



Questions about Global Food Security

Interview with Olivier De Schutter

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Malthusian apprehensions that population growth will eventually exceed food supplies have been held off for a long time because so far food production has been growing faster than population. Today, however, some experts are again raising the alarm about a possible food crisis. The scare has been triggered by continuous increases and volatility in the prices of agricultural commodities, a result of a concurrence of different cyclical and structural factors since the beginning of the new millennium, including climate change, land degradation, water shortage, declining oil supplies, erosion of biodiversity, increase of biofuel production, and growing demands for a meat-rich diet from emerging countries.

According to the *Population Division* of the United Nation, the world population is expected to reach 9 billion in 2050. By that time, 70% of the inhabitants will be concentrated in urban areas and the average per capita income at the global level will be higher than today. In order to respond to the foreseen demand of this larger, more urban and richer population, Fao has stated that food production will have to increase by 70%. Furthermore, the production of biofuels from agricultural commodities is projected to continue expanding in the future, due primarily to policy support measures and quantitative mandates in developed countries. This in a context of climate change that negatively impacts agricultural yields. As a result, agriculture in the 21st century is facing several challenges: it needs to produce more food to feed a growing population and more feedstock for the bioenergy market; contribute to development in agriculture-dependent poor countries; adopt more efficient and sustainable production methods; and adapt to climate change.

Aware of the critical nature of these challenges, we sought out Olivier De Schutter, the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food to gather his views on the issue.

Olivier De Schutter is Professor of Law at the Université Catholique de Louvain in Belgium and the College of Europe. He is also a member of the Global Law School Faculty at New York University and Visiting Professor at Columbia University. From 2002 to 2006, he chaired the EU Network of Independent Experts on Fundamental Rights, a high-level group of experts advising the European Union institutions on fundamental rights issues. He has acted on a number of occasions as an expert for the Council of Europe and the European Union. From 2004 onward, until his appointment to UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, he was General Secretary of the International Federation of Human Rights on the issue of globalization and human rights. His publications are in the area of international human rights and fundamental rights in the EU, with a particular emphasis on economic and social rights and the relationship between human rights and governance. His most recent book is *International Human Rights Law* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010).

Olivier De Schutter was appointed Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food by the Human Rights Council in March 2008 and assumed his functions on May 1, 2008.

His mandate is to:

- promote the full realization of the right to food and the adoption of measures at the national, regional and international levels for the realization of the right of everyone to enough and adequate food to fully develop and maintain his or her physical and mental capacity;
- to examine ways and means of overcoming existing and emerging obstacles to the realization of the right to food;
- to submit proposals that could help to achieve Millennium Development Goal n. 1, namely, halving the percentage of people suffering from hunger by the year 2015, and realizing the right to food, especially through international assistance and cooperation to reinforce national actions to implement sustainable food security policies;
- to present recommendations on possible steps to be taken to progressively achieve full realization of the right to food, taking into account lessons learned in the implementation of national plans to combat hunger;
- to work in close cooperation with all state governments, intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations, the Committee of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, as well as other relevant actors representing the

broadest possible range of interests and experiences, within their respective mandates, to promote the realization of the right to food for all;

– to promote the realization of the right to food in relevant international conferences and events.

Recent food crises, combined with the energy crisis and emerging climate change issues, are undermining the livelihoods of millions of poor people as well as economic, ecological, and political conditions in many developing countries. Furthermore, progress in achieving development goals – such as cutting hunger by half by 2015 – threatens to be delayed. Can you explain what the realization of the right to food means and what are the key elements to achieve it?

The right to food is a human right recognized under international law, which protects the right of all human beings to feed themselves in dignity, either by producing their food or by purchasing it.

Realizing the right to food is about more than simply increasing the production of food and hoping that it will reach hungry mouths. It is about creating food systems where the interests and rights of all citizens, including the poorest and most vulnerable, are taken into account in all the relevant policy areas – agriculture, land, trade, nutrition, social policy and others – and people are given tools for holding governments to account when their right to food is denied.

The key elements for securing the right to food can be grouped under three headings – availability, accessibility and adequacy. Availability requires, on the one hand, that food should be available from natural resources either through its production, by land cultivation or animal husbandry, or through other means, such as fishing, hunting or gathering. On the other hand, it requires that food should be available for sale in markets and shops. Accessibility requires economic and physical access to food to be guaranteed. Economic accessibility means that food must be affordable. Individuals should be able to afford food for an adequate diet without compromising on any other basic needs, such as school fees, medical care or rent. Physical accessibility means that food should be accessible to all, including the physically vulnerable, such as children, the sick, persons with disabilities, and the elderly, for whom it may be difficult to go out to get food. And adequacy means that the food must satisfy dietary needs, taking into account the individual's age, living conditions, health, occupation, sex, etc. For example, if children's food does not contain the nutrients necessary for their physical and mental development, it is not adequate. Adequate food should also be culturally ac-

ceptable. For example, aid including food whose consumption is a religious or cultural taboo for the recipients or food that is inconsistent with their eating habits would not be culturally acceptable.

The right to food therefore goes far beyond merely raising net calorie intake to tackle hunger. It is an approach that addresses the root causes of hunger – which are as much about political and social marginalization as they are about agricultural yields.

In one of your Reports you stated that agriculture is currently at a crossroads. In the past, most efforts to improve food production focused on high yielding variety seeds and providing farmers with a set of inputs capable of increasing yields by replicating the model of industrial processes. Why is industrial agriculture no longer viable?

Two of the greatest and most pressing challenges today are, on the one hand, fighting hunger and poverty, on the other, reversing the course of climate change and environmental degradation. We can no longer afford solutions that tackle one side of the equation while worsening the other.

Conventional farming relies on expensive inputs, fuels climate change, and is not resilient to climatic shocks. It is simply no longer the best choice today. We will not defeat hunger and stop climate change with industrial farming on large plantations. Any approach of this nature is merely a race against time that will eventually be lost, and through which we will only accelerate the onset of climate change and its potential to devastate harvests.

The greatest tragedy of rushing headlong into a second ‘green revolution’, where industrial solutions are sought at an industrial scale, is that other solutions and other ways of organizing food production exist that work with nature’s cycles, not against them, and the opportunity to support these will be missed.

It is becoming increasingly necessary to redirect agriculture towards models of production that are more environmentally sustainable and socially just. What are agroecological production systems and how can agroecology contribute to the right to food?

Agroecology is the application of ecological science to the design of agricultural systems in a way that enhances soil productivity and protects crops against pests by relying on natural environment, such as beneficial trees, plants, animals and insects.

Scientific evidence demonstrates that agroecological methods can actually do very well in boosting food production in areas where hungry people live - especially in unfavorable environments. To date, agroecological projects have achieved an average crop yield increase of 80% in 57 developing countries, with an average increase of 116% for all African projects. Recent projects conducted in 20 African countries even demonstrated a doubling of crop yields over a 3-10 year period.

Agroecology can contribute to the right to food by creating resilient and productive food systems while simultaneously alleviating poverty and boosting rural development. Agroecology is a knowledge-intensive approach that can put effective technologies and techniques in the hands of smallholders, who are among the world's poorest and most food-insecure.

However, despite its impressive potential to realize the right to food for all, agroecology is still insufficiently backed by ambitious public policies. It requires public policies supporting agricultural research and participative extension services. States and donors have a key role to play here. Private companies will not invest time and money in practices that cannot be rewarded by patents and which do not open markets for chemical products or improved seeds.

The food crises that have marked the new millennium have revealed something really important, namely, that we are now in an era of scarcity and it is time to take the necessary measures to minimize the trade-off between food security and environmental protection. However, the first reaction to the increase in the prices of basic food commodities has been to urge food-importing countries and private investors to acquire large plots of fertile land in developing countries in order to ensure long-term food security and speculate on farmland. Since large-scale land acquisitions, or “land grabs”, are profit-oriented and largely aimed at production for export, they will encourage further development of an industrial agricultural model in the host countries. This could amplify conflicts over land and lead to marginalization of small farmers, displacement of local populations, adverse environmental impacts, food insecurity, and intensification of poverty instead of its alleviation. Do you think it is possible to conciliate the interests of Western and Emerging countries (food and energy security) with those of the host countries (the need for agricultural investments, food sovereignty, access to land and natural resources)? In this regard, is compliance with the Principles for Responsible Agricultural Investment¹ and the Prin-

¹ In 2009, UNCTAD, FAO, IFAD and the World Bank have jointly developed a set of *Principles for responsible agricultural investment that respects rights, livelihoods and resources*

Principles for Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests² enough to protect the rights of local populations?

The land tenure guidelines are an important first step, and are particularly significant given the central role of the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) in drawing them up in participatory fashion.³ However, it is now essential for countries to rigorously apply the guidelines, particularly in regions of the world such as Sub-Saharan Africa, where large-scale land acquisitions are occurring at an increasing pace.

It is possible to reconcile the interests of investors and host countries, but only if the governments of host countries conduct human rights-based impact assessments of these land acquisitions, and only if these countries

(*PRAI*). The seven Principles that cover all types of investment in agriculture, comprise the following:

Principle 1: Existing rights to land and associated natural resources are recognized and respected.

Principle 2: Investments do not jeopardize food security but rather strengthen it.

Principle 3: Processes relating to investment in agriculture are transparent, monitored, and ensure accountability by all stakeholders, within a proper business, legal, and regulatory environment.

Principle 4: All those materially affected are consulted, and agreements from consultations are recorded and enforced.

Principle 5: Investors ensure that projects respect the rule of law, reflect industry best practice, are viable economically, and result in durable shared value.

Principle 6: Investments generate desirable social and distributional impacts and do not increase vulnerability.

Principle 7: Environmental impacts of a project are quantified and measures taken to encourage sustainable resource use, while minimizing the risk/magnitude of negative impacts and mitigating them.

² The Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests promote secure tenure rights and equitable access to land, fisheries and forests as a means of eradicating hunger and poverty, supporting sustainable development and enhancing the environment. They were officially endorsed by the Committee on World Food Security on 11 May 2012. Since then implementation has been encouraged by G20, Rio+20, United Nations General Assembly and Francophone Assembly of Parliamentarians.

³ The Committee on World Food Security (CFS) was set up in 1974 as an intergovernmental body to serve as a forum for the review and follow-up of food security policies. In 2009, the Committee went through a reform process to ensure that the voices of other stakeholders were heard in the global debate on food security and nutrition. The vision of the reformed CFS is meant to be the most inclusive international and intergovernmental platform for all stakeholders to work together in a coordinated way to ensure food security and nutrition for all. CFS was reformed to address short-term crises, but also long-term structural issues. The Committee reports annually to the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations (ECOSOC).

put in place comprehensive national strategies for food security and the right to food. The arrival of multinational investors may raise land yields, but this will do nothing to curb hunger and poverty among local populations if the acquisitions take place at the expense of local farmers and herders whose traditional rights are pushed aside.

After years of political unawareness of the rural world, food crises have placed the problem of hunger at the center of the international political agenda. At the same time, agricultural land has become a bone of contention in the struggle for economic and political supremacy among countries. The dispute is economic even more than geopolitical. It takes place between those who regard land as a commodity that can be subject to financial speculation, or as raw material for industrial agriculture, and those who regard land as inseparable from its environment and inhabitants, and believe that it should be protected to guarantee the fundamental right to food. Perhaps a deep paradigm shift is called for to reduce hunger and ensure the right to food in a context of natural resource scarcity. What we need is possibly a different pattern of economic growth, capable of mitigating the *myopia* of both the Market and the State. What is your opinion on this, is such a change mere utopia, or something we can continue to hope for?

The dominant paradigm is currently the market paradigm, and in many countries and regions of the world what is needed is first and foremost to make policy-makers and citizens aware of the alternative to this paradigm, which is a rights-based approach to managing natural resources. A rights-based paradigm involves a stronger role for the State, but this does not ineluctably imply that the policies deployed will be “myopic”; in fact, the central tenet of a rights-based approach to tackling hunger is to rebuild food systems around the ongoing participation of broad groups of actors, thereby ensuring that multiple points of view are represented. This approach can act as a safeguard against “myopic” policy decisions that neglect the needs of specific groups.

Particularly as natural resources become scarcer, it is crucial to put in place a paradigm whereby the voices of poor, food-insecure populations are heard. These are the groups whose livelihoods and access to food rely most directly on the natural environment and its self-sustaining capacities being kept intact. Small-scale farmers are natural custodians of the environment, and are the actors whose voice is often under-represented when economic and political decisions are taken. A new rights-based paradigm is wholly possible to achieve. It does not require a rejection of market

principles. It merely puts safeguards in place in order to counter decisions made on market principles that would exacerbate hunger and poverty, and further marginalize the poor from economic opportunities.

In your capacity as Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, you have a fundamental institutional role in this context. Can you disclose to us the next steps you intend to take towards the progressive achievement of the full realization of the right to food?

In the remaining year and a half of my mandate, I intend to conduct further right-to-food country missions in Africa, Asia and other parts of the world, and plan to convene a regional right-to-food expert consultation in West Africa – the third such meeting, following the success of the 2012 East African meeting in Nairobi and the 2011 Latin American consultation in Bogota. In addition to these visits, I will continue to promote the right to food in global fora including the Committee on World Food Security and the G20, and will officially report to the UN on national implementation of the right to food and the challenges encountered over the course of my mandate.