Submission to the G20 Development Group Food Security Review

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The Special Rapporteur welcomes the G20 Development Group “Review of economic growth and job creation in relation to food security and nutrition” as an opportunity to identify necessary reforms to the global food system. A main conclusion arrived at by the Special Rapporteur in his work, including on the basis of extensive consultations and country visits undertaken over the past six years, is the need for least developed countries to build local food chains to create job opportunities in the local food processing and marketing sectors.

The right to food provides important guidance in this regard. Specifically, in order to achieve sustainable food and nutrition security in lower income countries, the Special Rapporteur would advise that G20 action be guided by the following considerations.

1. Investment in smallholder agriculture

Small-scale food producers, including many farmworkers who barely survive from their labour on large plantations, represent a majority of those experiencing food and nutrition insecurity in today’s world. The promotion, over past decades, of export-led agriculture, often based on the exploitation of a largely disempowered workforce, has been at the expense of smallholders producing food crops for local consumption. This has resulted in a situation in which many low-income countries, though they are typically agriculture-based, produce food crops for local consumption. This has resulted in a situation in which many low-income countries, though they are typically agriculture-based, export raw commodities, but have perhaps paradoxically increased their dependence on food imports, sometimes supplemented by food aid, because they have neglected to invest in local production and food processing to feed their own populations. The neglect of smallholder agriculture has contributed to increased rural poverty, the growth of urban slums, and to the inability of governments to move to a more diversified economy.

2. Reforms in middle- and high-income countries, as a condition for reforms in developing countries' agrifood systems

There is a connection between the obstacles faced by low-income countries in their attempt to improve the food and nutrition security for their populations and the need for reform in middle- and high-income countries. A number of reasons explain the lack of investment in food production to satisfy local needs, including the burden of foreign debt (which leads countries to focus on cash crops for exports) and the often weak accountability of governments to the rural poor. Another main reason, however, is the availability of cheap food imports caused by overproduction in better-off exporting countries, stimulated by subsidies going to the largest agricultural producers in those countries. Consequently, efforts in lower income countries to rebuild local food systems and to expand opportunities to small-scale food producers must be supported by reform of food systems in higher income countries. Such reform faces a number of obstacles, however. The farming sector in OECD countries has become highly dependent on agricultural subsidies that have favoured the production of commodities for the livestock or food processing industry – corn, soybean and wheat, in particular – rather than food: even without taking into account the subsidies for the consumption of

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fossil fuels by agricultural producers, countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development subsidized their farming sector to the amount of $259 billion in 2012, thus favouring the expansion of the food processing industry, thanks to the availability of cheap inputs. Large agribusiness corporations have come to dominate increasingly globalized markets thanks to their ability to achieve economies of scale and because of various network effects. This results in food systems that are largely locked into a certain type of production for a certain category of actors, with limited possibilities for the system to reform itself.

3. Support to local food systems

The Special Rapporteur has emphasized, with others, that small-scale food producers must be provided with greater opportunities to sell on the local markets, while the poorest consumers must have the possibility to purchase food that is fresh and nutritious, and therefore healthier. The strengthening of local food systems would also improve the resilience of cities. By 2050, when the world population will have reached 9.3 billion, about 6.3 billion of these inhabitants, more than two in three, will be urban. As the competition increases between putting land to urban or to industrial use in the urban and peri-urban perimeter, it is vital that cities develop a variety of channels through which they can procure their food, including through the development of short food chains connecting cities to their local foodshed.

A wide range of social innovations have emerged in recent years to support the rebuilding of local food systems, primarily by reconnecting urban consumers with local food producers. The right to food provides important guidance for such efforts. First, a key condition for success is that participation is encouraged at a local level, in order to allow all stakeholders (from the producers to the end consumers) to arrive at a joint diagnosis of which improvements could be made to rebuild the local food system. The establishment of local food councils formally linked to municipalities can be one way of achieving this. Second, the right to food provides a way to measure whether the initiatives launched are successful, thus facilitating monitoring. Third, the right to food introduces the dimension of accountability: social innovations aimed at the mobilization of local resources to rebuild food systems through a bottom-up approach will have lasting impacts if they result in commitments that beneficiaries can claim – for instance, commitments to provide certain types of support to local food producers or to deliver adequate food to low-income communities.

Moreover, there is a need for a careful sequencing of actions, requiring strong cross-sectoral coordination. For instance, support to small-scale food producers should be paired with investments in local food packaging and processing industries and in food retail, in order to maximize the benefits to the local economy of the growth of the agricultural sector. Support to small-scale food producers should also go hand in hand with investments in the manufacturing and services sectors for the delivery of consumer items, since increased incomes in rural areas have the potential to raise demand for locally traded goods and services: this “consumption linkage” is estimated to be four to five times more important than the “production” linkage between food producers and agro-processing activities. The multiplier effects are particularly significant where agricultural growth is widely spread across large segments of a very poor population.

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Olivier De Schutter was appointed the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food in March 2008 by the United Nations Human Rights Council. He is independent from any government or organization, and he reports to the Human Rights Council and to the General Assembly. All reports are available on http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Food/Pages/FoodIndex.aspx. The Special Rapporteur can be contacted at srfood@ohchr.org

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2 For example, the Special Rapporteur noted with interest such initiatives in Canada (A/HRC/22/50/Add.1, paras. 17 and 26–32), South Africa (A/HRC/19/59/Add.3, paras. 48 and 49), and Brazil (A/HRC/13/33/Add.6, para. 33).