De Schutter: “Food crisis has never been this intense”

Food Security, Good Governance, ‘Land Grabbing’, Agriculture and hunger. Mr. Olivier De Schutter, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, answers to all the questions made by Afronline and other four African newspapers – Sud Quotidien (Sénégal), Les Echos (Mali), L’Express de Madagascar (Madagascar) and Addis Fortune (Ethiopie).

Food is as valuable as gold. This fact is well known by the billion people who are suffering from hunger. It is also well known by the investment funds which hunt the underdeveloped countries for land that can be used for agriculture. As opposed to the ‘Wall Street wolves’, the hungry of the world have but one aim: to reach a minimum level of calories to allow them to live.

International investment funds have totally different objectives.

According to the German weekly Der Spiegel, these funds are convinced that “the phenomenon more people-less land”, which is a current forecast for the period from now to 2050, “makes food a very highly coveted investment, with annual profits ranging between 20% and 30%”.

The negotiations that are presently being undertaken in Africa, which concern hundreds of thousands of hectares of fertile soil, are one of many preoccupations faced daily by Mr. Olivier De Schutter.

Since his taking office in March 2008 as United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Mr. De Schutter has been forced to leave Belgium much more frequently; he lives there and teaches at the Catholic University of Louvain (UCL, Université Catholique de Louvain).

His job consists in implementing the tasks that the UN has entrusted to him, among which stands out “to promote the complete realisation of the rights to food and provide
instruments for the adoption of the necessary measures at the national, regional and international levels”.

This is an overwhelming responsibility, especially if we take into account the waves of violence that have been experienced by many African countries between the end of 2007 and the beginning of 2008 as a consequence of the steep rise of food prices on world markets.

Even though tens of billions of dollars were promised by international donors to save agriculture in many African areas, Mr. De Schutter is convinced that “the crisis is here and has never been this intense”.

The reasons why all this is happening have been explained at length and in-depth in this interview by the Special Rapporteur of the UN to Afronline, and four African media partners (Sud Quotidien, Senegal; Les Echos, Mali; Addis Fortune, Ethiopia; L’Express de Madagascar).

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 40% decrease, but in the last few months they have started going up once more. Is Africa protected from another food crisis?

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 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 on the global markets does not automatically lead to lower prices for consumers: in April 2009 FAO published a report made in 58 developing countries showing that in 80% of the countries being looked at, foodstuffs were being sold at higher prices compared to April 2008, and 40% 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.

Finally, 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.
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 an UN Special Rapporteur on Right to Food do to help world’s poor access food?

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 marginalisation, 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.

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.

Firstly, it focuses on supply side without taking demand into account. For instance, the desire of Northern countries for animal protein, and more recently our thirst of agro-fuels, have a responsibility 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 80% 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 minimise the problem but, by accelerating the duplication of the sector, the system is creating rural exodus and poverty as towns grow.

By Joshua Massarenti (Afronline.org), in collaboration with Mame Aly Konté (Sud Quotidien, Senegal), Alexis Kalambr (Les Echos, Mali), Hagos Woldeyohannes (Addis Fortune, Ethiopia) and Sylvain Ranjalahy (L’Express de Madagascar, Madagascar).

Download the full interview with Olivier De Schutter