'Stop robbing land from the poorest' urges UN food expert
Tom Levitt and Jemima Roberts
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Improving smallholder rights to the land they depend on is becoming more of a necessity as farmland speculation and competitive energy crops threaten their tenure

Indigenous peoples and smallholders are losing their livelihoods as 30 million hectares of land is being lost every year to soil degradation, urbanisation and conversion to real estate development and industrial use, according to the UN.

The UN's 'Access to Land and the Right to Food' report says this loss is being 'exacerbated' in recent years by the increased demand for biofuels and speculation on farmland by private investors.

Report author and UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food Olivier de Schutter says the consequences for millions of smallholder farmers, fishermen and indigenous people, who depended on the land for their subsistence and livelihoods, was in many cases dramatic. His report argues that the key to safeguarding their rights was land tenure laws.

He suggests the reinforcement of tenancy laws could significantly protect the rights of land users, as well as redressing the balance in the unequal distribution of land in rural areas. Access to land also opens up local markets and food sources, thereby strengthening food security and providing a 'buffer' against precarious external market forces, he argued.

Speaking at the recent Committee on Food Security in Rome, Schutter said, 'You won't solve world hunger by robbing the poorest from the land on which they depend: you will solve it by strengthening security of tenure and by ensuring equitable access to land and natural resources.'

Schutter has previously argued that decision-makers were ignoring the contribution that low-input agroecological methods employed by many smallholders could make to safeguarding food production in the long-term.

His report also cautions against development models that follow mainstream 'agro-export-led' models, favouring large producers and landowners over vulnerable groups and small-scale initiatives. In addition, more encouragement should be directed to community-centred rather than individual-centred ownership.

Soren Ambrose from ActionAid International said land rights and the security of access to quality land was crucial as it was where the 'promises made by leaders get tested.'

'De Schutter has already remonstrated with the World Bank for its report on 'land grabs' that put foreign investment before food security and protection of rights, and now he has taken the necessary step of laying out the challenges of security of access to land and calling on the international community to meet those challenges,' he said.

War on Want agreed and said fixing food sovereignty issues would 're-localise food systems, based on the right knowledge of the farmers who know the land best.'

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