their capacity for proposals. Small-scale food producer organizations’ networks are engaging governments and intergovernmental forums at national, regional and global levels and building alliances with other sectors of civil society. They are impacting on government policy and gaining accreditation and credibility in global institutions like FAO and IFAD. Locally, alternative food networks and fair trade movements are conducting concrete experiences at community level, proposing agroecological production and food webs as an alternative to the industrial food chain, as we will see in Chapter 5. The transnationalization of civil society movements has facilitated the emergence of alternative paradigms and brought pressure “from below” on governments at all levels, empowering groups that would have been much weaker if they had remained isolated. The International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD) study published in 2008 has provided significant scientific support for alternative paradigms, although it is not receiving the recognition it merits.

At the same time, however, the promoters of the agro-industrial global food system are positioned to turn the food and climate crises to their advantage by advocating solutions led by technology, capital and market liberalization. It is reported that “the six largest agrochemical and seed corporations are filing sweeping, multigenome patents in pursuit of exclusive monopoly over plant gene sequences that could lead to control of most of the world’s plant biomass...under the guise of developing ‘climate ready’ crops.” (ETC 2010). The UN Environment Program (UNEP) suggests that the “green economy” will “result in improved human well-being and social equity, while significantly reducing environmental risks and ecological scarcities” (UNEP nd). Critics argue, however, that in the absence of effective and socially responsive governance the green economy will spur even greater convergence of corporate power and
unleash the most massive resource grab in more than 500 years (ETC 2011). The corporations’ investment in agriculture in the developing world has been marginal up to now and their approaches to agricultural production and food system are in crisis. Yet they have been able to normalize themselves as aid actors thanks to both their structural and their discursive power. The financial crisis and the downward turn in Official Development Assistance has given them a hand in this. Failure of G8 governments to meet the aid commitments they had made at the 2009 G8 Summit at L’Aquila was one factor that induced them to open their arms to the private sector to pick up the slack.

Corporate sector interests and paradigms have received support from a major new entry in the cast of actors in this latest period, a category of foundations with unprecedented financial power to shape the agricultural development agenda. The Melinda and Bill Gates Foundation made its first grant in the field of agriculture in 2006. By the end of 2009, it had invested more than $1.4 billion in promoting a “new green revolution” strategy whose implementation is accountable solely to its two co-chairs. This compares—in terms of democracy and transparency—with FAO’s regular budget of $1 billion for the 2010-2011 biennium debated, approved and monitored by its 192 member governments. The box below presents a recent statement of the technology-led productivist paradigm by an academic who is associated with the Gates Foundation’s work on the politics of winning acceptance for corporation-produced bio fortified food crops in developing countries.

**Box 1.4 What kind of farming is environmentally sustainable?**

Agricultural scientists often believe there will be less harm done to nature overall by highly capitalized and specialized high-yield farming systems employing the latest technology. Increasing the yield on lands already farmed would allow more of the remaining land to be saved for nature. Environmentalists invoke the damage done by modern farming, whereas agricultural scientists invoke the greater damage that would be done if the same production volume had to come from less productive low-yield farming systems.

Paalberg (2010, p. 112).

This excerpt is illustrative of the need to read carefully between the lines of what purports to represent solid academic reasoning. Questionable assumptions on which this argument is based include dividing agricultural scientists and environmentalists into two separate categories with unanimous and opposed views, equating low-tech farming systems with low yields, and taking it for granted that land not put under agricultural production will be “saved for nature”.

A thoughtful analysis of who wields power in the food system published almost on the eve of the eruption of the food price crisis argued that the three most significant evolutions over the past few decades had been the hollowing out of the state by globalization and devolution, the growing power of transnational corporations in the world food system accompanied by the prospect that “private global regulation” may weigh in more strongly than public regulation, and the emergence of new food movements presenting alternative visions of the food system (MacMillan 2005, pp. 2-5). The brief historical review we have conducted above corroborates this view. The tensions among these evolutions have been highlighted by the explosion of the food price crisis. In food regime analysis, the food price spikes in 2007-2008 and the resulting riots could be read as an externalization of the crisis of the corporate food regime. Following the introduction of structural adjustment policies and WTO regulations that denied states the right to pursue food self-reliance objectives, the fulfillment of “food security” had been entrusted to corporations on the
grounds of their presumed capacity to organize global relations of food production and circulation of food (McMichael 2013b, pp. 110-111). Their ability to do so, and the WTO’s capacity to manage global markets, is now in doubt. At the same time, there are legitimate suspicions that the expansion of a market-based solution to global food provision may be reaching its absolute limits in ecological terms. The ensuing shake up of the global food system and of its governance framework opens up both threats and opportunities. We will explore them further in Chapters 4-6, after first becoming more closely acquainted with the actors, interests and paradigms to which this chapter has provided a first introduction.

Timeline of food governance: Institutions-paradigms-actors-food regimes

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i Parts of this chapter and of Chapter 4 draw on an earlier paper published by the Heinrich Boll Foundation (McKeon 2011a).

ii Food aid aligned progressively with the increased corporate concentration in the food chain that developed over the succeeding years. Two-thirds of food for the billion-dollar US food aid program in 2010 was bought from just three US-based multinationals (The Guardian, 18 July 2012).

iii Established in 1974 and shut down in 1992 under pressure from the US and lobbying organizations like the International Chamber of Commerce.

iv See Chapter 3 pg. .. for a brief discussion of the causes of the crisis.

v See Chapter 2 p. .... and Chapter 5 pp. ... for fuller discussions of intellectual property rights.

vi More on structural adjustment, the WTO, and corporate concentration and financialization in Chapter 2, pp. ... .

vii The IPC is an autonomous, self-managed global network of some 45 people’s movements and NGOs involved with at least 800 organizations throughout the world. Its membership includes constituency focal points (organizations representing small farmers, fisher folk, pastoralists, Indigenous Peoples, agricultural workers), regional focal points, and thematic focal points (NGO networks with particular expertise on priority issues). It is not a centralized structure and does not claim to represent its members. It is rather a space for self-selected CSOs which identify with the food sovereignty agenda adopted at the 2002 forum.

viii More on food security, food sovereignty, and the right to food in Chapter 3, pp. ....

ix IFAD established a Farmers’ Forum in 2005 to dialogue with its Governing Council and enhance farmer organization involvement in the formulation and implementation of national strategies and programs. See McKeon and Kalafatic (2009, pp. 18-20).

x The IAASTD was a four year process involving 400 experts from all regions, sponsored by the World Bank, FAO, UNEP, and UNDP. Its report, published in 2008, called for a fundamental paradigm shift in agricultural development and advocated strengthening agro-ecological science and practice. See www.agassessment.org.