



# High Level Commissions and Global Policymaking: Prospects for Accelerating Progress Toward SDG2

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## ACRONYMS

CGIAR	Consultative Group for International Agricultural Research
CFS	Committee on World Food Security
CGD	Center for Global Development
DFID	Department for International Development
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
FNS	Food and Nutrition Security
FSSG	Food Security and Strategy Group
GAFSP	Global Agriculture and Food Security Program
HLPE	High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition
IFAD	International Fund for Agricultural Development
MDB	Multilateral Development Bank
MDGs	Millennium Development Goals
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
ODA	Official Development Assistance
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
RBA	Rome-based Agencies
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SG	UN Secretary-General
UN	United Nations
UNHETF	UN High Level Task Force on the Global Food Security Crisis
WBCSD	World Business Council for Sustainable Development
WFP	World Food Programme
WHO	World Health Organization

# Executive Summary

Most countries are not on track to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 2 (SDG2) to end hunger and improve sustainable agriculture by 2030. Even before COVID-19, progress had halted and on many indicators was actually reversing: the prevalence of severe food insecurity has been increasing for the past five years (FAO 2020). A slowing economy, widespread conflict, more extreme and frequent weather events due to climate change, and sharp inequality have exacerbated stalled progress. The cratering global economy and ongoing health crisis of COVID-19 will push SDG2 even further from reach.

This diagnosis is depressingly routine and increasingly well-known: both official reports from multilateral organizations and academic and policy analyses have been warning for years that the world is off track on SDG2 (Cohen, 2019; FAO, 2019; Gertz et al., 2017; Samman et al., 2018). Yet despite this knowledge, investment and action to reverse these trends have not materialized. According to the authors of the 2020 Global Report on Food Crises, “We have the tools and the know-how. What we need is political will and sustained commitment by leaders and nations” (WFP, 2020).

One idea for kickstarting global action on SDG2, initially proposed by a group of experts in 2019, is convening a new high level commission on food and nutrition security (FNS) and agriculture. Such commissions, which lack formal policymaking authority but act through advocacy and communications, have been created in recent decades to address multiple global policy challenges in development, health, and international security. Conceivably a new commission on FNS and agriculture could help drive political action and accountability, improve coordination, and attract global attention around SDG2. However, there is already a crowded institutional landscape in FNS and agriculture, and there is a risk a new commission would duplicate existing efforts and divert attention and resources from other, more promising endeavors.

This paper assesses the potential and limits of a new high level commission in FNS and agriculture. Our goal is not to advocate for a new commission. Instead, we scope what can be learned from previous similar efforts, and critically analyze whether the functions of a high level commission map on to current challenges in FNS and agriculture. Why have some high level commissions had important impact in shaping global politics while others have fallen flat? What, if anything, could a new commission on FNS and agriculture hope to achieve? And how should such a commission be organized and implemented to maximize its influence?

“[Commissions] can help diplomacy a lot and member state negotiations... They can leapfrog or accelerate things.”

- Interviewee

“There is no shortage of reports. I can't even keep up with a fraction of the reports. Another report is not going to do much more.”

- Interviewee

Drawing on an original database of 143 historical and current high level commissions, five case studies of specific commissions, and interviews with 35 experts in FNS and agriculture and from previous commissions, we find reasons for both skepticism and support for a new commission.

## Key Takeaways

### Many high level commissions have only modest impact.

Tracking the causal impact of high level commissions is challenging, as their influence can be diffuse and only appear years after the fact. Yet whether judged by the uptake of their recommendations or the frequency of citations and mentions in academic literature, policy reports, and the media, the typical commission does not leave much of an impact. Many commissions, even those made up of very famous members, come and go without much of a trace. This perhaps reflects the fact that, as one interviewee noted, “forming a commission is what you do when you want to look like you’re doing something but don’t actually want to do anything.”

### Yet a few commissions have had clear, substantial impact.

While many commissions have minimal lasting effects, a few have had transformative influence on international cooperation. Some, such as the Brundtland Commission and the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, have had wide-ranging influence in shaping discourses through defining and popularizing new concepts (in these cases, “sustainable development” and the “responsibility to protect”, respectively). Others have worked more behind the scenes, leveraging their networks and close access to influential policymakers to press the case for their recommendations.

### Many factors determining whether a commission is influential are outside of its control.

A commission’s efforts can be easily overtaken by larger structural political forces that hinder international cooperation. Even well-designed and executed commissions may be thwarted by shifts in the global political environment. Conversely, other commissions will find themselves at the right time

and the right place, with windows of opportunity to have a lasting impact—but commissions cannot necessarily create these windows through their own efforts.

### Demand-driven commissions tend to be more successful than supply-driven commissions.

Commissions that arise in response to a clear external demand and are reactive to the global political environment have a built-in audience that is likely to be receptive to the commission’s recommendations and at least seriously consider taking up its proposals. Supply-driven commissions, those that emerge out of commission chairs or sponsors taking independent initiative to advance an agenda, face a tougher uphill battle in shaping policy outcomes.

### Commissions are most successful when they have a clear problem statement and theory of change.

Many high level commissions were formed without clarity on the precise problem they wanted to resolve, what actors they needed to influence, a theory for how they would achieve their objectives, or metrics for gauging success. Without these factors in place, commissions can serve as useful discussion forums, but rarely have much traction with broader audiences. A clear mandate facilitates cohesive discussion and action. When a commission does not have a consensus problem statement, much of the commission’s time and effort will likely be taken up seeking to define one.

### Following best practices in the design, execution, and follow-through for commissions improve their odds of success.

Our case studies, interviews, and reviews of previous literature reveal several key lessons for launching a new commission, including:

- the importance of a highly engaged and committed chairperson(s)
- how to strategically choose commission members
- the need for adequate funding and staffing, including a well-resourced secretariat
- how to foster networks and relationships and focus attention through in-person meetings
- how to manage internal dissents and political controversies within the commission
- why commissions need extensive (and often

expensive) communications strategies, beyond simply publishing a final report

- how to lay groundwork for longer-term action and follow-up, thereby extending the reach of a commission

## A New Commission for SDG2?

Putting together everything we know about the strengths and weaknesses of high level commissions and the current gaps and needs in FNS and agriculture, would a new commission help? There are reasons to be skeptical. For instance, there are already multiple efforts to coordinate global donors in the sector, and it is not clear a high level commission would add anything new. Similarly, a commission seeking generally to raise awareness or catalyze political action on FNS and agriculture would lack focus and a clear theory of change for achieving practical results. And many of the most important constraints to progress on SDG2 need to be addressed at the country level, rather than the global level.

Despite these concerns, however, our research does suggest a commission with a clear mandate and focus on a tractable agenda could be fruitful. We identify three options for further consideration:

### **Option A: Commission Designed to Carry Forward the Work of the UN Food Systems Summit.**

In 2021, the UN will convene a global Food Systems Summit to raise awareness and encourage political commitments for transforming food systems. The Summit is the clear focal point for political action and advocacy in the FNS and agriculture sector for the next year. A new high level commission closely aligned with the Summit process—with an explicit mandate on carrying forward the messages and objectives of the Summit into the future—could valuably complement the efforts of the Summit committee and help ensure its lasting legacy. The commission's purpose would be to promote high-level political commitment and follow-through for the Summit's action plan, so that issues related to transforming food systems do not fall off the global political agenda once the Summit is over.

### **Option B: Commission Designed to Propose Reforms to the Institutional Architecture for FNS and Agriculture.**

There are longstanding debates over the need to reform the complex web of multilateral institutions, initiatives, and partnerships that govern global FNS and agriculture, but such efforts have struggled to gain traction. Many experts we spoke with agreed that reforming and streamlining the institutional architecture might be valuable in theory, but would be a difficult and arduous process. A high level commission convened to propose reforms to the architecture would be stepping into a politically fraught environment, and would face steep obstacles. But were such a commission able to unblock the process of architectural reform, it could produce real benefits, and there is a potential window of opportunity in the wake of the Food Systems Summit. The commission's mandate could involve analyzing whether the current multilateral architecture is fit-for-purpose for achieving SDG2, and it could serve as a forum for coalescing around a common reform agenda. To be effective and achieve buy-in, such a commission would need a clear mandate from high-placed actors, most likely the UN Secretary General, and be supported by several powerful national governments. This effort is only worth pursuing if these actors actively support it.

### **Option C: Commission Focused on One Specific, Tractable Topic.**

Rather than focusing on the entirety of SDG2, a commission could focus on one narrow, more specific topic within the broader FNS ecosystem. This would provide a greater chance of delivering an actionable policy agenda with a clear theory of change. Based on our discussions with experts in the sector, we believe two important topics that could be helpfully addressed by a new high level commission include the intersection of conflict and FNS and the case for investing in agriculture. Crucially, even a more narrowly defined commission should still be ambitious in its vision and recommendations and seek to build connections across the food, nutrition, agriculture, finance, and environmental communities. And even if the commission is not explicitly focused on food systems, any such commission should still seek to coordinate and align with the Food Systems Summit process in some fashion, given its centrality in contemporary policy and advocacy debates in the sector.

# Introduction: Moving in the Wrong Direction on SDG2

Even before COVID-19 the world was significantly off-track to achieve the second Sustainable Development Goal (SDG2) on food security and sustainable agriculture.<sup>1</sup> As of 2019, nearly 690 million people suffered from undernourishment, up 10 million from the year before and a full 60 million from five years earlier. Two billion people suffer from moderate or severe levels of food insecurity. The FAO currently estimates that, if recent trends continue, the number of undernourished will continue to rise to 840 million people by 2030 (FAO, 2020). No country is on course to meet all 10 of the 2025 nutrition targets that were established in 2012, and a mere eight countries are on track to meet at least four of the targets. Meanwhile, citizens around the world cite ending hunger, achieving food security and promoting sustainable agriculture as the most important of the SDGs (IPSOS, 2019).

Despite this clear need and strong public interest, international action on food and nutrition security (FNS) and sustainable agriculture has lagged, constrained by financing gaps, weak accountability and data collection efforts, and the fragmentation of the governance system (Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2019). Projections indicate an additional US\$7 billion per year is needed just to meet minimum goals on reducing undernutrition by 2025, while estimates for achieving the end of hunger range from an additional US\$11 to \$265 billion annually (Fan et al., 2018).<sup>2</sup> Yet official development assistance (ODA) to agriculture is dropping, down 9.2% in 2018 from a year earlier, to just US\$10.2 billion. Since 2002, the share of ODA going to agriculture has been fixed at around 5%, while the share going to health and education have increased. Donors tend to be more reactive and respond to food crises and other disasters as part of their humanitarian aid budgets, rather than investing in long-term agricultural development. In addition to ODA, there has been some growth in other official flows, but the sector has not managed to attract major private flows (Duke University, 2020).

Meanwhile, data and governance limitations impede greater accountability. Many countries lack the ability to track use of donor funds and other financing, or to conduct regular agricultural surveys. Follow-up and review on tracking SDG2 metrics is

The end product isn't the launch of the paper. That is the start. The paper is just a tool. No one is going to react just because a paper got published. [Use] the report as a tool and not as the end product"

- Interviewee

<sup>1</sup> The five primary sub-goals or targets linked to achieving SDG2 by 2030 are: (2.1) End hunger and ensure access by all people, in particular the poor and people in vulnerable situations to safe, nutritious and sufficient food all year round; (2.2) End all forms of malnutrition, including achieving, by 2025; (2.3) Double the agricultural productivity and incomes of small-scale food producers, in particular women, indigenous peoples, family farmers, pastoralists and fishers; (2.4) Ensure sustainable food production systems and implement resilient agricultural practices that increase productivity and production, that help maintain ecosystems, that strengthen capacity for adaptation to climate change, extreme weather, drought, flooding and other disasters; and (2.5) Maintain the genetic diversity of seeds, cultivated plants and farmed and domesticated animals and their related wild species.

<sup>2</sup> The range represent the results of different models projecting different specific outcomes; see detailed discussion on p. 2-3 of Fan et al. (2018).



voluntary, with no formal accountability architecture or outside ability to verify countries' implementation or performance (Donald & Way, 2016).

Lastly, the global FNS and agriculture institutional landscape contains an array of multilateral development banks, bilateral donors, research institutes, foundations, and NGOs.<sup>3</sup> An even larger and more diverse group of actors operate at the regional and national level. This dense landscape leads to fragmentation and overlap in mandates, leading to incoherence and impeding coordination and collective action (Aubert et al., 2016; Crola, 2015; Gertz & Kharas, 2019; Rampa et al., 2019). At the country and community level, the lack of collaboration impairs the development of systematic scaling, with smaller projects littering the local environment.

In brief, even before COVID-19 upended the world, the outlook for global food security was bleak: many key indicators were moving in the wrong direction, and the world was struggling to mobilize an effective response commensurate with the urgency of the moment. COVID-19 is likely to exacerbate both the scale of the problem and the preexisting shortcomings associated with international efforts in support of SDG2. Preliminary estimates suggest the pandemic could increase the number of undernourished people by 83-132 million in 2020 (FAO, 2020). The COVID-19 crisis may also hit ODA—initial projections suggest that over the medium term, total ODA could fall by as much as US\$29.9 billion due to the economic downturn in donor countries, with a potential 7.6% reduction specifically in agricultural ODA. This would bring agricultural ODA disbursements back to levels not seen since 2013.<sup>4</sup>

What can be done to change course? In 2019, the think tanks Chatham House and the European Centre for Development Policy Management convened leading experts and industry practitioners to debate this question (Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2019). One idea that emerged

from this session was a “Leaders Alliance” to spur political engagement, improve coordination, mobilize resources, and attract global attention. Similar campaigns have had some success in influencing global debate and policy practice in the development, health, and international security arenas. At the same time, many commissions quietly faded from view and did not have any significant influence or impact in shaping policy. Given that there is already a dense institutional landscape of organizations working toward achieving SDG2, there is risk that any new endeavor will end up distracting attention and ultimately further fragmenting global governance in food security.

## Our Approach

The objective of this report is to assess whether a high level commission could catalyze action for SDG2. Crucially, our goal is not to advocate for a new commission. We study historical antecedents of similar commissions and compare these to existing needs and gaps in the FNS and agriculture sector to offer guidance on the potential and limits of a new commission. Why have some commissions had important impact on global politics while others have fallen flat? What, if anything, could a new commission in FNS and agriculture hope to achieve? And how should such a commission be organized and implemented to maximize its influence?

We approach these questions in three stages. First, we provide a conceptual analysis of high level commissions and situate their rise within broader trends in international relations. To assess how common such commissions are and what topics they have worked on, we build an original database of 143 previous commissions.<sup>5</sup> We argue such commissions can influence international policy through multiple channels, and provide some preliminary quantitative assessments of their influence based on citations and media mentions.

3 Rampa et al. (2019) provide an overview of the key characteristics of the key organizations that dominate the governance system. There are seven prominent organizations that are particularly influential. Three are based in Rome and referred to as the Rome-based Agencies (RBA): the FAO, which is a central source for information and data; the World Food Programme (WFP), which focuses on humanitarian emergencies; and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), which is a funding source for agriculture projects, with special emphasis on smallholders. The other four are the Consultative Group for International Agricultural Research (CGIAR); the World Bank's FNS project, the Global Agriculture and Food Security Program (GAFSP) and the African Development Bank.

4 These calculations are based on assuming projected GDP declines in donor countries are subsequently transmitted into their ODA budgets and that there is some further reallocation of ODA to domestic spending; for further details, see (Duke University, 2020).

5 To create the database, we began by reviewing the existing academic and policy literature on commissions (including Evans, 2013; Lapeyre, 2004; Thakur et al., 2005; von Einsiedel & Fong, 2017; Yamey, Summers, et al., 2018). We supplemented this list by searching the Yearbook of International Organizations (2020) for relevant commissions. Finally, we conducted internet searches to identify additional high level panels, eminent persons groups, and commissions. This ultimately produced a database of 143 individual commissions. While we do not claim this is a completely exhaustive database, it is to our knowledge the most expansive such collection produced to date.

In a second stage we conduct case studies of five specific commissions, which allows us to dig into further detail on why commissions are created, how they are designed, and what influence they have. The case studies draw on 13 interviews with individuals directly related to the commissions we study, either as commission members or working with the secretariat or organizing committee.<sup>6</sup> Interviews are complemented with analyses of commission reports, websites, and secondary literature. The cases reveal both what worked well in previous commissions and where they came up short and suggest potential models for a new commission related to SDG2.

Finally, in a third stage we turn to understanding what role a new commission could play. We interviewed 20 experts across the FNS and agriculture sector to better understand the constraints to progress on SDG2 and gauge their views on the merits of creating a high level commission.<sup>7</sup> Based on this information, we then considered which, if any, of the existing constraints could be alleviated by a high level commission. This led us to identify three potential options for a new commission.

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6 Semi-structured interviews were conducted by the authors. Interview guides included both standardized questions across all interviews (based on literature reviews and analysis of the commissions database) and specialized questions tailored to each commission (based on reviewing reports produced by the commission as well as official websites and secondary sources such as media articles). Interview subjects were identified primarily by contacting the communications departments of the secretariat or chairs of the commission to determine appropriate interview subjects, and a snowball sample was used for identifying additional interviewees. Interviews were conducted through video calls and lasted between 45-60 minutes. To encourage frank and candid answers, and in line with the proposal filed with the Duke Institutional Review Board, we agreed not to attribute any comments to specific individual participants and to keep interviewees' identities confidential.

7 Interview subjects were identified based on a canvass of key organizations and stakeholders in the sector, followed by snowball sampling to build out a larger group of participants. Interviews were conducted in a similar manner as described in the previous footnote.

# High Level Commissions and International Cooperation

In recent decades, there has been a boom in international task forces, high level panels, eminent persons groups, and similar initiatives—associations we collectively refer to as “high level commissions”. These commissions are convened to address a specific transnational policy challenge, with membership typically consisting primarily of internationally-oriented current or former policymakers and other prominent individuals. Some recent high level commissions include the UN’s High Level Panel on Digital Cooperation, co-chaired by Melinda Gates and Jack Ma; the G20’s Eminent Persons Group on Global Financial Governance, chaired by Tharman Shanmugaratnam; and the Commission on State Fragility, Growth, and Development, jointly hosted by the London School of Economics and the University of Oxford and chaired by David Cameron.

The rise of high level commissions is part of a broader diffusion of diplomatic power in world politics. Today a wide range of non-state actors—including corporations, civil society/NGOs, international organizations, and philanthropic foundations—wield increasing influence and clout (if not necessarily formal authority) in international relations (Keck & Sikkink, 1998; Kelley, 2010; Matthews, 1997; Strange, 1992). The result is a complex web of cross-cutting diplomatic ties, with states and other actors both competing and cooperating in pursuit of their international priorities.

Within this broad constellation of actors seeking to influence global policy, high level commissions are distinct for three reasons. First, they operate as hybrid entities, occupying a space between the formal, insider world of traditional state power and the outsider world of non-state actors (A.F. Cooper, 2014). While high level commissions themselves have no official power to set policies or implement their own recommendations, their members are typically drawn from the insider world of policymakers—past, present, and future. Officially, commission members participate in an individual capacity (meaning they speak only for themselves) and are not there to represent their country or organization. Informally, however, commissioners often act as shadow diplomats, negotiating political outcomes and ultimately shaping the landscape for global cooperation. High level commissions can function as brokers between the worlds of civil society and official diplomacy, transmitting ideas and information between the two.

Second, in part due to their hybrid nature, high level commissions bring together a particular combination of assets that—at least in principle—allow them to be influential

“In general it is hard to maintain a political agenda for an extended period of time. You can’t reinvigorate the old political agenda, you often have to come up with a new one.”

– Interviewee

global actors. Given that their members often have decades of relevant experience in government, the private sector, civil society and academia, high level commissions have collective **expertise** on their particular policy challenge.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the stature and reputations of their members give high level commissions **legitimacy** and **credibility**, meaning that official policymakers are likely to pay more attention to their suggested recommendations. Commission members' personal networks and connections with their current and former colleagues also allow high level commissions privileged **access** to key decisionmakers. Finally, the fame and prominence of members can endow high level commissions with a form of **celebrity**, meaning they are able to garner public attention and visibility for their causes (Cooper, 2008). Of course, the membership and context of each commission will shape their strengths and weaknesses across these various assets, and different commissions will rely more heavily on some than others.

Third, high level commissions differ from most other actors in world politics because they exist for the explicit purpose of solving one specific policy challenge. They have a particular mandate—which may either be self-assigned or given to them by a sponsoring institution—that defines the scope of their work. This means high level commissions are not weighed down by the baggage of a long institutional history, nor must they worry about their long-term institutional survival. This allows them a single-minded clarity that other actors seeking to influence global politics often cannot afford. (Though it is worth noting that while the commission itself has minimal outside interests, the individual members often do not, which may influence their work.)

## Cataloguing High Level Commissions

To get a better sense of the prevalence of high level commissions, the subjects they address, their institutional design and their effectiveness, we

created an original database of current and historical commissions created since 1965.<sup>9</sup> To be included in our database, commissions need to satisfy three criteria:

### Defined Membership List of Elite Individuals

We focus on groups comprised of elite individuals. While there is some level of ambiguity in defining “elite”, we understand it as those with an international reputation that spreads beyond their narrow professional domain, such that they are recognized experts not only by their peers but also by broader society. Such individuals include current or former heads of government, cabinet members, CEOs of multinational corporations, and particularly prominent academics and members of civil society.<sup>10</sup>

### Convened to Address Specific International Policy Challenge

We explicitly focus on commissions addressing a specific international policy issue, as defined in their mandate. We thus exclude both groups whose mandate only addresses a single country as well as groups with broad or undefined mandates that cut across multiple issue areas, such as The Elders grouping founded by Nelson Mandela or the Club of Madrid group of former democratic presidents and prime ministers.<sup>11</sup> We also exclude one-off interventions, such as open letters signed by former policymakers. The commissions we study typically have a lifecycle ranging from several months to several years.

### Lack Formal Authority, but Work Through Communication and Advocacy

The high level commissions we study have no formal authority to implement their own policy recommendations; rather than act themselves, they must persuade others to act.<sup>12</sup> To do so, they rely primarily on communication and advocacy (both private and public) to influence global politics and policy. Many high level commissions culminate in a final report detailing their findings and recommendations, though as we discuss below

<sup>8</sup> At the same time, however, some commissioners are valuable explicitly because they are able to bring outside perspectives and a fresh look at existing challenges; thus, deep subject matter expertise is not always necessary for individual commissioners.

<sup>9</sup> As noted by other researchers, the 1960s is when the high level panel phenomenon first emerged. The Pearson Commission was one of the first (von Einsiedel & Fong, 2017).

<sup>10</sup> Notably, our focus on groups whose members are individuals, not states—even though in some instances these individuals are invited to participate because they are a head of state—distinguishes elite commissions from informal intergovernmental organizations (Vabulas & Snidal, 2013).

<sup>11</sup> We note that commissions are also common practice in the domestic political arenas (Tepper, 2004).

<sup>12</sup> While the commissions themselves lack formal power or authority, individual commissioners—who may be current policymakers or other influential actors, such as CEOs of large corporations—may have such power.

this should not be considered the end of their work. Commissions often partner with governments, international organizations, and civil society organizations to amplify and spread their messages.

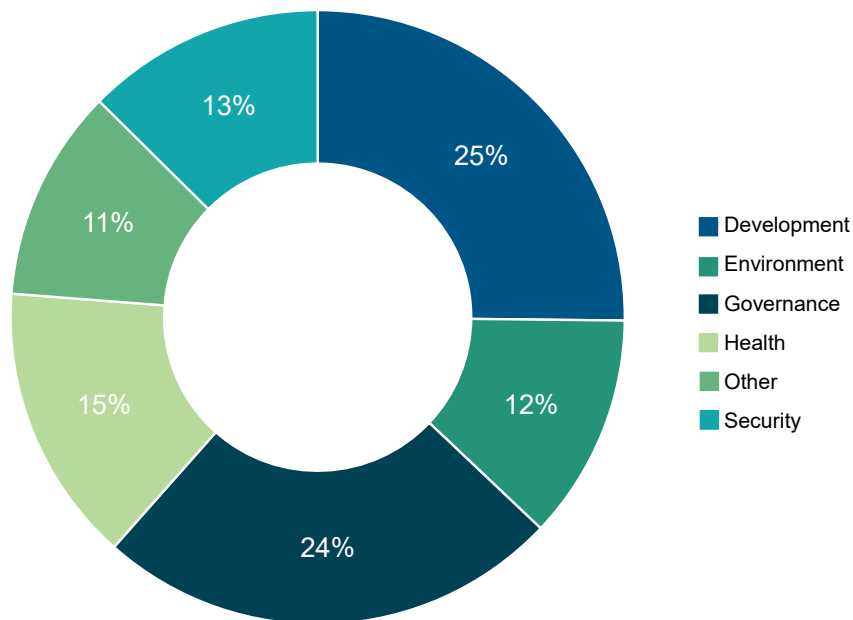
Figure 1 shows the core subject matter these commissions have addressed. The most common subjects are international development and global governance.<sup>13</sup> There have also been multiple commissions on topics in health, environment, and security. Notably, however, there are few previous commissions explicitly focused on food security or agriculture. The primary exceptions are the African Leaders for Nutrition Initiative, hosted by the African Development Bank; the Global Panel on Agriculture and Food Systems for Nutrition, initially championed by the UK’s Department for International Development (DfID); and the Aspen Institute’s Food Security and Strategy Group.<sup>14</sup>

Figure 2 depicts the year of creation for the 143 commissions in our database. While a handful of

such commissions were created in the 1960s, ‘70s, and ‘80s, elite commissions are primarily a post-1990 phenomenon, coincident with the broader rise of non-state actors in international politics. The frequency of such commissions has continued to increase, rising from an average of about one commission created a year in the 1990s to slightly over three a year in the 2000s up to just over six a year in the 2010s. The proliferation of commissions has in some sense saturated the attention span in international policymaking, making it difficult for any single commission to break through.

On average, the commissions in our database have 18 members. Notably, 54% are chaired by either current or former heads of state or government, underlining the elite background and international reputations of such commissions. Additionally, 49% have two or more co-chairs, rather than a single chair. The multiple chair approach appears to have become more common over time; of the 67 commissions created before 2010, only 37%

**Figure 1: Subject Matters of Previous High Level Commissions**

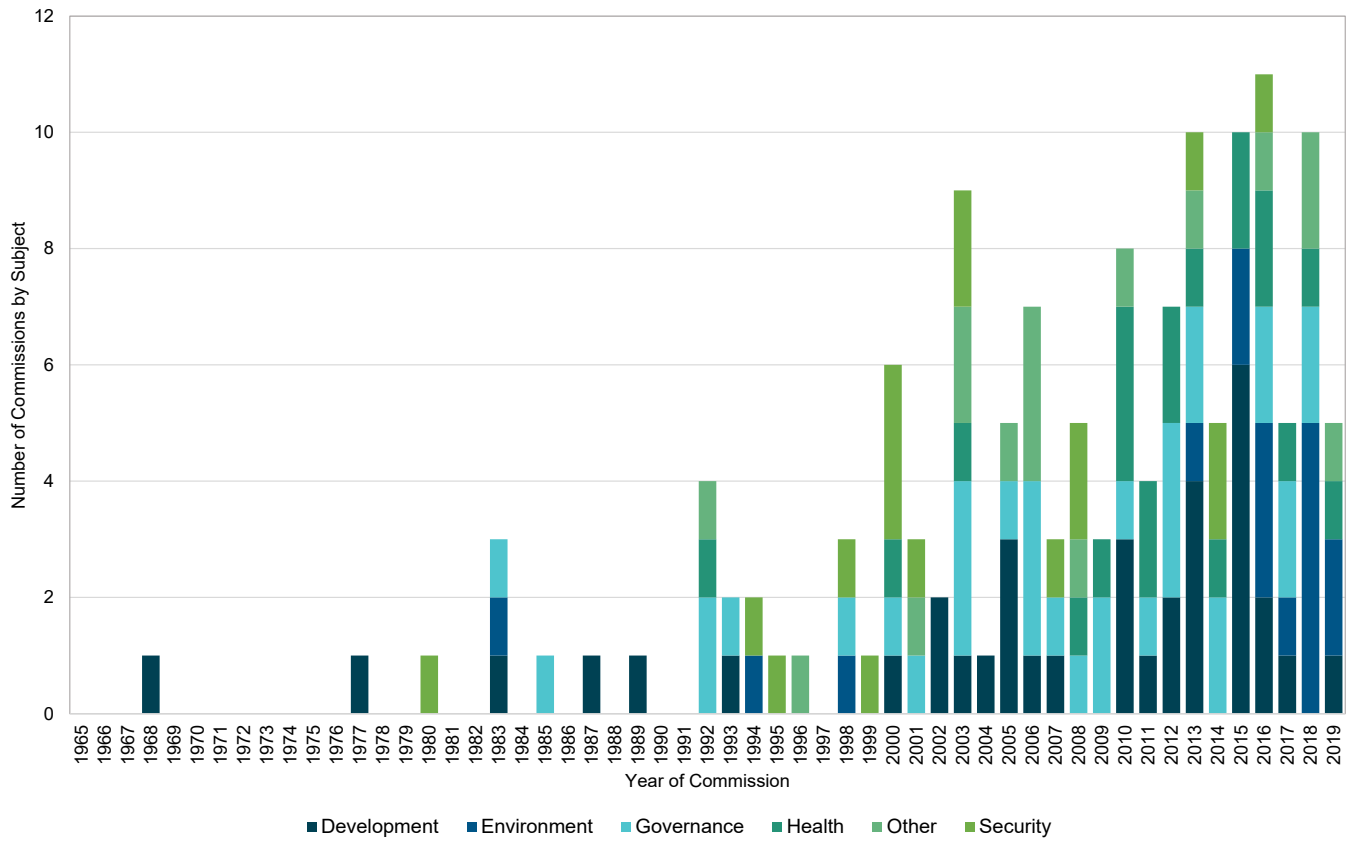


Source: Authors’ calculations.

<sup>13</sup> Commissions focused on global governance include those proposing reforms to specific international institutions and the broader global institutional architecture, democracy, and general issues related to international cooperation.

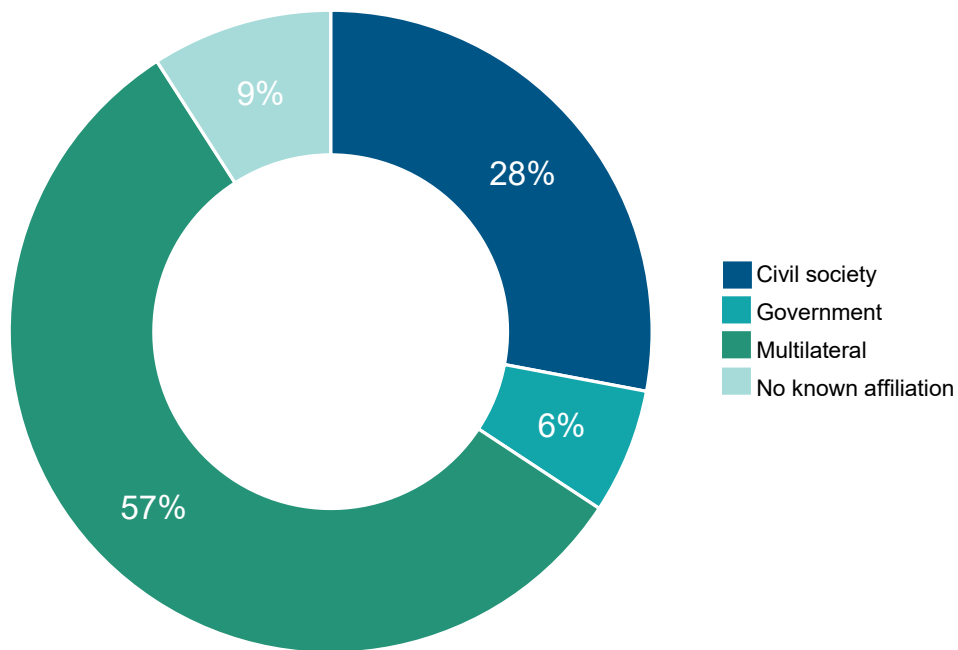
<sup>14</sup> It is worth noting, however, that there are several other multilateral forums on these topics, including for instance the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) and the UN High Level Task Force on Food Security. It is worth noting, however, that there are several other multilateral forums on these topics, including for instance the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) and the UN High Level Task Force on Food Security, as well as some more technical/scientific panels such as the EAT/Lancet Commission and the CERES 2030 initiative.

**Figure 2: High Level Commissions by Year of Creation**



Source: Authors' calculations.

**Figure 3: Institutional Affiliations of High Level Commissions**



Source: Authors' calculations.

had multiple co-chairs, while 61% of the 76 created since 2010 do. This perhaps reflects an interest in ensuring chairpersons adequately represent a diversity of stakeholders on topics of global interest, an important consideration but, as discussed in the case studies and lessons learned below, one which may conflict with the goal of clear leadership in the management of commissions. For those commissions whose reports or websites provided biographical sketches of all commission members, we also classified them by their occupation. The average commission has 57% of members from the public sector, 10% from the private sector, 31% from civil society (including academia, media and NGOs), and 1% from the military.<sup>15</sup>

We also track the primary institutional affiliation of each commission. We classify commissions into four groups: those officially affiliated with international organizations, which gives the commission its mandate; those whose mandate is given by national governments; those that partner with existing civil society organizations, such as foundations, think tanks, or universities; and those that are standalone entities with no formal links to existing institutions (see Figure 3).

Institutional affiliations are important for two reasons. First, affiliations allow commissions to draw on both the material resources and international reputation and prestige of their sponsoring institution, and thus facilitate commissions' work. Second, institutional affiliations influence the authority of commissions, and reflect where they fall along the spectrum between the official/insider realm and the informal/outsider realm in global politics. Those with a formal mandate issued by an official UN declaration, for instance, have explicit authority to study a particular policy issue that has already been identified as a priority by an official international organization. They are thus more ensconced in the insider world of international politics, and have a more immediate route to policy influence. Conversely, standalone commissions or those affiliated with civil society have more tenuous ties to official policymaking; they are often motivated by seeking to put an issue on the global agenda – one that is not yet prominent enough to be highlighted in a UN declaration. However, the independence that comes with their

outsider status may allow them to adopt bolder and more controversial positions.

Overall, we find the majority of commissions are affiliated with an international organization. The United Nations alone has sponsored 44 such commissions.<sup>16</sup> The World Bank (8) and World Health Organization (7) have also sponsored multiple commissions. Meanwhile just over a quarter of commissions are affiliated with a civil society organization, while only a small minority are sponsored by governments<sup>17</sup> or exist as standalone entities.

## How Do High Level Commissions Influence Policy Debates and Outcomes?

High level commissions inherently lack the direct authority to implement policy change. They can provide information, issue recommendations, and exhort policymakers to change their approaches, but they are fundamentally advisory bodies. To be effective, these commissions must influence their target actors—which include governments, international organizations, philanthropists, NGOs, corporations, and academics—to act.

How do they do so? We use an inductive approach to identify the primary mechanisms through which commissions shape international policy, relying on both our database of commissions and our empirical research from the cases discussed below. Our broad sweep of the array of high level commissions leads us to detect five distinct functions high level commissions perform, which we observe repeatedly in the commissions we study. These are: promoting normative change, generating and synthesizing new knowledge, catalyzing political action, facilitating coordination among actors, and serving as a test run for subsequent negotiations. Some commissions will perform only one or two of these functions, while others will seek to perform many. However, commissions may struggle to carry out multiple functions: commissions have limited time and effort and those designed to excel at one function may be ill-suited to carry out another.

<sup>15</sup> Note averages are calculated first within each commission and then averaged across all commissions. Totals do not equal 100% due to rounding.

<sup>16</sup> For deeper analysis specifically on the dynamics of UN commissions, see Luck (2000) and von Einsiedel & Fong, (2017).

<sup>17</sup> The most frequent government sponsors of high level commissions include many internationalist middle power countries, notably the Scandinavian countries, Canada, and Australia. Committed government sponsors can be very effective in translating a commission's recommendations into policy change.

## 1. Promote normative change

The first means through which high level commissions can influence global politics is by promoting long-term normative change (Evans, 2013; Thakur, 2016). Commissions can seek to shape how powerful actors—states, individual politicians, NGOs, the media, etc.—and the broader public understand and make sense of particular transnational policy challenges. Commission reports and messaging campaigns can construct frames of meaning that organize themes and values that shape individuals' identities, interests, and beliefs. This may involve both framing old issues in new ways, or identifying issues receiving insufficient emphasis on the global agenda and advocating for their importance and relevance. In either case the goal is typically to raise the profile and resonance of a particular frame for making sense of a global issue, and (implicitly or explicitly) seek to persuade policymakers that action is needed. Due to their hybrid nature, commissions can serve as effective brokers between civil society (often the source of new frames and norms) and policymakers (who can adopt and implement new norms through policy change). In other words, commissions are unlikely to generate completely novel and original normative frames, but they are well placed to distill, crystalize, and communicate arguments that have been circulating in civil society and accelerate their endorsement among official policymakers. While promoting normative change can be a very effective means of influencing global politics, it is typically a long-term process that unfolds across years or decades—beyond the time horizons of many commissions, which often advocate for more urgent and immediate policy change.

The World Commission on Environment and Development, commonly known as the Brundtland Commission, illustrates how commissions can promote long term normative change. Chaired by former Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Brundtland, the commission was convened by the UN Secretary General in 1983 to propose “long-term environmental strategies for achieving sustainable development to the year 2000 and beyond (Brundtland Commission, 1987). The commission’s report, *Our Common Future*, published

in 1987, established what has come to be seen as the canonical definition of the concept of sustainable development, as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” While the commission did not invent either the concept or the expression of “sustainable development”, it is widely cited for popularizing a particular framing of the concept, one which now permeates the global development discourse (Borowy, 2013). While the Brundtland Commission ultimately was extremely successful, this impact was achieved only over the process of many years, and even once the framing of sustainable development was widely accepted it has not always translated into concomitant changes in actual policy or behavior. This suggests both the strengths and limits of working through normative change: while the ability to shape policymakers' conceptualization of issues is undoubtedly powerful, even successful attempts at normative change may not always quickly lead to tangible changes in policy.

## 2. Generate and synthesize new knowledge

A second function high level commissions perform is generating and synthesizing practical new knowledge to inform policymaking (Thakur, 2016). Whereas normative change and issue framing are broadly about *why* international action is needed, generating new knowledge is about understanding *what* action is needed. The function is more scientific and technocratic than political, which is often

reflected in a commission's composition, which features more experts than active politicians. This function is particularly important when there is significant uncertainty, either in diagnosing current policy challenges or in predicting the effects of potential policy interventions. High level commissions will rarely produce new original science, but they can review and synthesize existing

research to establish areas of consensus.

The High-Level Commission on Carbon Prices, co-chaired by Joseph Stiglitz and Nicholas Stern and sponsored by the World Bank affiliated Carbon Pricing Leadership Commission, shows how a commission can generate new knowledge.

“It’s hard to get the world excited about another literature review. If you’ve got some of the world’s great minds and influencers, it can’t just be a review of the evidence—there’s got to be something new to say.”

— Interviewee



Comprised primarily of academics, the Stiglitz-Stern commission set out to identify indicative ranges of carbon prices that would induce the change in behaviors needed to keep global temperature below 2 degrees Celsius. Ultimately the commission suggested a price range of \$40-\$80 per ton by 2020, rising to \$50-\$100 per ton by 2030. This technical knowledge was designed to be a reference point for policymakers advocating for and seeking to implement a carbon price. Of course, whether or not this knowledge is actually taken up and used by policymakers is a separate question; while the findings of the Commission were widely cited in media reports, they have not widely filtered into policy changes.

### 3. Catalyze political action

The third function high level commissions serve is catalyzing political action by pressuring policymakers into shifting their behavior. Commissions can seek to mobilize politically salient constituencies to increase accountability or expose the distance between policymakers' rhetoric and action. Where the normative change function is focused on shifting policymakers' beliefs and understanding of an issue, the catalyzing political action function is focused on shifting political incentive structures and increasing the costs of failing to take action. This can include both carrots and sticks: commissions can publicly shower praise on politicians that follow their advice, and "name and shame" those that do not. Because commission members have internationally renowned reputations, their voices on such matters can carry significant weight.<sup>18</sup> Commission efforts to catalyze political action are more likely to be successful when they are aligned with broader transnational advocacy networks working to advance similar policy goals (Keck & Sikkink, 1998). To this end, commissions can either explicitly or implicitly partner with civil society organizations such as think tanks and NGOs to amplify their messages and increase their political influence.

The Commission for Africa, set up by UK Prime Minister Tony Blair in 2004, provides an example of how commissions catalyze political action. Many members of the 17-person commission were current policymakers, from both G8 and African countries, and the commission was explicitly convened to lay the political groundwork for a G8 meeting the UK was hosting in 2005. The commission sought to build

momentum in advance of the Gleneagles summit, and specifically to increase political pressure on G8 leaders to make ambitious commitments to Africa at the summit. The commission also included Bob Geldof, who had a long history in campaigning on global poverty issues and could bring celebrity and greater public attention to the cause. Geldof organized the coincident 'Live 8' concert series to shift public opinion on issues related to African poverty, demonstrating how civil society can align their efforts with the political strategy of a high level commission.

### 4. Facilitate coordination among actors

A fourth possible function of high level commissions is facilitating coordination among key policymakers. Where actors have broadly aligned incentives, commissions can help to coordinate activities to improve efficiency. Commissions can serve as a forum for members to exchange information and coalesce around a particular plan of action. Efforts to coordinate action are often inward-looking—i.e. they focus on changing actions of their own members (or perhaps of the governments, companies, international organizations, or NGOs to whom their members have close ties). Yet commissions can also serve as a focal coordinating point for a broader constellation of actors and policymakers; if commissions coalesce around a specific set of policy recommendations, even actors with no direct connection to the commission may take direction from the commission and adjust accordingly.

The Finance Ministers Coalition for Climate Action, launched in collaboration with the World Bank in 2019, is an example of a commission that works primarily through coordinating action. The commission describes itself as "a forum to promote shared principles and facilitate the exchange of experience and information on climate change-related fiscal and economic policies and practices" (Coalition of Finance Ministers for Climate Action, 2019). It is designed to allow finance ministers from around the world who want to prioritize action on climate change to learn lessons from each other's experiences and coordinate on future plan of action. The group has also published a set of principles to guide their own actions and actively promotes these principles to the broader policymaking community, thus encouraging other actors to also align their efforts with the commission's work.

<sup>18</sup> At the same time, however, commission members may be reluctant to publicly criticize current policymakers who are members of their own social networks.

## 5. Test run for subsequent negotiations

The fifth and final function high level commissions can perform is serving as a dry run or rehearsal for future negotiations and political settlements. While commission members officially participate in these panels in a personal capacity, informally individual commissioners often act as though they serve as representatives of a broader constituency—be it their country, their region, their industry, or their profession. Often these broader constituencies will have conflicting opinions and interests in seeking to resolve a policy challenge, impeding international cooperation. When the individual members of a panel are able to reconcile their competing interests and define a shared, compromise agenda, this can then serve as a roadmap for similar efforts to reconcile these same conflicts between the same constituencies in other, more politically-charged forums. Essentially commissions can function as a lower-stakes environment for testing potential bargaining between interest groups. The outcome of such debates can then become a baseline for subsequent, more formal negotiations, such as a new international treaty or reforming multilateral organizations. To perform this function successfully, the commission's membership needs to include all relevant stakeholders.

The Panel of Eminent Persons on UN-Civil Society Relations, commonly known as the Cardoso panel, illustrates an attempt to use a commission to resolve differences among competing stakeholders—though with only modest results. The panel was originally convened in the context of contentious relations between civil society organizations and the UN. Civil society organizations were exerting increasing influence in global politics and seeking greater access to policymaking forums. While many governments saw value in bringing these voices in, they were also wary of opening the floodgates to NGOs and sought to guard and protect their own power. The Cardoso panel brought together six individuals with backgrounds primarily in the public sector with six individuals with backgrounds in NGOs and civil society and asked them to point the way forward for a compromise outcome. The 12 members ultimately reached agreement in their report on a series of suggested

reforms to encourage greater UN engagement with and access by civil society. Several of the panel's recommendations were subsequently implemented by the UN Secretary General, while others were taken up for debate by states in the UN General Assembly. Yet several civil society organizations were disappointed with these ultimate outcomes, suggesting perhaps that the panel composition did not accurately represent the diversity of views and stakeholder positions on this issue (Kane, 2008). In the case studies below we discuss a commission that performed this function more successfully, the High Level Panel on the Post-2015 Development Agenda.

These five functions are not mutually exclusive, and in many instances the functions can reinforce each other. For instance, commissions can craft narrative arguments with the goal of both catalyzing immediate political action and shifting policymakers' longer-term normative understanding of an issue. Yet there are also trade-offs, as commission designs and structures will be better suited to some functions than others. Thus, in seeking to create a new commission it is important to identify which of these functions are most needed and design the commission accordingly.

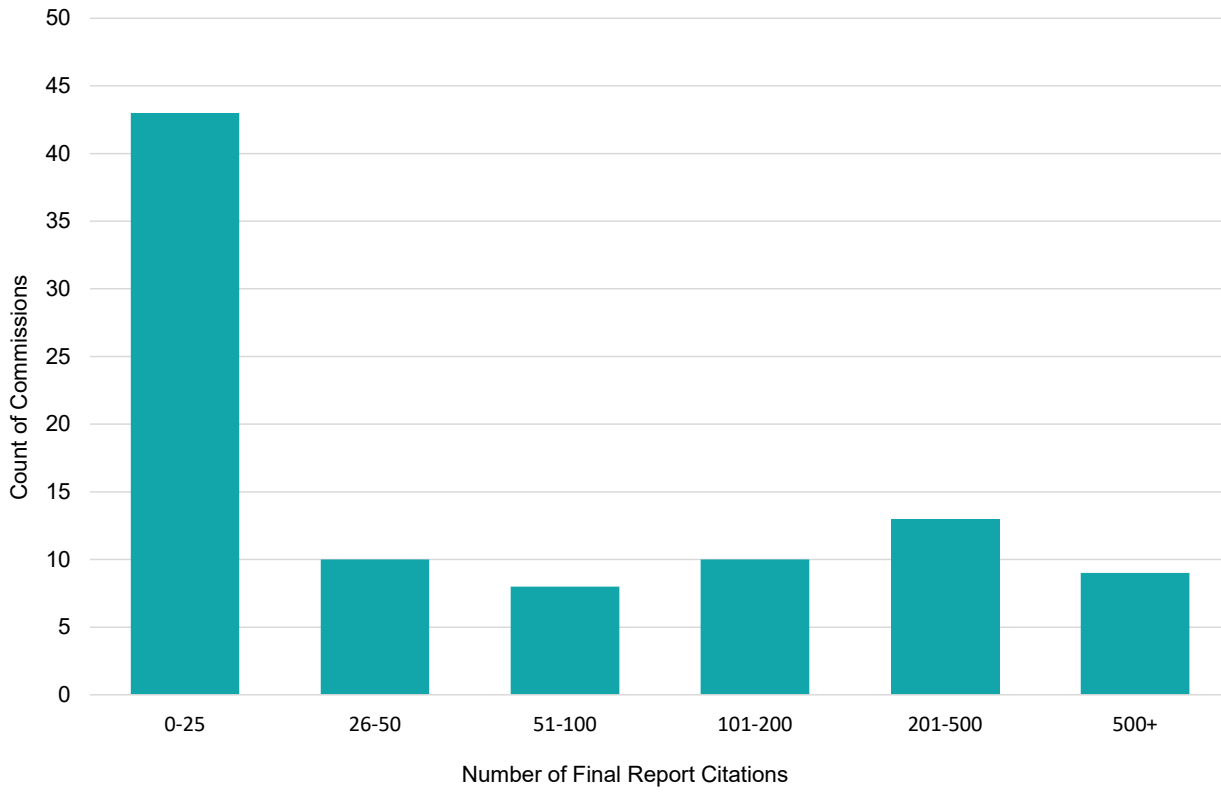
## Assessing the Impact and Influence of High Level Commissions

Isolating the causal impact of high level commissions is difficult. One potential starting point is simply asking how frequently the recommendations included in commission reports were subsequently implemented by policymakers. On this basis, it would appear many commissions have limited impact, as there is often a substantial gap between what a commission aspires to change and the reforms that are eventually enacted. As one review specifically looking at UN commissions noted, “the implementation rate of recommendations in UN reform reports is, in general, no more than 20%—at best” (von Einsiedel & Chandran, 2015).

“When you set it up, you should know what you want to achieve.”

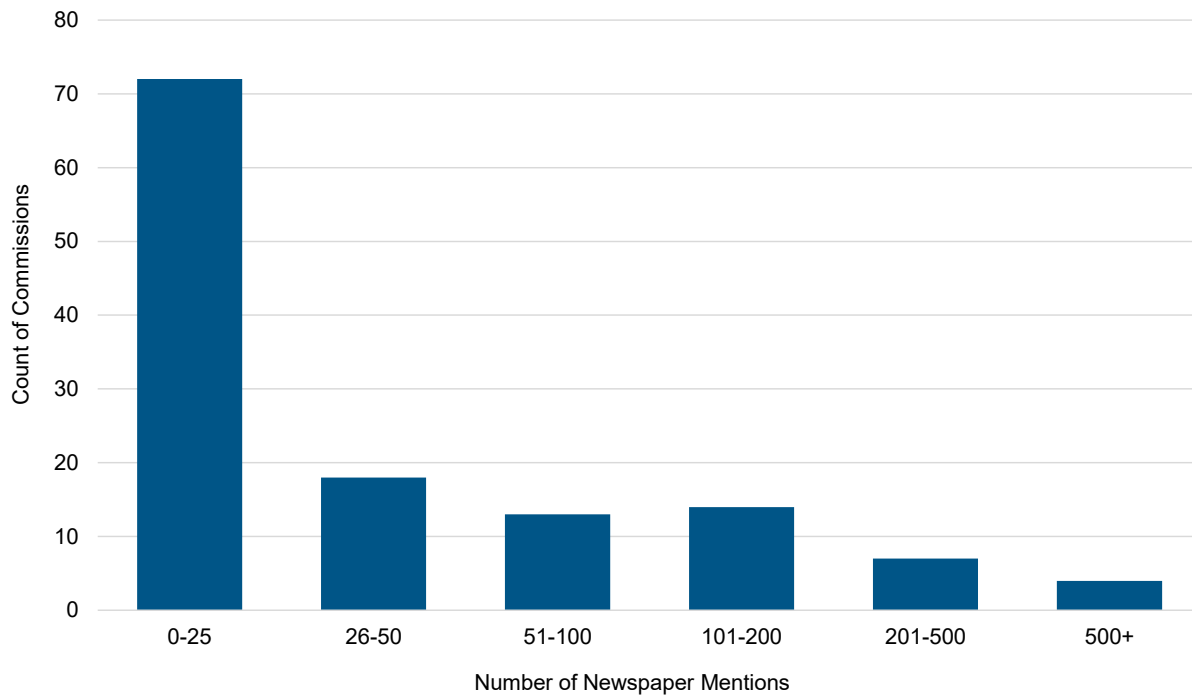
– Interviewee

**Figure 4: Count of High Level Commissions Classified by Citations of Final Report**



Source: Authors' calculations.

**Figure 5: Count of High Level Commissions Classified by Newspaper Mentions**



Source: Authors' calculations.

Yet such a frame provides an incomplete and potentially misleading assessment of the influence of high level commissions for several reasons (Luck, 2000). To begin with, commissions operate within a broader political context that is largely beyond their control. Thus, even when commissions identify a valuable reform agenda and mount a vigorous communications campaign to share their findings, their efforts can be swamped by broader structural political forces that impede international cooperative action. At the same time, even when the recommendations of a commission are subsequently implemented by policymakers, it is not always clear if a commission had any causal effect in influencing this outcome or whether it would have occurred regardless. This suggests that, paradoxically, simply measuring whether a commission's recommendations were subsequently implemented or not could end up indicating that the least ambitious and innovative commissions—those that embraced policy recommendations that were already likely to occur anyways—had been the most successful.

Perhaps most importantly, commissions can play an important role in influencing international agendas and discourses in ways that have a diffuse but nevertheless real impact on global politics, independent of whether their specific recommendations are adopted or not. Particularly for commissions focused on long-term normative change, the ability to shape broader debates (in a way that trickles down into a range of future policymaking decisions) may be a more important measure of influence than whether individual policy recommendations are adopted or not. The Brundtland Commission is again instructive on this point: its framing of sustainable development is now so widely accepted that its influence far exceeds its original list of policy recommendations.

As a proxy for measuring high level commissions' influence in shaping policy agendas, we track two metrics: (a) how frequently commission reports are cited by other academic and policy reports using the Google Scholar database of citations, and (b) how frequently commissions are mentioned in media reporting using the LexisNexis database of "Major World News Publications".<sup>19</sup> These measures capture to what extent the communications and advocacy strategies of commissions succeed in spreading their messages to public audiences.<sup>20</sup>

Figures 4 and 5 show the distributions of these two measures and several points are worth mentioning.

First, a large number of high level commissions appear to have minor influence on academic and media debates, with minimal (<25) citations or press mentions. In other words, many commissions come and go without leaving much of a trace.<sup>21</sup> Second, there is a small minority of commissions that are tremendously successful in gaining scholarly and media attention, with over 500 academic citations and press mentions.

These commissions are primarily focused on promoting normative change—when they are successful, their work ends up repeatedly cited and discussed by academic and policy communities, even decades after they complete their work. (Far and away the most frequently cited report, that of the Brundtland Commission, has been cited over 12,000 times.) And third, there is also a substantial group of panels that do not achieve a level of influence on par with the most famous commissions, but which nevertheless still receive notable attention from both academics and the media (the middle sections of the graphs.)

Why are some high level commissions more cited and discussed in the news than others?<sup>22</sup> Commissions chaired by a current or former head of state/government appear to get a boost in media coverage, and are more likely to be cited in major world newspapers (24 vs 15), but they are less

“...forming a commission is what you do when you want to look like you're doing something but don't actually want to do anything.”

— Interviewee

19 Google scholar citations were calculated the week of July 6th, 2020. LexisNexis news mentions were calculated the week of July 27, 2020.

20 These metrics still have some important limitations. Notably, we conducted our searches using English search terms, and thus if commissions were cited using their translated names in foreign languages we will not capture this. Some media coverage may also reference a commission's recommendation without explicitly including the commission's name. To partially offset this problem we searched both for commissions' official names (eg World Commission on Environment and Development) and nicknames (e.g. Brundtland Commission) wherever relevant.

21 Thakur (2016, p. 872) similarly notes: "Many high level panels and blue ribbon commissions end up forgotten, little remembered, and even less implemented. Some have made a difference." Evans (2013, p. 2) likewise argues: "Some [commissions] have fundamentally changed the terms of international policy debate... but a number of others, perhaps too many for comfort given the resources and energy invested in them, have sunk utterly without trace."

22 All analyses in this paragraph based on assessments of medians, rather than means to avoid skew by outliers.

likely to be cited in Google Scholar (18 vs 104). Similarly, commissions affiliated with a civil society organization receive fewer media mentions (8) than the more official commissions affiliated with either multilateral institutions (21) or governments (171), though there are less stark differences in scholarly citations. Commissions with larger numbers of members are also no more likely to receive coverage: the correlations between the size of the commission and news mentions (0.04) and scholarly citations (0.08) are minimal.

While these data provide one lens on the influence of high level commissions on broader public and expert debates, this is not the only way commissions can shape global politics. Indeed, one of high level commissions' key assets—their access to networks of current policymakers—allows them to be influential behind the scenes, which may not register in a large number of citations or news mentions. One interviewee suggested that the private communications between commission members and influential policymakers was often the most effective channel for amplifying a commission's work. Another suggested a key channel was educating commission members themselves and nurturing relationships among members such that in the future, if these individuals were in positions of power, they might draw on lessons and professional networks developed during their work on the commission. Quantitative data are ill-suited for measuring this form of influence, which is not easily observed from the outside. For this reason, in the following section we provide case studies that probe the influence and effectiveness of several individual commissions.

One broader lesson—and a point that came up in many of our interviews—is that, at the time of their formation, many high level commissions did not necessarily have a clear idea of the impact they hoped to achieve or defined metrics for measuring success. That is, many commissions may be created out of an impetus to “do something”, but without clearly specifying what the problem is and how and why a commission could lead to better outcomes. To be clear, we do not mean to suggest this is true of most commissions. Yet it does appear to be the case that, as commissions have become a common feature in global politics, political leaders and philanthropists may unthinkingly assume initiating a new commission will advance their policy agenda, without necessarily articulating a clear explanation of what specific gaps or needs a commission would fill, or a theory of change for how a commission would achieve its goals.

# Case Study Evidence

To explore why high level commissions form, how they work, and what influence and legacy they have, we provide brief case studies of five commissions. We selected cases based on two criteria. First, we chose examples that used a variety of different functions for influencing global politics to examine the mechanisms through which commissions operate. Second, we chose commissions likely to be of particular relevance for a new commission focused on SDG2, including those related to agriculture and those focused on accelerating progress toward other SDGs.

The first three cases are historical: Aspen Institute's Food Security Strategy Group (FSSG), the High-Level Panel on the Post-2015 Development Agenda and the High-Level Panel on the Future of Multilateral Development Banking (MDB). For these cases we compare their impact and influence against their stated mandate and seek to identify strengths and weaknesses. The other two commissions we study were ongoing at the time of publication: the High Level Panel for a Sustainable Ocean Economy, and the Global Commission to End Energy Poverty. Since it is too early to assess their influence, we assess the logic behind their design and proposed theories of change.

The cases reveal several lessons. The FSSG demonstrates the limits of a group more oriented toward discussing problems rather than identifying solutions. More than any other commission studied, the Post-2015 Panel was demand-driven and benefitted from a clear mandate and built-in audience for its work. The MDB panel highlights how outsider groups have limited ability to influence policy reform negotiations, especially if powerful insiders do not support the process. Both the Ocean Panel and the Energy Commission highlight a recent trend among commissions, as they both include peripheral advisory and technical expert groups which complicates their organization, and simultaneously are designed to act directly, rather than simply issue reports.

“Lack of coordination is a big problem, but “overlaps” [in activities/mandates] is too narrow a term. There is a lack of agreement on a common direction and agenda.”

- Interviewee

# Aspen Institute's Food Security Strategy Group

The Aspen Institute (Aspen) is an NGO that convenes high-profile public and private leaders to discuss solutions for complex policy problems. In 2013, Aspen affiliates Madeleine Albright (former US Secretary of State) and Dan Glickman (former US Secretary of Agriculture) began discussing issues related to hunger and global food security, particularly in light of the role of food riots in the Arab Spring and the earlier global food price crisis of 2007/08. They were especially interested in examining the issue from a non-siloed, holistic lens, incorporating environmental, poverty reduction, gender equity, and other perspectives. To do so they formed the FSSG.

## Mandate and Design

The FSSG formed with a perceived need for broad discussion of cross-cutting issues related to agriculture and food security. The group deliberately adopted a wide-ranging mandate and expansive list of members. Organizers asked participants to consider food security broadly. What, for instance, were the linkages between food security and women's health issues? How can climate change strategies support food security efforts? What is the role of the private sector and financial markets? How could food security discussions move beyond siloes and pursue integrated solutions to systemic challenges?

The FSSG's core purpose was to provide a forum for discussion. Aspen places an emphasis on individual personalities, relationships and dialogue; "Aspen is a great convener," said one interviewee. "Aspen has the ability to bring a lot of high-level folks together. The idea was that in the post 2008 (global food price crisis) environment, the post Arab Spring environment, we could bring people together to look at what started the crisis." Albright and Glickman were joined by former US senator Tom Daschle and Tony Elumelu, the Nigerian-born innovator, economist and philanthropist, in co-chairing the panel. In all, there were 63 active group members and scores more listed as contributors in the final report. The group drew upon disparate backgrounds, with 27 members from civil society, 23 from the private sector and 13 from the public sector; many were established experts, others on-the-ground practitioners. "We feel the complexity of group composition was very important," said one participant. "That would really be a key element and made the conversation vibrant and made the recommendations more robust." Aspen served as the secretariat for the group, while financial support was provided by a number of corporate partners, including several companies with agribusiness interests such as Bunge, Dupont Pioneer, Land O' Lakes, and Coca-Cola.

## Process and Output

The FSSG met six in times in Morocco, Italy, United States, and Serbia. Given the size of the group, not all members were able to join each meeting; an organizer noted there was a core group of members who participated throughout the process, and others

**Table 1: Food Security Strategy Group**

Characteristic	Details
Mandate	Identify strategies for integrated responses to food security challenges across sectors and interlinked areas
Timeframe	2013-2015
Co-Chairs	Madeleine Albright, Thomas Daschle, Tony Elumelu, Dan Glickman
Number of Members	63
Member Composition	13 public sector, 23 private sector, 27 civil society
Institutional Affiliation	Aspen Institute (think tank)
Meetings	6 in-person meetings
Report title	<i>Public and Private Sector Interventions for Global Food Security</i>
What worked well	High-profile co-chairs and diverse composition of group members
What did not work as well	Mismatch with Aspen's institutional expertise & funding shortfalls

came in and out for particular meetings. While participants described the sessions as individually fruitful, the lack of clarity on a specific mandate along with changing participants meant that the process lacked some coherence. One participant noted, “the whole issue of food security relates to other security issues and governance ... It’s a complicated set of issues. I don’t think at the time we did this we recognized how complex the problems were.” That shortcoming was also compounded by the fact the group did not conduct a comprehensive scan of the problems and challenges at the outset, which some group members felt was a mistake. Given that Aspen did not have deep pre-existing expertise in FNS and agriculture, the group had much ground to cover.

The group’s final report, *Public and Private Sector Interventions for Global Food Security*, was quite brief—excluding the foreword and appendices, the executive summary and main body were less than 12 pages (Albright et al., 2015). While the report was the primary public-facing output for the group, organizers emphasized that they viewed the six meetings themselves as the key output, as an important discussion forum and opportunity to build relationships and professional networks—similar to other convenings sponsored by Aspen.

## Influence and Legacy

The FSSG ended in 2015, primarily because of funding shortfalls. One organizer indicated a desire to continue, but the lack of funding made this impossible. Participants suggested FSSG had been successful as a discussion forum and likely brought greater attention to the problems of food security among the group’s members themselves. An organizer highlighted the benefit of cultivating relationships among diverse FSSG members unlikely to interact with one another, along with Aspen’s expectation that participants reach out to their own professional networks to influence policy. However, members did not point to specific instances in which this had occurred.

Beyond the absence of many tangible results, the group’s public interest, as measured by citations or news reports, was limited (perhaps due to financing restrictions). The group did not leave much of a lasting mark within the FNS and agriculture community. In speaking with multiple experts and stakeholders, only a few had any familiarity with

the FSSG, and none suggested it had been a transformative effort.

## Key Takeaways

### FSSG reflected Aspen’s strengths and limitations.

Aspen’s ability to convene high-profile individuals was clear from prominent co-chairs and group members with a wide breadth of experience. Aspen’s lack of deep expertise in food and agriculture posed challenges, leading the group to underestimate entrenched complexities in the sector. The group played to its strengths and kept its mandate broad, but that did not necessarily translate well to actionable outcomes. “The problems are holistic,” said one participant. “The solutions aren’t—the solutions are much more narrowly focused.”

### Adequate funding is critical.

The FSSG may have achieved more with greater financial resources for increased staffing for administrative and research capacity, important because Aspen did not have a deep background in food and agriculture. Better dissemination of the report might have been helpful as well.



## High Level Panel on the Post-2015 Development Agenda<sup>23</sup>

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were the UN's targets for progress on a range of global development priorities for 2000 to 2015. As the world neared the expiration date of the MDGs, international development experts debated what should come next. Two alternative positions emerged. One group favored an approach that sought to “finish the job,” meaning keep a focus on core poverty, hunger, health, and education metrics relevant to the world's poorest countries. The other group favored expanding the development agenda to include more focus on the environment and on middle-income and high-income countries. To help resolve such debates and pave the way for a new global commitment on international development, in 2012 the UN Secretary General convened a high level panel on the post-2015 development agenda.

### Mandate and Design

The panel's official terms of reference spelled out its mandate in less than 20 words: advise the UN Secretary-General (SG) on a “bold” and “practical” development agenda beyond 2015 (UN, 2013). While the formulation was clear, given the competing

visions about what the UN should do, there were multiple directions the panel could have pursued. But the panel had a well-defined audience—the SG and UN members—and clear purpose, as there was a general recognition among governments and the international community that some form of successor to the MDGs would be created through the UN.

The panel was designed with a key function: identify an agenda that a broad range of stakeholders could ultimately support in future negotiations. The SG selected co-chairs representing countries at different stages of economic development: one high income (David Cameron, then-prime minister of the United Kingdom); one middle income (Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, then-president of Indonesia); and one low income (Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, then-president of Liberia). The additional 24 panelists were a mix of former heads of state, ministers, diplomats, professors, and municipal officials chosen by UN leaders or member states. This composition proved prescient at anticipating pressure points. To cite one example, local leaders play significant roles in the implementation of green infrastructure agenda. The perspectives of individuals such as Kadir Topbas—the mayor of Istanbul and president of the United Cities and Local Governments umbrella organization—were valuable in helping to shape strategies. “There were a number of constituencies that could have had a blocking role that were brought in because I believe the idea of the panel was to

**Table 2: High Level Panel on Post-2015 Development Agenda**

Characteristic	Details
Mandate	Advise the Secretary General on a bold and practical development agenda beyond 2015
Timeframe	2012-2013 (11 months)
Co-Chairs	David Cameron, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf
Number of Members	27
Member Composition	23 public sector, 1 private sector, 3 civil society
Institutional Affiliation	United Nations
Meetings	Five (kickoff and final meetings in NYC; working meetings in home countries of each of co-chairs)
Report title	A New Global Partnership: Eradicate Poverty and Transform Economies through Sustainable Development
What worked well	Clear mandate and built-in audience and purpose; “horse trading” between constituencies to identify scope of potential future agreement
What did not work as well	Rushed timeline, resource constraints early in process

<sup>23</sup> Homi Kharas, an advisor to this project, served in the secretariat for the panel and was a lead author of their final report.

test whether these very disparate people could actually come together behind a document,” said one participant.

## Process and Output

From the beginning, the Post-2015 High Level Panel was under significant pressure. The looming expiration of the MDGs created a fixed, external timeline. The SG announced the panel in July 2012 and gave it a deadline of the second quarter of 2013, a maximum span of 11 months. Moreover, the SG, Ban Ki-moon, was personally invested in the panel’s efforts and awaiting its output. And coordinating the panelists’ schedules and demands, given their prominence and stature, was no small task.

Hence, the panel’s meetings were something of a sink-or-swim proposition and had to be efficient and productive. There were five in-person gatherings: a launch in New York City, sessions in London, Monrovia and Bali and then a concluding meeting again in New York City.<sup>24</sup> The preparation for the sessions aligned with best practices described elsewhere in this report—the co-chairs were prepared and engaged, there were clear agendas and succinct briefing notes that captured panelists’ attention but did not overwhelm. The secretariat debated breaking the larger panel into smaller working groups, but there was concern this might encourage divisions and lead panelists into entrenched positions that would ultimately impede reaching a shared vision.

The meetings brought together all constituencies to build consensus. The Post-2015 panel progressed toward its mandate by embracing political bartering during meetings of the entire group. Questionnaires were distributed to panelists in advance to determine the levels of agreement on a subject, with time allocated most generously to issues with greatest divergence. Several other steps helped facilitate negotiations: 1) the group did not begin writing the report until later in the process to avoid getting attached to initial outcomes or being distracted by wordsmithing;<sup>25</sup> and 2) staff members and supporting groups connected with each panel member were not allowed to obstruct the larger effort.<sup>26</sup>

In a final sprint, the commission released its report, *A New Global Partnership: Eradicate Poverty and Transform Economies through Sustainable Development*, which was presented to the SG, the UN membership, and the international community (UN, 2013). The report recommended a universal development agenda that could apply to all countries, embracing a holistic understanding of development. While not being overly prescriptive with specific goals and targets, the report included an annex of illustrative goals.

## Influence and Legacy

The influence of the Post-2015 Panel can be measured in several ways. A key concern for the panel was to shape the international negotiations for the successors to the MDGs. Here the panel clearly benefited from having an established, well-defined, and receptive audience. More than any other commission studied in this paper, the Post-2015 Panel was demand driven—there was an explicit problem that needed a solution. As one panel participant noted, “the mandate was to advise the SG on the post-2015 agenda... We advised him he should get universal consensus on SDG goals. He took the advice and he did it.”

While the final SDGs as agreed by 193 UN member states in 2015 do not perfectly mirror the goals suggested by the panel, they do substantially overlap. This alignment reflects the difficult work of horse trading among competing interests. The intergovernmental working group that would formally negotiate the SDGs had a similar composition to the Post-2015 panel and hence ended up in a similar place; in essence, the Post-2015 panel can be viewed as a trial balloon for this working group. Additionally, following publication of the report Panel members attempted to catalyze political action by advocating for their recommendations and highlighting the costs of inaction as policymakers debated final steps (UN, 2014).

The Post-2015 Panel also had a broader impact promoting normative change in the international development community. The panel’s report explicitly sought to introduce a “new paradigm” and

<sup>24</sup> It should be noted that there substantial workstreams outside the in-person meetings between panelists. Panel members held discussions with various groups, including farmers, workers in the informal sector, migrants, small business owners, women’s groups, academics, experts, politicians, and philosophers. The panel estimated it reviewed documents from over 5,000 civil society organizations and consulted with executives from 250 companies in 30 countries (UN, 2013).

<sup>25</sup> An initial draft was not shared with the panel until the end of the fourth meeting. The final meeting in New York City was spent on getting final agreements on the document.

<sup>26</sup> To be clear, the surrounding staff or “Sherpas” played a sizeable role during the process. But there were efforts made to prevent them from organizing opposition.

“transformative shifts” to the development agenda. Many of the panel’s key concepts, such as the importance of ‘leaving no one behind’, have become pillars of current debate among development practitioners. The group’s normative influence was enhanced as its ideas were considered throughout the UN through the SDGs. This illustrates how high level commissions’ channels of influence can reinforce one another.

## Key Takeaways

### The supporting environment is critical.

Both timing and external interest worked in the Post-2015 panel’s favor. There was clear demand for the panel’s work, within both the SG’s office and the international development community, so the panel did not need to cultivate an audience or make the case for its existence. Though the panel operated under a tight timeline, it was well-placed to feed its outputs directly into ongoing political processes and international negotiations.

### Clear mandates help.

There was little ambiguity about the question the Post-2015 was to answer. The straight-forward nature of the question avoided the challenge of debating what problem the group was trying to solve, thus its time could be devoted to building consensus.

### Engaged leadership and representative panel led to productive in-person sessions.

While the three-chair structure was unusual and something of a risk, participants praised the leadership. The selection of Cameron, Yudhoyono, and Sirleaf ensured the diverse categories of UN member-states felt they were represented by the process. Moreover, the composition of the panel—its emphasis on political insiders who represented different constituencies—aligned with the core purpose to develop a shared agenda. The key work came in the meetings—bringing the panelists together, engaging in political bartering and hashing out differences. Design choices related to the meetings reinforced this focus—smaller working groups were considered but not pursued to avoid dividing the panel, internal surveys were conducted to determine how time should be allocated, and writing was delayed to avoid distractions.

# High Level Panel on the Future of Multilateral Development Banking

In recent decades, the development banking landscape has become increasingly crowded, with as many as 25 global, regional, and sub-regional development banks sharing the same space (Engen & Prizzon, 2018). This trend led some influential observers to consider convening a group to advocate for increased coordination among institutions. The effort gained traction in 2014 and 2015 among senior officials at the Center for Global Development (CGD). Larry Summers, the former US Treasury Secretary and World Bank chief economist, became the CGD’s board chairman in 2014, while Nancy Birdsall, the former executive vice-president at the Inter-American Development Bank, served as president. Both were interested in exploring the possibility of structural changes. After receiving funding from the Gates Foundation, they launched the High level Panel on the Future of Multilateral Development Banking in 2015.

## Mandate and Design

The initial impetus for the panel on MDBs came through informal discussions among high level

civil society networks. The panel’s members were drawn from these networks, selected by the panel’s three co-chairs and two co-directors.<sup>27</sup> If there were standard design principles that helped shape the panel composition—geographic diversity, depth of experience, levels of individual prominence—there were also larger considerations tied to the panel’s mission. In early internal discussions, the senior staff identified two possible approaches:

1. An “insider” effort that would have close links to existing policymakers and take a conservative, incremental approach to institutional change; or
2. An “outsider” group that would be more independent and could advocate for more dramatic—but less easily realized—institutional changes.

The final mix of panelists leaned in the latter direction, although there were elements of a hybrid model. It was a high-profile outsiders group in the sense that no one was actively employed by MDBs or national governments, but many of the panelists were retired or had direct working experience at relevant institutions and government ministries.

Despite opting for a bolder, more ambitious approach, the group wrestled with its mandate throughout. At the outset, the panel did not have a clear defined problem statement on what they hoped

**Table 3: High Level Panel on the Future of Multilateral Development Banking**

Characteristics	Details
Mandate	How to reform and improve the MDB system
Timeframe	2015-2016 (the panel convened for 18 months, although panel members only engaged for roughly one year)
Co-Chairs	Montek Singh Ahluwalia, Lawrence Summers, Andrés Velasco
Number of Members	19
Member Composition	12 public sector, 2 private sector, 5 civil society
Institutional Affiliation	Center for Global Development (think tank)
Meetings	2 in-person meetings
Report title	<i>Multilateral Development Banking for This Century’s Development Challenges</i>
What worked well	Outsider effort that proved compelling enough for insiders to pick up some of its work
What did not work as well	With limited buy-in from intended audience, influence was muted

<sup>27</sup> The co-chairs were Summers, Montek Singh Ahluwalia (former World Bank and IMF official) and Andrés Velasco (former finance minister of Chile). The co-directors were Birdsall and Scott Morris, who is a senior fellow at CGD and previous served as a deputy secretary at the US Treasury Department, leading negotiations with MDBs as part of that role.

to address, and thus during the process members continued to debate what specific issues should be included in the panel's purview and even whether there was a need for large-scale institutional reform. Without clarity and agreement on the problem statement, it was difficult to put forward clear solutions.

## Process and Output

The extended discussions on the problem the MDB panel was trying to solve led to changes in the meeting format. Originally conceived as something of a “light lift” for participants—a single one-day meeting followed by online commenting on drafts—organizers added a second in-person session when the virtual format did not resolve key differences. The gatherings themselves followed the same informal instincts that characterized the formation and recruitment of the panel: participants described them as “free-wheeling.”

That is not to suggest there was no strategic direction for the output. The organizers saw two options. The first was for the panel to define a high-level vision that would trickle down into operational decisions for the respective MDBs. The second was to articulate a concrete set of actions and reforms. The HLP on MDB opted for the latter. “The problem with the [first] alternative,” one participant said, “is that when you deliver your report to policymakers, they can all nod their heads and say it sounds good; they can even adopt the rhetoric. But you might not see any operational or institutional change.”

The report was also notable for the dissent it included from Ray Offenheiser, who was president of Oxfam. Offenheiser objected to the report's emphasis on global public goods and argued poverty reduction should be the primary focus of MDBs. While participants did not feel Offenheiser's dissent undermined the larger effort, it is unusual for panel members to publicly oppose their panel's work.<sup>28</sup> Other reviews of high level panels and elite commissions have highlighted the importance of diverse viewpoints and managing debate, but they have also stressed the need for panelists to own

or advocate for the final publication (Evans, 2013; Yamey, Summers, et al., 2018).

## Influence and Legacy

The MDB panel's influence can be traced back to its “outsider” orientation. While the panel included many prominent individuals, it did not include members in positions of authority at MDBs. Furthermore, multiple participants and observers said that, despite repeated attempts, the World Bank did not meaningfully engage with the group during the process after Bank leadership determined that their interests did not align with that of the panel. While an outsider commission can serve some functions, the limited MDB participation hindered the panel's ability to deliver on facilitating improved coordination among institutions. Without buy-in from relevant MDBs during the process, the panel did not have the ability to nudge powerful stakeholders directly.

Many of the panel's interests and concerns ultimately fed into a later panel sponsored by the G20, the Eminent Persons Group on Global Financial Governance. The effort was an insider exercise designed to ask similar questions as the earlier MDB panel.<sup>29</sup> While it might not be possible to draw a definitive line between the two, the timing of the G20's initiative as well as the overlap in some participants suggests the MDB panel had some influence on this process.<sup>30</sup>

A final element worth highlighting is the MDB panel's efforts to promote normative change. Specifically, the panel argued global public goods should be at the center of the World Bank's reimagined mandate. This push gained some traction: for instance in 2016 World Bank President Jim Yong Kim called for a “much expanded role for the World Bank Group in the global public goods agenda” (Kim, 2016), and subsequent researchers cited the MDB panel as a reference point in reframing this debate (Yamey, Ogbuoji, et al., 2018).<sup>31</sup> Yet others argued the MDB panel's efforts in this space were misguided. A member of the G20 Eminent Persons Group suggested that “one of the perceived weaknesses of the (MDB panel) was they had taken this [global public goods point] too literally... It was this idea that

28 Although not unprecedented, the World Commission on Dams is a notable example of a high level panel that was characterized by internal disagreement, with the World Bank walking away from recommendations after participating in the effort.

29 The Eminent Persons Group on Global Financial Governance's mandate was to recommend reforms to the global financial architecture and governance of the system of international financial institutions so as to promote economic stability and sustainable growth in a new global era; and to discuss how the G20 could better provide continued leadership and support for these goals.

30 Velasco served on both, and Koch-Weser and Birdsall were thanked for their contributions to the Eminent Persons Group on Global Financial Governance's report.

31 Another earlier commission, the International Task Force on Global Public Goods (2003-2006), had also championed this agenda.

the World Bank Group should do global public goods and the others (shouldn't). We didn't want to fall into that trap." The G20 panel ended up suggesting that multiple stakeholders, not simply the World Bank, should hold responsibility for the global commons. Thus, the MDB panel helped shape the normative debate on the future of global public goods, but its preferred interpretation did not win over all participants.

## Key Takeaways

### **Outsider groups have limited ability to solve coordination challenges among powerful institutions.**

The panel attempted to outline a vision for coordinated action among MDBs. However, its lack of direct political influence with those MDBs proved to be a substantial roadblock inhibiting the implementation of the recommendations.<sup>32</sup> This is not to suggest outsider panels do not have a place in the commission landscape, but there should be an understanding that progress is likely to be halting.

### **Debate over the problem statement at the outset risks attracting outsized attention.**

It is critical that there is a clear articulation of the problem statement to maintain the panel's structure and focus. A facilitator or a clear process for resolving debates may help get a commission on track. While not necessarily inherently problematic, the report's published dissent reinforces the idea the panelists did not coalesce around a shared vision of the issues.

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<sup>32</sup> It should also be noted that the panel lacked scholars of political structures, which limited its ability to capture important and relevant expertise.

## High Level Panel for a Sustainable Ocean Economy

The High Level Panel for a Sustainable Ocean Economy (Ocean Panel) formed in 2018 to focus global attention on the economic benefits associated with healthy ocean environments. The initiative is ongoing, and thus it is premature to discuss its influence and legacy. However, we briefly assess its design and early work programs, as it provides a possible model for a similar effort focused on FNS and agriculture.

### Mandate, Design, and Early Activities

The Ocean Panel was initiated by the Norwegian government, which sought an opportunity for greater collaboration among countries whose economies rely on oceans. Erna Solberg, the current Norwegian prime minister, and Tommy Remengesau, the president of Palau, serve as co-chairs, and the panel consists of fourteen heads of state and one UN official. The World Resources Institute (WRI), a think tank based in Washington DC, serves as the group's secretariat. The panel originally intended to conclude its report in the second half of 2020 before engaging in a road show to highlight its findings, although the pandemic is likely to push the release to 2021.

There are two additional bodies affiliated with the Ocean Panel that support its efforts and are critical to its commitment to knowledge-informed decision-making. The first is an *advisory* group that is a mix of more than 100 representatives from businesses,

civil society and intergovernmental organizations that have ocean interests and can influence their personal networks to serve as advocates for the Ocean panel's work. The second is an *expert* group that features roughly 80 professors, researchers and analysts who help review the scientific inputs while also proposing policy solutions that align with accepted best practices.

The panel seeks to influence global cooperation on oceans through several channels. The panel organizers specifically targeted national leaders as panelists to directly influence policy change. One organizer noted the panel's objective was to (a) directly inform national leaders and motivate them to take action, (b) encourage their members to serve as regional leaders and champions for their cause, and (c) to provide a roadmap that other countries could follow. The panel seeks both to catalyze political action and coordinate behavior. The decision to work with national leaders also has drawbacks, however, as they have many competing demands on their time and attention. An organizer noted that working with current policymakers could be challenging because they can be constrained by domestic political concerns.

The panel is also explicitly seeking to reframe the understanding that promoting the economic potential of oceans conflicts with preserving the sustainability and health of oceans. The panel wants to promote a different normative view, that harnessing the economic potential of oceans depends on ensuring their environmental sustainability. This will likely be a central message of the panel's report and focus of their communications campaign.

**Table 4: High Level Panel for a Sustainable Ocean Economy**

Characteristics	Details
Mandate	Deliver recommendations to governments to ensure a sustainable ocean economy
Timeframe	2018-ongoing
Co-Chairs	Erna Solberg (PM of Norway) and Tommy Remengesau (President of Palau)
Number of Members	15
Member Composition	15 public sector (14 heads of state; 1 UN official)
Institutional Affiliation	World Resources Institute (think tank)
Meetings	Shifted online with Covid-19

# Global Commission to End Energy Poverty

The Global Commission to End Energy Poverty (Energy Commission) emerged out of a similar debate to that currently ongoing in the FNS and agriculture sector. In 2018, an expert roundtable convened to discuss how to accelerate progress on SDG7 (energy access for all). How could leading policymakers, investors and utility companies improve access to affordable, reliable, and sustainable electricity in the developing world? Participants asked whether an elite commission might be an effective means of advancing this agenda. The Rockefeller Foundation pursued the idea, forging a collaboration with the MIT Energy Initiative and launching the panel in 2019. As with the Oceans Panel, while we cannot provide a definitive assessment of this commission-in-progress, we outline its key features.

## Mandate, Design, and Early Activities

The Energy Commission's focus has an ambitious agenda for accelerating progress toward SDG7:

1. Raise the profile of energy poverty. The commission is pursuing normative change by shifting discussions on poverty reduction to gaps in energy access. Rockefeller is playing an important role with this workstream, using its advocacy and communications capacity to help spread the commission's framing of the issue.
2. Conduct original research. The MIT Energy Initiative released an inception report that accompanied the Energy Commission's launch in 2019. In it, they highlighted two

key areas (distribution and wholesale trade) where its researchers had identified the need for coordinated action (MIT Energy Initiative, 2019). A flurry of hypotheses followed, which MIT promised to test during the lifecycle of the commission.

3. Coordinate immediate action and investments. The 30 commissioners were selected as much for their control over investments in specific locations as opposed to their thought leadership. Participants said the success of the project would be determined by the actual implementation of energy projects.

Very few high level commissions have attempted to cover such a broad work program. To effectively implement this program, the Commission will need to develop a cohesive approach that complements the respective institutional strengths of Rockefeller and the MIT Energy Initiative. MIT appears well-served to focus on the research, while Rockefeller and the commissioners can push for implementation strategies. The COVID-19 pandemic further complicates matters, both practically (pushing meetings and convenings online) and substantively (is energy poverty pushed to the background by issues that might capture more global attention such as health?).

**Table 5: Global Commission to End Energy Poverty**

Characteristics	Details
Timeframe	2019-ongoing
Mandate	Identify and address the barriers to achieving universal, economically impactful electrification
Co-Chairs	Akinwumi Adesina (president of African Development Bank), Ernest Moniz (former US Secretary of Energy),
Number of Members	30
Member Composition	14 public sector, 11 private sector, 5 civil society
Institutional Affiliation	Rockefeller Foundation (philanthropy)



# A New High Level Commission for SDG2?

Given both the strengths and limitations of high level commissions as mechanisms for cooperating on international policy challenges, could such a commission help accelerate progress toward SDG2? To assess this question, we first conducted interviews with 20 experts and leading practitioners across the FNS and agriculture space to better understand the key constraints and shortcomings in the sector. We then compared these challenges to the roles and functions of high level commissions to determine where a commission might be valuable.

“If you go talk to governments, everything is in siloes again. Usually [with] ministries, there’s a health ministry that does nothing related to nutrition or very little in terms of prevention; then there is a fisheries ministry that doesn’t talk to the agriculture ministry; then there is maybe a women and children ministry that also doesn’t talk to the agriculture ministry. In general, I think the first step is understanding these complexities and it is about national incoherence between departments, but also within different levels of government.”

- Interviewee

In our interviews, we heard that stakeholders were open and intrigued by the idea of a new high level commission, but also skeptical and cautious. Many noted there was already a dense institutional landscape in this sector (see Table 6), and it was unclear whether a new initiative was needed or what it could achieve. More generally, many of the biggest challenges are ill-suited to this form of commission: several interviewees suggested that top-down approaches such as elite commissions have not driven the hoped-for change in the sector, and new solutions must be driven through community-level co-creation and multi-stakeholder dialogue. And given the sprawling nature of the FNS and agriculture sector and its litany of complex challenges, there is a risk that a new prominent commission might try to do too much. A new commission searching for a silver bullet or seeking to cover all of SDG2 would be set up to fail. However, a more targeted commission with a clearly articulated audience and theory of change could achieve meaningful progress.

Here we first consider reasons for skepticism and outline some areas where we believe a new commission would *not* be helpful, before turning to three possible areas where a commission could be more fruitful.

## Commission Options Unlikely to Succeed

Our research suggests that several commonly suggested ideas for a new high level commission in FNS and agriculture would be unlikely to have significant impact.

### Coordinating global actors and donors

An early idea we considered was a new commission to encourage greater coordination among donors and other key

**Table 6: Major Commissions, Partnerships, and Alliances for International Cooperation in FNS and Ag**

Initiative	Year Created	Lead Institution(s)	Objective / Purpose
<b>Major UN or FAO-led Efforts</b>			
High Level Task Force on the Global Food Security Crisis	2008	UN	Enhance coordination and coherence of FNS system during food price crisis
Committee on World Food Security (CFS)	1974 (revived in 2009)	FAO	Serve as international and intergovernmental platform that coordinates policies related to food security and nutrition
High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition	2009	FAO/CFS	Science/policy interface of the CFS
<b>Other Efforts</b>			
Global Donor Platform for Rural Development	2003	IFAD (secretariat)	Lobby for increased public and private investments in agriculture and rural development
Scaling Up Nutrition movement (SUN movement)	2011	Hosted by UN Office for Project Services	Encourages national governments and civil society to collaborate against malnutrition
Global Food Security Cluster	2011	FAO & WFP	Coordinate the food security response during a humanitarian crisis
High Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development	2013	UN	Helps monitor progress toward SDGs, including SDG2
Global Soil Partnership	2012	FAO	Promotes soil issues to support food security and improved nutrition
Global Alliance for the Future of Food	2012	Various NGOs	Alliance of NGOs and foundations that aggregates voices
Food Reform for Sustainability and Health (FReSH)	2017	WBCSD	Support the transformation of food system and create a set of business solutions for industry change
Scaling Up Agroecology Initiative	2018	FAO	Seeks collaboration between the RBAs and other non-FNS multilateral institutions
Global Agribusiness Alliance	2018	WBCSD	Encourages private companies in upstream segments of the value chain to work together
50x2030 Initiative	2018	FAO, World Bank, IFAD, Gates Foundation, others	Create better agricultural data in 50 African countries by 2030
Africa Food Security Leadership Dialogues	2019	World Bank, AfDB, African Union Commission, FAO, IFAD	Encourage cooperation to address food security in Africa

actors in FNS and agriculture to better align their actions and financing. In interviews practitioners reported that coordination and cohesion among actors in the sector remains an important challenge. Yet as Table 6 shows, there is already a plethora of

initiatives and partnerships seeking to improve global coordination in FNS and agriculture. Overall, these efforts have achieved only modest changes, and we are skeptical a new high level commission to advance coordination could do much above and beyond what

had been carried out by pre-existing efforts. The sources of this coordination problem appear to be deep-rooted, tied to actors' differing interests and priorities; a new commission would be unlikely to overcome these issues.

### Raising awareness

A second initial idea we evaluated was a high level commission focused broadly on raising attention and general awareness to the world's failures on SDG2 targets. Yet we did not perceive a clear theory of change for how such a commission might meaningfully achieve impact in FNS and agriculture. Even if a commission succeeded in generating greater public attention to the issues of ending hunger and supporting agriculture, this would be too diffuse and unfocused to generate pressure for significant policy reforms. Moreover, there are existing actors already seeking to generate such attention, such as the FAO and WFP's celebrity goodwill ambassadors. Interviewees were skeptical that in general more political and celebrity attention could move the needle.

### Catalyzing political action and accountability

A third idea we considered was a new commission focused on a broad push to catalyze political action and improve accountability on SDG2. But given the complexity of the FNS and agriculture sector and the multitude of actors involved, such an approach also appears unlikely to succeed. Any high level commission which sought to cover the entirety of SDG2 would struggle to identify and prioritize an actionable set of policy recommendations. Our interviews with experts in the sector suggest such a commission would likely fail to reach agreement on a clear problem statement, as there are many competing views on what the most pressing challenges in the sector are, and these undoubtedly vary by region. It would also lack clarity on the audience it was seeking to influence, given the breadth of actors involved. This suggests a commission with a broad focus on catalyzing global political action for SDG2 would most likely produce a sprawling report that was unlikely to translate into policy changes.

We also believe that many efforts to coordinate activities and catalyze political action around SDG2 are better implemented at the *national* rather than the global level. An in-country forum that brought together ministerial-level officials from the various departments and agencies that are connected to FNS and agriculture, along with key donors and other partners, could improve coordination, better align financing with local priorities, assemble more holistic financing, and generate political momentum for policy changes. But though a national (or perhaps regional) commission could potentially help in this work, it is not clear there is a necessary role for a global commission. The key coordination is needed for policy coherence at the

“Before thinking about, ‘how can we increase attention and focus?’ We should ask, ‘why isn’t it already getting attention?’”

– Interviewee

national level (and between national, state, and local levels in-country). The prioritization of needs within the FNS and agriculture sector, the relevant actors, and local political context will all vary by country. While outside actors can help facilitate such local discussions, there are limited roles for them to play, as such processes will be far more successful when they are country-owned and country-led. Moreover, there are already some existing international efforts to facilitate these national coordination programs, such as the Food Systems Dialogues program. There is little benefit to replicating these programs.

### Starting an “IPCC” for Food Systems

Our interviews also surfaced a number of promising ideas for initiatives and reforms that we believe are worth pursuing but are not well suited to be carried out by a high level commission. For example, several interviewees suggested creating a standing scientific expert group on agriculture, modeled on the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. While we agree this idea has merit and is worth exploring, we do not see how a new high level commission of the type studied in this report is needed to implement the concept.

### Stimulating private sector engagement/ investment

Similarly, we also heard there was a need for new forums that brought together private sector actors

with governments and donors more consistently to coordinate, exchange information, and stimulate investment. Again, this idea may be worth pursuing, but it seems better suited to a broader alliance of organizations rather than a small group of elite individuals.

## Potential Roles for a New High Level Commission

Despite these notes of caution, our analyses do suggest a more sharply defined and targeted commission could make progress on a tractable agenda. A commission does not need to address every problem or even necessarily the biggest single problem in the FNS and agriculture space; instead it should focus on a clear problem with a clear theory of change for how the interventions of a high level commission could help.

Building on both our assessment of how high level commissions can influence international relations and our analyses of the specific constraints impeding progress on achieving various elements of SDG2, we suggest three potential options for a new high level commission: one focused on continuing the work of the UN's Food Systems Summit, scheduled for 2021; one focused on reforming the international architecture in FNS and agriculture; or one focused on a specific tractable topic, such as conflict and food systems or building the case for investing in agriculture. Below, we briefly sketch out a case for each, assessing the context, potential mandate, theory of change, and design considerations of a new commission.

### Option A: Commission Designed to Carry Forward the Work of the UN Food Systems Summit

In 2021, the UN plans to convene a global Food Systems Summit to raise global awareness and encourage global commitments and actions for transforming food systems. This event will provide a unique attention-focusing moment for the FNS and agriculture space, and critically provide an opportunity to connect the FNS/agriculture communities with those who work primarily on the environment, health, and economic development. Many of the summit's own objectives parallel the functions of a high level commission: in an interview

a representative for the Summit noted that they hoped to raise awareness and “drive a change in the discourse” by putting food systems at the center of the SDGs (i.e. promoting normative change) and to encourage every country to produce a political commitment around their food strategy (i.e. catalyzing political action).

Given that the Summit process itself is already working to promote normative change in how we think about food systems and to secure political commitments in this space, there is little demand for a separate high level commission that would overlap with—or worse, compete with—the Food Systems Summit. Indeed, there are already plans for the Summit to be supported by a Champions Group of high level individuals to advise on planning, amplify its messages, and attract political and popular attention. While details for the Champions Group have not yet been announced, it is likely to meet our criteria of a high level commission. It would be neither feasible nor desirable for a separate commission to attempt to craft a competing normative vision and agenda, given that the Summit is clearly the focal point for political action and advocacy in the FNS and agriculture sector at the moment.

However, we do believe a group that is closely aligned with the Summit process—with an explicit mandate on carrying forward the messages and objectives of the Summit into the future—could valuably complement the efforts of the Summit committee and help ensure the Summit's lasting legacy. Its purpose could be ensuring high-level political commitment and follow-through for the Summit's action plan, so that issues related to transforming food systems do not fall off the global political agenda once the Summit is over. And its efforts could help expand and amplify the normative

“The food fight within the food agencies internally is getting worse. Everyone is pretending to be in charge – WHO, FAO, WFP. There is definitely not one UN in agriculture. Could the UN Food Systems Summit help the UN get its house in order?”

– Interviewee

changes the Summit is proposing, helping embed these ideas in academic and civil society discourses over time, much as the Brundtland Commission's work ultimately helped anchor the concept of sustainable development.

The key design consideration for any such commission is how to work closely and effectively with the Food Systems Summit. The new commission could potentially be planned in tandem with and officially launched at the Summit. This will likely involve some level of formal affiliation with the UN, and perhaps some overlap in staffing with the Summit committee. The commission may also draw its members from those involved with the Summit's Champions Group to encourage continuity. In selecting members, it would also be critical to ensure participation of prominent individuals beyond the FNS and agriculture community, such as current and/or former heads of state and finance ministers, and to engage development banks and the private sector. The goal should be not only to speak to current stakeholders in the FNS and agriculture community, but to bring such messages to a broader audience and develop linkages with other sectors.

## Option B: Commission Designed to Propose Reforms to the Institutional Architecture for FNS and Agriculture

As mentioned above, the global institutional architecture in the FNS and agriculture sector is a dense and complex web of institutions, initiatives, and partnerships. This landscape has evolved over decades, in part because key actors in the sector have often responded to perceived shortcomings and gaps in the FNS system by layering new institutions on top of the existing architecture—for instance, the Global Agriculture and Food Security Program was created as a new initiative in 2010 as a response to the global food price crisis, rather than seeking to mobilize new funding through existing channels. While each individual decision to launch a new partnership or fund may be justified on its own terms, overall the resulting system involves significant overlap and duplication of mandates, and is not optimized for international coordination or efficiency.

The challenges of this architecture have been well-known for many years, yet in practice achieving meaningful reforms has proven difficult (Rampa et al., 2019; von Braun, 2018). In our interviews, many respondents agreed that reforming and streamlining

“You need to be really targeted about what you know you want to achieve, be distinct with your time, secretariat capacity, or you could go on forever and achieve nothing.”

– Interviewee

the institutional architecture might be valuable in theory, but there was a common—and strongly held—view that in practice this would be a difficult and arduous process. Established interests in the sector have developed over years, many of whom will be resistant to change and protective of their current roles. This is one reason why debate over architectural reform has become stuck, with limited prospects for meaningful change.

A high level commission convened to propose reforms to the architecture would be stepping into a politically fraught environment, and would face steep obstacles. Yet precisely because current debates over reform have proven intractable, the potential upside of a new commission—were it able to unblock the process of architectural reform—would be substantial. It would be a high risk, high reward proposition, but one which might be worth pursuing under the right conditions. The commission's mandate could involve analyzing whether the current multilateral architecture is fit for purpose for achieving SDG2. This would include examining resource mobilization and financing—including improved leveraging of private sector funds—in addition to examining mandates and duplicative efforts among multilateral institutions. A new commission could serve as a forum for coalescing around a common agenda and feasible approach that balances competing stakeholders' views, much as the panel on the post-2015 development agenda helped resolve competing viewpoints to reach a shared consensus.

One lesson from the CGD commission on MDBs is if commissions focused on institutional reforms do not have early buy-in from the relevant powerful actors, they are unlikely to gain traction. Thus, a new commission on reforming the FNS and agriculture architecture would need a specific mandate from high-placed actors, most likely the UN Secretary General and several powerful national governments.

Even still, there would likely be some political resistance to any wide-ranging reform initiatives, and thus commission members would need to be chosen strategically to ensure key interests are represented and would not become spoilers in the process, blocking any efforts to reform. Given these political sensitivities, the process for setting up such a commission would need to proceed cautiously, beginning with sounding out whether there is demand and appetite for such an initiative among current stakeholders. The political attention surrounding both the fallout of the COVID pandemic and the Food Systems Summit may create an opening where governments and international institutions are willing to take a fresh look at reforming the architecture for FNS and agriculture. A high level commission could help accelerate this process.

### Option C: Commission Focused on One Specific, Tractable Topic

Rather than focusing on the entirety of SDG2, a commission could focus on one narrow, more specific, and tractable topic within the broader FNS ecosystem, which would provide a greater chance of delivering an actionable policy agenda. Interviewees suggested a wide range of topics, from risk mitigation and insurance for food producers, to land tenure, to trade policy. However, many of these are more suitable for a technical committee rather than via the political tool of a high level commission. Based on our discussions with experts in the sector, we believe two important topics that could be helpfully addressed by a new high level commission include the intersection of conflict and FNS and the case for investing in agriculture.

In recent years armed conflict has emerged as one of the key drivers of food insecurity around the world. The 2020 Global Report on Food Crises notes that nearly 60 percent of the people suffering crisis levels of acute food insecurity live in countries that are in conflict (WFP, 2020). A high level commission on conflict and FNS could elucidate the complex linkages between conflict and food (in)security, including food stresses as a cause of conflict, the manipulation of food supply and food control as a tool of warfare, and how to promote the resilience of food systems during periods of conflict (Brück & d'Errico, 2019). It would focus on generating and synthesizing new knowledge on these questions that could be quickly taken up by

the governments, international donors, businesses, and NGOs operating on the ground. Commission members could include both academic experts and practitioners with direct experience, and would bridge the FNS, conflict, and humanitarian assistance communities.

A second option would be a commission focused on building the case for increasing investment in agriculture and drawing the linkages between agricultural productivity, sustainability, and broader economic development. Building on the more technical work of the CERES2030 commission—which studies which investments in agriculture and food policy would have the greatest payoff and how much they would cost—a new commission could help build the *political* case for increasing investment in agriculture, similar to what the Commission on Macroeconomics and Health (2000-2001) and the Lancet Commission on Investing in Health (2012-2013) did in health. And just as the Oceans Panel is currently seeking to reframe narratives to show the alignment, and indeed necessity, between environmental sustainability and economic productivity in managing oceans, a new commission could highlight the linkages between productivity and sustainability in the agriculture sector and economic growth. Commission members could be current and former high-level policymakers both within and beyond the agriculture sector, which is crucial for developing linkages between agriculture and other sectors.

As the above sketches suggest, the specific mandate and theory of change for a topic-specific commission would vary based on the subject it sought to address, which would in turn shape its design. Crucially, however, even a more narrowly defined commission should still be ambitious in its vision and recommendations and seek to break down many of the siloes between the food, nutrition, agriculture, finance, and environmental communities that may impede coordination on policy. A new commission should speak not only to FNS and agriculture audiences but build linkages across policy domains. Success in one topic-specific commission could potentially spur interest in similar efforts in different topics. And even if the commission is not explicitly focused on food systems, any such commission should still seek to coordinate and align with the Food Systems Summit process in some fashion, given its centrality in contemporary policy and advocacy debates in the sector.

# Conditions for Successful Commissions

If stakeholders do decide to initiate a new commission related to SDG2, how should they go about doing it?

While the details will of course vary based on the specific mandate and theory of change a commission is pursuing, there are several generalizable lessons on how to design, run, and follow-through on a high level commission to improve odds of success. Here we collect these lessons, drawing on our review of existing literature and our case studies and interviews of previous commissions.<sup>33</sup>

This section highlights considerations for designing and implementing effective and influential high level commissions. These conditions should not necessarily be considered absolute—in some cases, the commission’s function(s) might warrant a different approach.

## Commission Formation

### Establish clear mandate and problem statement.

Commissions need a clear mandate to facilitate cohesive discussion and action. Where there is disagreement on mandate, it will be difficult for commissions to make any significant progress. Both the FSSG and MDB panel demonstrate some of the pitfalls of an ambiguous mandate. For most commissions, the mandate will consist of a problem statement describing a policy challenge, allowing discussions to proceed toward identifying, implementing, and advocating for solutions.

### Choose an engaged and committed chair.

Effective chairs set an agenda, inspire, motivate, pressure, and generally push things along to achieve a commission’s goals. They frame important analytical work and run meetings. They also serve as gravitational forces to inspire others to join the commission and play a key role in spreading its message, both privately among their personal and professional networks and publicly through op-eds, interviews, and other communications.

“the [commissions] that fell on deaf ears had fuzzy, confusing, contradictory messaging. It wasn’t really clear what they were for and didn’t handle internal dissent very well.”

– Interviewee

“Leadership is so critical. People know based on who is inviting them what they are walking into.”

– Interviewee

“Our theory of change is based on the people themselves.”

– Interviewee

“There is no shortage of reports. I can’t even keep up with a fraction of the reports. Another report is not going to do much more.”

– Interviewee

<sup>33</sup> In particular, in this section we rely on previous assessments of best practices in high level commissions in Luck (2000), Thakur (2016), von Einsiedel & Fong (2017), Evans (2013) and Yamey, Summers, et al. (2018).

### Select members strategically.

Potential members each bring a set of assets to commissions and may be selected for their fame, personal networks, and knowledge and expertise. Some commission members may have deep technical expertise, while others may bring a fresh outsider perspective. Commissions should avoid relying too heavily on the same “old boys club” and be wary of individuals who are just seeking a line on their CV but not interested in meaningfully contributing. Commissions should be built as a portfolio, with an eye to the complementarities among individual members aggregating to a cohesive whole.

### Be wary of inviting too many members.

Commissions with more than 12-15 participants can become difficult to manage and may find it challenging to achieve a consensus.<sup>34</sup> Though inviting more members can potentially lead to opportunities to reach additional networks and gain more prominence, this can devolve into continually bringing in more participants, resulting in an unruly and unfocused process. An alternative approach is the one the Oceans Panel is embracing—using its advisory group to support broader participation and buy-in without diluting its core effort.

### Secure adequate funding and budget carefully.

As highlighted by the break-up of the FSSG, many commissions are constrained by tight budgets that can limit work programs, force early adjournment, and prevent a full post-publication communications strategy.<sup>35</sup> We repeatedly heard that commissions are expensive endeavors and it is not worth executing one “on the cheap”—the support staff, travel expenses, and communications teams are essential to commissions’ likelihood of success. Securing adequate financing at the outset for the full scope of the commission’s work is critical.

“You need to do your due diligence – are they collaborative, good thinkers who do different things? It’s like putting a football team together – can’t do a bunch of prime ministers together - they need to do different things.”

– Interviewee

## Process Management and Report Writing

### A well-staffed and resourced secretariat is necessary.

Secretariat staff are crucial for shaping the messages of the commission and writing the report, as well as handling the logistics of planning and executing meetings and managing communications among commission members. Surprisingly, several commissions we studied did not have secretariat staff and broader support infrastructure in place from the beginning, which resulted in a “build the ship while you are sailing it” approach. Interviewees reported this being a source of stress that risked sinking the entire effort. High-level individuals do not have time to build this infrastructure, particularly in the absence of sufficient resources. In some cases, their organization may devote adequate in-kind staff time to support the panelist (although additional core operational staff will be needed).

### Research staffing must be adequate.

Depending on the nature of the commission’s work, thorough and trustworthy reviews of existing knowledge are nearly always needed; in some cases, original research is required. A scientific advisory panel may be able to provide this effort, but core research staff may be necessary as well.

<sup>34</sup> Note, however, that this advice will also vary based on the commission’s specific purpose. For example, since part of the Post-2015 panel’s mandate was to identify an agenda that a broad range of stakeholders could support, it necessarily needed a larger group. That made for challenges that the engaged leadership group navigated through active and effective management.

<sup>35</sup> Program support provided by donors for the FSSG was US\$500,000 in 2013, US\$250,000 in 2014 and \$135,000 in 2015 (Aspen Institute, 2013).



### **In-person meetings are essential for building relationships and focusing attention.**

Several participants noted that in-person meetings are significantly more effective than conference calls for focusing attention and drawing out counterarguments. These should be carefully planned and moderated for maximum efficiency. The Aspen Institute has established several longer-term high-level groups and has strongly emphasized the importance of relationship-building in creating new networks. Traveling and spending two or three days dedicated to the commission ensured individuals came well-prepared and committed to the process. Clearly, COVID-19 will make international travel difficult for the near future; while this is not reason to delay launching a new commission, it should be taken into consideration.<sup>36</sup>

### **Involve relevant stakeholders throughout the commission's lifespan.**

Engaging a broad group of stakeholders is important both for improving legitimacy and securing buy-in for the ultimate product. High level commissions are at risk of being insular, elite, and out of touch; to be more inclusive they can counter such tendencies via listening sessions with civil society, private sector, or country ministers. Such programming can be organized around the commission's in-person meetings.

**“Some commissions get published and there will be an addendum where these five authors want to make it clear that they did not believe in chapter 3. That’s just so awful for the commission.”**

**- Interviewee**

**“Who wants a review of the evidence? There are a million reviews out there. If you want to write a review, write a review. If what you are trying to do is bring together some of the worlds’ great minds to say something new, interesting, and provocative and address a gaping hole of a need – and that you are going to tell to the world at a particular moment in time—that’s what you are doing. Anyone can write a review.”**

**– Interviewee**

### **Establish processes for managing internal disputes and face political controversy head-on.**

Commissions will necessarily tread on contentious and controversial ground. There need to be mechanisms for managing disputes among members and for engaging outside constituencies who disagree on critical points. Managing such politics is crucial for ensuring commissions do not avoid controversial topics—resulting in cautious final reports—or break down in irresolvable conflict. In many commissions members will be supported by a “Sherpa” who supports and advises them and helps prepare them for meetings. These Sherpas are separate from commission secretariat staffers. Managing the tripartite relationship between secretariat staffers, Sherpas, and commission members can be complex and is best navigated by establishing clear roles for each upfront.

### **Establish clear end dates, report deadlines, and communications benchmarks.**

Clarity on the commission's timeline and process from the outset can help with focus and accountability. Without an endpoint as a ‘tether’, a commission risks drifting, and losing focus and

<sup>36</sup> The two contemporary panels are both having to react to the new environment wrought by COVID-19. The Oceans panel reported that it was still having effective group online meetings, but that its process was aided by the fact that participants had already developed a rapport through previous in-person meetings. For the Energy Commission, aligning schedules across various time zones for video meetings has presented significant challenges.

## Post-Publication

“The main problem is that some people will want to join a commission because it looks good on their CVs and not do anything. That’s very frustrating...you do have to watch out for dead weight – people who are like, ‘I’d love to help’ and then they don’t do anything.”

– Interviewee

momentum. In many instances such a timeline may be driven by outside events, such as the need to complete recommendations before global negotiations are set to begin. At the same time, however, some commissions may need more time if they are working on a topic that requires sustained effort and will play out over a longer period.

### Reports must balance clear and accessible messaging and a bold vision.

In drafting final reports, commissions typically balance complex aims of presenting consensus while being bold and bringing innovation to longstanding policy debates. Commissions can quickly fade from memory and leave little impact if their reports do not present a compelling new vision but rather simply reiterate existing understandings. One way commissions can garner attention is to conduct original research, present new datapoints, or distill existing knowledge into compelling forms that serve as a hook for a broader audience.

### Have a specific plan for creating impact.

While the strategy for creating impact will always be part of a commission’s discussion, having a draft impact plan can expand the vision beyond a final report and can foster discussion of opportunities, needed resources, and responsibilities. Creating a statement such as this is likely to be helpful: “This commission’s work will be successful if \_\_\_\_.”

### Plan for a robust (and well-resourced) impact effort and outreach campaign following publication of a report.

Many commissions either formally or informally viewed the publication of their report as the conclusion of their work. The most successful commissions realized this was not the case; as Gro Harlem Brundtland said, “A good report is not the end but the beginning”. The release of a “final” report should be around the mid-point of a project, not at the end, as for most commissions the follow-up phase is the most critical part of the work and determines the commission’s influence.<sup>37</sup> Commissions should organize a full schedule of rollout events and press outreach to all key locations, targeting messages to local audiences. Interviewees also stressed the importance of a good communications plan and the staff to execute it starting on day one.

### Use commission members as ambassadors.

Commission members can be powerful advocates in amplifying a report’s messages after publication. Depending on their individual backgrounds and stature, commission members often have significant public platforms as well as private access to key decisionmakers. To persuade commission members to act as effective ambassadors, however, it is important to ensure they feel included in earlier processes and claim ownership of the ultimate product.

“The end product isn’t the launch of the paper. That is the start. The paper is just a tool. No one is going to react just because a paper got published. [Use] the report as a tool and not as the end product”

- Interviewee

<sup>37</sup> Though it is worth noting that some commissions are explicitly designed to hand-off their product to another actor, such as the High Level Panel on the Post-2015 Development Agenda; in these cases the follow-up phase may be taken up by these other actors.

### Lay groundwork for future action plan.

While many commissions will focus on policy recommendations that are immediately actionable, it can be helpful to suggest pathways for longer-term actions and to identify a research agenda. This can extend visibility. In a few instances, commissions have regrouped several years after their initial project to gauge progress and reassess their recommendations.

### Evaluate the effort.

We could find very little evidence that an evaluation or assessment was conducted on the impact of individual high level commissions. Any new commission should consider utilizing some assessment tool from the start of the effort, and with a one-year, or two-year follow-up to examine impacts and lessons learned.

“We do a lot of preparation but don’t do a lot of follow-up [to measure impact].”

– Interviewee

## Conclusion

We began this project in January 2020, when news of the COVID-19 outbreak was only first beginning to emerge, and few foresaw its global impact. At the time, prospects for further international cooperation on global development were mired in gridlock. There was little appetite or interest in launching any new ambitious global cooperation initiatives, and the international development community seemed destined to continue muddling through.

Seven months later, as we finalize this report, we are living in a completely different world. We are no longer stuck in a world of gridlock, where nothing seems to change; we are living through a moment of extreme volatility and uncertainty, where many different futures seem possible. Inertia has given way to a crisis mobilization. The problem for advocates of greater international cooperation is no longer how to generate some modest momentum for moving away from the status quo. It is how to break through the onslaught of news and new priorities competing for global attention, to harness some of the energy (both creative and destructive) in international politics today.

This new dynamic, of course, will shift the prospects for a new high level commission related to SDG2, though in non-obvious ways. On the one hand, the pandemic may drive policymakers to focus almost all their attention (and financing) on health and health systems; this could further push FNS and agriculture off the global agenda. On the other hand, the pandemic and subsequent economic collapse have deeply implicated food systems, as spikes in demand, threats of food hoarding, and the risk of spiraling shortages grabbed international attention. Anecdotal evidence suggests the pandemic has in fact heightened global attention on food security: for instance, a representative for the Center for Strategic and International Studies' Global Food Security Program told us they had been responding to a flood of media inquiries on the state of the global food system ever since the COVID-19 outbreak. Food systems have not been pushed off the global agenda—even though government budgets for FNS and agriculture may be under stress.

Greater global attention to food security may help open a window of opportunity for a new high level commission in this space. Of course, whether scarce time, effort, and resources should be devoted to such an effort is another question altogether. In this study, based on a comprehensive analysis of previous high level commissions, we have identified several areas where we believe a new SDG2 commission would *not* be helpful. But we have also found three options we believe have real potential: a commission designed to carry forward and follow-up on the outcomes of the Food Systems Summit, scheduled for 2021; a commission reassessing the multilateral architecture in FNS and agriculture;

As Gro Harlem Brundtland has put it, “A good report is not the end but the beginning.”

Operationally this means, as Ed Luck has expressed it succinctly, “In terms of getting high-level and/or sustained attention, nothing counts like follow up, follow up, and follow up. The release of a ‘final’ report should be around the mid-point of a project, not its culmination.”

and a narrower commission designed around a clear, tractable topic.

Would a new commission succeed in moving the needle on SDG2? Our research suggests many previous commissions have had little to no influence; indeed, the modal impact of a commission is that it is quickly forgotten and leaves little trace. Yet others have had remarkably wide-ranging impact. Moreover, our research also identifies several best practices for designing, carrying out, and following through on a commission, practices which can improve a commission's odds for success. With favorable conditions teed up and with buy-in from governments, a new high level commission on SDG2 could potentially capitalize on the current political moment and achieve meaningful progress.

Ultimately, we have purposively avoided explicitly endorsing the decision to proceed with a new commission or not. Such decisions need to be made in a broader context that assesses not only the political demand for a new commission, but also the opportunity costs of a new commission vs potential alternative mechanisms for encouraging international cooperation on SDG2. Definitely answering this question is not only beyond the scope of our analysis, but also beyond our authority and competency as independent researchers; it is an inherently political decision that must be made in a political context. But we believe this report should be valuable for any policymakers, civil society leaders, or other stakeholders pondering this question, and can usefully inform their decision-making process.

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