Africa: Sharing Money Important, But Not Enough - UN Rapporteur

17 August 2009

Fortune is pleased to take part in an unusual but very productive collaboration with other media outlets in Africa and Europe. Organized by www.afronline.com, and together with newspapers in Senegal, Mali, and Madagascar, Fortune has participated on an online interview of Olivier De Schutter, a special rapporteur to the United Nations on Right to Food.

De Schutter spoke on issues of the consequences of the economic crisis after the riots of 2008; the 20 billion dollars promised by the G8 to address the issues of crisis in food; the ongoing land grab in Africa by investors in the West and Asia; as well as the impact of climate change on the right to food in Africa.

De Schutter was a professor of Law at the University of Louvain (UCL), Belgium, from where he earned is PhD in law. He also holds a LL.M, from Harvard University. He has been lecturer in law at the University of Leicester (UK) and has been teaching European Union law, international and European human rights law and legal theory at numerous universities in New York, France, Finland, Portugal, Benin and Puerto Rico.

He is the author of several expert reports for the Council of Europe. He is the author and co-author of dozens of books and articles about issues ranging from European law to immigration law, from trans-national corporations to international law.

De Schutter is an expert on social and economic rights and on trade and human rights, who served between 2004 and 2008 as a Secretary General of the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH). He was appointed Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food by the Human Rights Council in March 2008 and assumed his functions in May 2008.

"I am working on a dossier which will become a report that will be delivered to the Human Rights Council in March 2010," he said in this interview. "It will include concrete proposals to improve the respect for food rights in the agro-food system."

Afronline.org: In 2007 and 2008, Africa was subject to growing riots, due to the booming food prices. In the second semester of 2008, prices registered a 40pc decrease, but in the last few months they have started going up once more. Is Africa protected from another food crisis?

De Schutter: We cannot understand the tragedy of hunger based only on the evolution of food prices on international markets. By focusing on these aspects alone, we ignore all the problems related to the production chain and to the distribution of food. Poor people in African countries do not buy rice or manioc (cassava) on the Chicago Stock Exchange, but in
local markets or village shops; producers sell the goods to intermediates, and not to the international market.

Therefore, even when prices do go up, few producers may in fact enjoy an increase in revenues. Similarly, the decrease of prices in the global markets does not automatically lead to lower prices for consumers. In April 2009, Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) published a report made in 58 developing countries showing that in 80pc of the countries being looked at, foodstuffs were being sold at higher prices compared to April 2008, and 40pc of those surveyed had seen prices increases from January 2009.

In January 2008, hunger affected 923 million people, but today the hungry amount to 1.02 billion people worldwide. The crisis has never been this strong.

That being said, the increase of prices does weigh a lot on the balance of payments and on the trade balances of poor countries, among which are many African net-food-importing countries. Due to this dependence - resulting where for the past 30 years, investment has been in crops for the export market to raise foreign currency rather than growing food - countries remain extremely vulnerable.

It is obvious to all that the link between agricultural production and oil is an intolerable situation. To date, we have not acted on the root causes of price volatility and other jolts are inevitable.

Addis Fortune: The United Nations has several agencies to alleviate the problems of global food shortages, in particular among poor countries; the FAO and WFP. What more can a UN Right to Food Rapporteur do to help world’s poor access food?

De Schutter: Hunger is usually seen by the international agencies either as a production problem or one of availability - the FAO seeks to encourage more production, and the WFP to deliver food where it is needed, for instance following bad harvests or resulting from conflict situations. The root causes of hunger are discrimination and marginalization, lack of accountability of governments to the needs of their population, or in adopting of policies that aggravate hunger instead of alleviating it.

A framework based on the right to adequate food obliges us to include these questions - questions of governance if you like, or of accountability - into our answers to the hunger issue. Without this - without accountability mechanisms and a protection of the entitlements of the poorest - our solutions will remain short-term, insufficiently targeted, and ultimately ineffectual. It may result in increased production but completely fails to reduce the scourge of hunger. The right to food is therefore a vital part of the panoply of answers we have to develop against hunger.

Afronline.org: In a recent article, The Economist claims that until agricultural productivity in poor countries increases, the balance between supply and demand will remain precarious. Do you agree?

Although not false, this assertion is over-simplified. It focuses on supply side without taking demand into account. For instance, the desire for animal protein by northern countries, and more recently our thirst of agro-fuels, plays a role in the reduction of stocks and mounting tensions between supply and demand in the international marketplace.
It is dangerous, however, to diminish the issue of hunger to an issue of just supply and demand. In 2008, harvests were excellent, but the number of hungry people increased. Why?

Of course, the answer does not lie in a lack of production. The problem is that 80pc of families do not have access to social protection, the purchasing power of poor countries did not increase sufficiently and small-holders are not being helped out. And we cannot consider production without also considering distribution it is a very important one. Many production systems now do not minimize the problem but by accelerating the duplication of the sector, the system is creating rural exodus and poverty as towns grow.

Addis Fortune: Close to one billion people are facing hunger, the population of the United States, Canada, and the European Union combined. It is a population that is often described as 'bottom-billion'. A challenging phenomenon to governments in 'bottom-billion' societies is the additional need to import food. This has brought about a serious imbalance in the balance of payments, leading to yet another cycle of foreign debt. Ironically, the world has not moved fast enough to disperse the 50 billion dollars promised in 2005 at the G20 Summit, in Gleneagles (United Kingdom). What is your office doing to speed things up?

We have to stop mystifying numbers. The last G8 Summit in L’Aquila pledged 20 billion dollars in three years to boost agriculture in developing countries. But what does it mean exactly? This is not sufficient compared to the 25 billion to 30 billion dollars per year for a period of five years which the UN agencies, and firstly FAO have said is needed for African agriculture alone.

All too often pledges are not respected. Last year, both the G8 Summit in Hokkaido, Japan and the Food Summit in Rome promised more funds, but they have so far only given half of the sum pledged. However, we also care about the way in which these funds are going to be invested, the kind of projects they will support and whether policies are planned at a national level.

I recommend two things: Governments need to be made more accountable and a more severe control on pledges must be put into place; but this can be made through a reform from the FAO Committee on World Food Security, (CFS). Furthermore, more should be invested in families and sustainable agriculture through providing such as storage tools, communications and stronger investment in agro ecological practices, rather than in simply supplying farm inputs. My mandate requires that I be a 'vigilante' and not to personally manage allocation of funds.

Afronline.org: Why have poor and rich governments as well as international institutions abandoned agriculture over the last decade?

Since the 1980s, agriculture has increasingly been ignored in many developing countries. This has happened both in development cooperation policies - where the share for agriculture dropped from 18pc in 1980 to four per cent in 2007 - and in national budgets. There are three main reasons.

Looking at the huge supports [such as export subsidies] to agricultural producers in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) area - 258 billion dollars in 2007 - and the high competitiveness of agriculture in nations such as Argentina, Thailand
or Uruguay; the agricultural sector came to be seen as unprofitable in the majority of developing countries, particularly the least developed countries (LDCs).

Why concentrate one's efforts upon agriculture, while this sector appeared to be destined to remain less competitive?

It seemed easier to export raw materials such as minerals, oil, diamonds or crop cultivations such as cotton, coffee, tea and tobacco; and to import foodstuffs which were often already transformed, rather than strengthen family and subsistence agriculture.

Then structural adjustment plans of the 1980s stimulated a production fall-off, for instance through either the organization of production processes or of mechanisms that would allow to maintain price levels, with the aim of favouring the emergence of "the truth of prices". However, the private sector has not taken up the relay and agriculture has been deserted, sometimes in a literal sense.

Finally, small farmers displaced in the countries are relatively marginalized on a political level. Their demands do not have clout compared to inhabitants of cities, for whom it was decided that less expensive imported foodstuffs bought on international markets should be encouraged with the use of food aid, at the expense of local production which accelerated the rural exodus. All the ingredients of the disaster we are now paying for were in the making.

Les Echos: Genetically modified (GM) products have been introduced, mainly in the cotton sector. Are you worried?

The GM debate is currently not on the right track. It must be framed in the context of improving agriculture and food. It is not about deciding whether we are for or against GM but about what kind of agriculture we want to promote and which kind of possibilities we have to improve and renew our systems. 'Agro-ecological' methods, which intensify production on a sound ecological basis, have strong potential.

Afronline.org: In Berlin, you took part in a consultation with many representatives of food companies. The finger is often pointed at these groups for being responsible for an increase in food prices. What was the outcome of the meeting?

Many NGOs, companies and experts took part in this multi-stakeholder consultation to reflect on the private sector's role to attain the right to food. Today, there is a form of consensus which allows to state that companies have to respect human rights, and that means food rights too. Nations have to do more to protect these rights against possible harm provoked by companies.

L'Express de Madagascar: A growing number of foreign investors are planning to use land for cultivation in Mali, Madagascar and other African countries. Do you foresee any problems arising from this?

Les Echos: Considering that governments have neglected such land, could this be rather an opportunity for poor nations? A lot of land cultivated during colonialism has since been neglected, depriving the countries of a valuable source of income.
The pace at which cultivable lands are currently sold to public investors or more frequently, to private ones; the size of the arable lands that are involved in this process and land speculation which started during the food crisis in 2008, leave many questions unanswered.

Farmers and nomadic breeders' rights of access to the land are at risk of not being taken into account. Frequently, they do not have property titles to the land upon which they depend for their survival and well-being and they do not have possibilities of legal recourse in the event of expropriation.

It is necessary to be cautious about talks concerning land that is "available" or "not used" or "not exploited", which even though not used intensively, is very often useful to semi-nomadic agriculture or to livestock breeding, which can ensure support and help maintain local populations.

Furthermore, investors are not forced to generate local employment, transfer new technologies or respect the environment. Negotiations are, therefore, often unbalanced, because they are made without transparency and without the local population on-board. This approach could very well increase the dependence of these countries for investments on the international markets.

It seems like a paradox, but as these countries are showing that they will be able to increase their production capacity, their dependency upon external forces will increase, and this could occur when they start re-exporting agricultural produce to foreign countries.

With global markets now being less reliable, prices will climb and be subject to fluctuation. That is why investors want to buy lands instead of foodstuffs on international markets; it appears to give more guarantees.

We do not have any guarantee that the earnings made through the handover of lands will benefit the local population, in terms of new infrastructures, schools and hospitals.

Land represents not only the most important means of access to food for millions of small farmers and their families; it is also part and parcel of the identity of certain people and communities. But, if the agreements for investing go against these realities, it could lead to the opposite effect.

Addis Fortune: Non-food growing countries with a bounty of oil riches are currently obtaining lands in poor countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America. Obviously, where there is the supply, those with the demand are moving in. The UN is one of the multilateral organizations against this new development, which it describes as 'land grabbing'. Why?

Various positions have been taken within the UN system on this issue. In June, I drew up eleven principles which, based on Human Rights, should ensure that these large-scale leases or acquisitions of land benefit the local population, rather than undermining their livelihoods and increasing inequalities within countries.

In my view, if those principles are complied with, 'land deals' can work for the benefits of both investors and local communities, and I am therefore delighted that the Mr. Taro Aso, Prime Minister of Japan, has more recently proposed that such principles form the basis of an
international consensus on this issue - which he hopes to achieve at the September session of the UN General Assembly.

We must view the recent interest of investors in agriculture as an opportunity. But we must also be aware of the risks, which are considerable.

**L’Express de Madagascar:** Would you not say that banning poor countries from relinquishing land that can be farmed to Asian companies is a deft move from the West to provide Asia with cereal?

It is vital that the North-South aspect not be used to hide the main issue: The tension between the interests of the elite countries who host investments and those of local communities which the investments will directly affect insofar as their subsistence is concerned - small farmers, indigenous populations and cattle breeders.

The North-South aspect is naturally still there and this is why the phenomenon of acquiring land on a large scale needs to be put in a multilateral context: The Human Rights Council, the United Nations General Assembly or the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), or even preferably at a forum like that of the G8.

But let us not forget that a lot of these investments are made in the private sector most notably big investment funds - generally American - who speculate on the increase in prices on arable land.

**L’Express de Madagascar:** What kind of guarantees and what exactly could be offered to poor countries in an international development framework so that they do not feel obliged to sell their land?

It is in developing countries' interest not to mortgage their futures by making concessions which are too great in a long-run or by totally giving up their land. Due to climate change and the exhaustion of our oil reserves, in the future food prices will become higher and more and more volatile on international markets.

It is very dangerous to count on international markets to guarantee food security on a national scale. Countries that rely on imports too much to feed their populations saw the consequences in the food crisis in 2008.

I, therefore, call on these countries to negotiate with interested investors whilst keeping a certain margin of manoeuvre and if possible, as Senegal does, develop long-term contractual relations in preference to giving up land.

**Sud Quotidien:** Africa is preparing for the Copenhagen Climate Summit in December 2009. Since 2006, some experts have been saying this is the last chance for the continent to put across a clear common position. In what way does the climate question influence food security?

The impacts of climate change on food security are clear. It could have negative impacts, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa. The frequency and timing of rain will change for example; both of which are crucial for agriculture.
Even if it is hard to measure with certainty the impact it will have on every region, an increase in arid and semi-arid zones by around 60 million to 90 million hectares is possible. Research of the GIEC predicts a halving of agricultural productivity in rain-related agriculture in Sub-Saharan Africa.

By slanting the agricultural relaunch towards the use of chemical fertilizers, it runs the risk of contributing to climate change and strengthening dependence on fossil fuels. The manufacture of these fertilizers is highly energy-consuming.

On the other hand, investing in sustainable agricultural models cannot only reduce greenhouse gasses, but also bring to the fore the development of more climate change resilient systems, and even stock carbon, as seen in the case of agro-forestry systems.

This is why the crucial question today is not only the amount re-invested in African agriculture - in terms of billions of dollars or percentage of GDP - but in the direction in which it is heading and in the earmarking of funds for specific activities. This is what I developed in my "green African revolution"; a position I reiterated in my letter to African heads of state.

Addis Fortune: There could be a serious slide-back in the achievements so far towards halving poverty by 2015. Does the UN still consider that Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are feasible?

I fear that the MDGs are typical of a 'top-down' mentality in which technocrats - experts - set priorities and policies, with little or no involvement of those from 'the bottom', who often are the real experts about what they need most urgently.

In many regions and for many of the MDGs, the targets set will not be achieved. With global hunger, the outcomes will be much worse than expected.

The MDGs belong to what the Norwegian economist, Erik Reinert, refers to as 'palliative economics'. They seek to help. But they leave untouched, for the most part, the structural causes of hunger and malnutrition, or more broadly, underdevelopment: an inequitable multilateral trading system, an international division of labour that locks countries into the production of raw commodities and does not allow them to climb the development ladder. These are deep imbalances between North and South that money alone cannot solve.

Sharing money is important, but it is not enough; it is sharing production and technology that counts.

This does not mean the MDGs were misguided, or that adopting them was foolish. They are like a scoreboard; not all members of the class can achieve the highest grades, yet, having a scoreboard and measuring progress remains useful.

It is fair to say, in fact, that the MDGs have been tremendously useful in mobilizing forces behind a short-list of well-defined development objectives, which correspond to certain areas of human rights.
At the same time, the MDGs also have clear limits as a means to channelling development efforts. They leave out the questions of accountability and empowerment, which are central in a human rights approach to development objectives.

No sanctions are attached to governments, whether donors or their partners, whose efforts have been insufficient, whose pledges have not been fulfilled, or whose priorities have not been appropriately set. I think this is a problem. We must put an end to this sort of impunity, because in the long-term, it will create a problem of credibility, and it can have deeply demobilizing effects.

Copyright © 2009 Addis Fortune. All rights reserved. Distributed by AllAfrica Global Media (allAfrica.com).