



## Research paper

# How to diagnose institutional conditions conducive to inter-sectoral food security policies? The example of Burkina Faso

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## ABSTRACT

The multidimensional nature of food security often leads experts to recommend mobilising all public intervention sectors to ensure that food security policies are inter-sectoral, and not the sole responsibility of a single sector. However, in African contexts such as in Burkina Faso, food security policies are in most cases far from being inter-sectoral. They are instead focused on agricultural production. It is therefore critical to understand why food security policies are what they are, to identify the underlying sectoral logics and to seek for signals of policy changes. This paper aims at contributing methodologically to the literature focusing on institutional diagnostic of food security policies. Drawing on a combination of new institutional approaches and cognitive public policy analysis we explain food security policies in Burkina Faso by three major factors. First, the persistence of agricultural production-oriented policies points to path dependency arising from the way food insecurity has historically been framed around cereal deficits. Second, the instruments used to measure and assess food security are not neutral: they directly shape both policy debates and decision-making. Third, the institutional configuration of the policy debate is characterised by a fragmentation that influences power games between actors supporting different visions of food security. Finally we argue that new concepts such as “nutrition-sensitive agriculture” combined with more open forums may have the potential to lead to more inter-sectoral food security policies.

## 1. Introduction

The multidimensional nature of food security is now firmly recognised<sup>1</sup> and at the same time poses serious challenges for public action. The idea that food security governance should mobilise all public interventions sectors (agriculture, employment, health, environment, trade, etc.) to address the complexity of the issue appropriately is often advocated by food security actors.<sup>2</sup> Many terms are used to express this idea – breaking silos, integrated, comprehensive, cross-sectoral, multi-sectoral or inter-sectoral approach, etc. – which we propose to capture

under the term “inter-sectorality”. The advocacy of inter-sectorality often leads to the recommendation to institutional reforms to anchor food security under the Prime minister or the Presidency (IEH, 2012). Better inter-sectoral coordination is seen as a guarantee to avoid food security falling under the remit of a single sector and to ensure a well-balanced approach to its four major dimensions (access to food, food availability, utilisation and stability).

However, observations on the ground in African contexts show that food security policies are quite far from inter-sectorality. They tend to be primarily focused on agricultural production, obscuring other

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<sup>1</sup> The evolution of the food security concept is a long history of enlargement from the initial focus on food availability to the importance of access to food with Sen's works and other subsequent dimensions. Hence, a number of authors have highlighted the complexity of the issue, characterised by divergences, controversies and fragmentation in framings (see for instance Maxwell, 1996; Mooney and Hunt, 2009; Janin, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> This is well illustrated in the discourse of José Graziano Da Silva (General Director of FAO): “It is crucial that countries adopt new modes of governance going beyond traditional ministries to which specific sectors are given in order to find innovative solutions to complex development problems” (Forum for the future of agriculture, 22 March 2016, Brussels). Inter-sectorality is also strongly advocated in nutrition (see Garrett and Natalicchio, 2011) and in its interactions with HIV/AIDS for instance (Hunsmann, 2010).

important dimensions such as economic access to food and nutrition.<sup>3</sup> The Burkina Faso example is particularly illustrative of this bias. In this country, a third of the population (35.4%) is food insecure and this number keeps increasing. The dramatic increase in cereal production over the last four decades has not prevented food surplus areas – such as the Boucle du Mouhoun region which is the “grain basket” of the country – from being free of food insecurity and malnutrition. Paradoxically, food security policies hardly consider this reality and tend to focus on the single message of increasing food production. So, why are food security policies so production oriented in Burkina Faso despite the official rhetoric of the need for inter-sectorality?

This paper addresses specific institutional concerns of food security policies in Burkina Faso. Our core research question is how to diagnose institutional conditions conducive to inter-sectoral food security policies? It is indeed critically important to understand why food security policies are what they are in Burkina Faso and to identify elements that could be signals of possible policy changes before envisaging any institutional reforms. Analysing major development strategies of the last 50 years, [Rodrik \(2010\)](#) advocates for “diagnostics before prescription” to make sure these strategies are adapted to specific realities (i.e. locally suited and with remedies that vary over time as the context changes). Failures to achieve progress in development arise when models that are valid only in specific circumstances are transformed into universal remedies, while successes often result from pragmatic experiments (policy innovation and learning). In particular, institutions are key parameters to consider in any diagnostic, alongside others such as biophysical or economic conditions, before implementing scientific, technical or political solutions to address food insecurity in the African local context.

As noted by [Stone \(1992\)](#), institutions are defined very broadly by political scientists, mainly as long-term rules of behaviour, principles, norms and complex symbolic, discursive structures and rituals. These “structures” (institutions) can be material (e.g. a particular organisation) or non-material (e.g. a particular ideology), formal (e.g. a legal rule) or informal (with no coercive power). All these norms and principles can influence actors’ behaviours – serving as constraints to limit room for manoeuvre – but also to legitimise particular behaviours and de-legitimise others while providing opportunities for actors. Economists also underline that “institutions both constrain and enable behaviour” ([Hodgson, 2006](#)). Far from being only constraints for individuals, institutions are the outcomes of human interactions ([North, 1991](#)). This justifies paying attention to both agency and institutional structures.

A number of neo-institutionalist approaches in political science provide useful insights to analyse public policies, and especially to understand institutional lock-ins and processes of policy change. In particular, the historical and discursive branches of neo-institutionalism highlight the role of institutions to explain public policies (e.g. [Pierson, 2000](#); [Fouilleux, 2004](#); [Schmidt, 2008](#)). However, this stream of literature is mainly concerned with public policies in developed countries and rarely deals with developing country issues, such as food security in Africa. On the other hand, there is an increasing literature stream on food security and nutrition governance which especially addresses the issue of inter-sectorality ([Reich and Balarajan, 2012](#); [Garrett and Natalicchio, 2011](#); [IEH, 2012](#)). However, this literature is developed primarily with an operational objective, provides little theoretical ground and often lacks historical depth.

In this paper, we draw on new institutionalist approaches to analyse food security policies in Burkina Faso. We then propose a framework for

the institutional diagnostic of food security policies in African contexts. We argue that food security policies in Burkina Faso can be explained through three factors which are key components of an institutional diagnostic: i) path dependency around the initial framing of food security and agricultural sectoral logics built over time; ii) the measurements, statistics and instruments of food security as micro-institutions that frame policy debate and decision-making; iii) the power games of actors supporting different visions of food security in the different forums where food security is discussed.

In Section 2, we present our theoretical framework. Data collection methods are in Section 3. Our results, which explain why food security policies in Burkina Faso are so production-focused, are presented in Section 4, and discussed in Section 5 in view of proposing a framework for an institutional diagnostic of food security policies. Section 6 draws some conclusions.

## 2. Theoretical framework: institutions in the analysis of public policies

Our theoretical framework to explore the production bias of food security policies is based on the combination of three perspectives on institutions (for an analysis at the global level, see [Fouilleux et al., 2017](#)). First, we draw on historical institutionalism, which provides useful insights to understand continuities in public policies and why they are “change resistant”. Second, we consider the stream in political science that focuses on “ideas”, i.e. non-material or cognitive structures, to explain policies. The so-called French school of cognitive analysis of public policy can be attached to the discursive branch of neo-institutionalism ([Schmidt, 2008](#)). Third, we use the literature considering measurements, statistics and instruments as another variable shaping policy debates and decisions.

### 2.1. Path dependency or the institutional lock-in of public policies

One major contribution of historical institutionalism has been to emphasize the weight of past policy choices on on-going policy definition processes. In such an approach, public policies tend to be reproduced independently of their relevance. Inspired by [David \(1985\)](#) and his work on technological lock-in, [Pierson \(1993, 1994\)](#) has taken up the concept of path dependence to analyse forms of institutional lock-in of social policies. According to this concept, once one type of public policy has been adopted, change becomes difficult because it is too costly. [Pierson \(2000\)](#) borrows the notion of increasing returns from the economists to not only explain that history matters but also that a particular path of action is increasingly difficult to exit over time. Policies are costly to create and often generate learning and coordination effects. The development of actors’ interests around the policy also makes the initial choice become irreversible and the policy become locked onto a given path. This view is summarised by [Hall and Taylor \(1996: 941\)](#) as “past lines of policy [will] condition subsequent policy especially by encouraging societal forces to organise along some lines rather than others (...) or to develop interests in policies that are costly to shift”.

However, the difficulty of policy change may depend on the degree of institutionalisation of public policies. Indeed, public policies are highly or weakly institutionalised depending on the sector. In the example of HIV policy, [Lascoumes and Le Galès \(2007\)](#) show that this emerging sector of public action is characterised by a weakly institutionalised policy. The representations of the public problem are not really stabilised, competing visions exist and there is no consensual definition of the problem because the definition process itself is an object of power struggle. On the contrary, other public policies are highly institutionalised as they have existed for a long time; actors involved in the sector are well organised within the administration and are well structured as interest groups with enough resources to defend their interests and impose their own problematisation of the sector. The

<sup>3</sup> We concur with [IEH \(2012\)](#) which, based on the analysis of six country case studies, states: “Although Food Security and Nutrition (FSN) is conceptually understood in its multiple dimensions, and there is a wide consensus that FSN should be addressed inter-sectorally (i.e. FSN is an area in which different sectors need to work together), in practical terms the institutions that orient and finally execute the actions at the field level tend to be sectorally focused”.

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