Q&A
Revitalising Agriculture Starts in a Small Field

Cléo Fatoorehchi interviews Olivier de Schutter, the U.N. Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food

UNITED NATIONS, Dec 8 (IPS) - In countries around the world, small farmers are trapped in a vicious circle - hard-pressed governments don't invest enough money in local agriculture, and local producers find themselves driven off their lands and into urban slums, where they sink even deeper into poverty.

This is doing nothing to ease the problem of global malnutrition; worldwide, 925 million people continue to suffer from chronic hunger, according to the latest figures released in September by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO).

Olivier de Schutter, the U.N. Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, says the most sustainable solution is to increase agricultural investments in developing countries, thereby raising farmers' incomes and bringing greater stability to the sector.

De Schutter, who is independent from any government or organisation, was appointed in May 2008 by the U.N. Human Rights Council based in Geneva. Since then, he has visited Nicaragua, Guatemala, Brazil, Benin and Syria.

Excerpts from the interview follow.

Q: How important is agriculture in the economies of developing countries?

A: A number of developing countries rely too heavily on a narrow range of raw commodities, such as cotton, coffee, tea, tobacco or sugar. This makes them very vulnerable to price changes for these commodities, and it also means that they have a tendency to overinvest in these export crops, and to under-invest in producing for local consumption.

That's the case for almost all Sub-Saharan African countries. I therefore encourage these countries to do two things: First, to reinvest in domestic agriculture to feed themselves, and be less vulnerable in the future to price increases for their food security. Second, to diversify their economies, in order to develop a secondary (industry) and tertiary (services) sector that can absorb the surplus labour and diminish the dependency on a limited range of export crops for their revenues.

Q: Will increased agricultural productivity bolster the economies of some of the poorest countries in Africa and Asia?

A: Increases in agricultural productivity can be key if these increases benefit small farmers, who are the poorest - 75 percent of global poverty is still in the rural areas. Better incomes for these rural poor means that they will buy more from local producers and service providers, with important multiplier effects on the local rural economies and also for the benefit of the manufacturing and services sectors in the country concerned.

Q: What kind of investments do you recommend?

A: Both public and private investments are needed. States simply do not have the budget required, many are cash- strapped. But I would emphasise two points.

Certain investments in public goods probably need to be done by the state, because there is no - or only a weak - incentive for the private sector to step in. For instance, states should develop extension services, rural infrastructures and agricultural research. They should encourage farmer field schools and support the organisation of farmers in cooperatives.

As far as investment from the private sector is concerned, it is important and can complement public investment. But it should not take the form of large-scale acquisitions or leases or land, which can cause tremendous social and political disruption and are a step backwards in improving access to land for the poorest farmers, who are often poor in part because they have too little land to cultivate.

So what is the alternative? I believe certain forms of contract farming can provide important benefits to the farmers, allowing them to be supported by investments without depriving them of access to their land. At best, in such a scheme, the buyer has a reliable source of supply, the farmers have a reliable buyer for their crops, and the land rights are left untouched.

Q: How much, exactly, does agriculture need? And how much is already invested? What is the shortfall?

A: It is estimated that, in order to relaunch agriculture in Sub-Saharan Africa - and to make up for 30 years of neglect - between $35 and $45 billion per year will be needed over a period of five years (2010-2015). That's more than has been promised to date, and in fact, very little of the money that has been promised has been in fact delivered.

Q: What are some solutions to this lack of accountability?

A: The involvement of national parliaments and civil society organisations, including farmers' organisations, can be very important to ensure that governments will make decisions in the areas of food and agriculture that are well informed, based on an adequate understanding of the needs of the poorest.

I recommend the adoption of strategies that are developed in participatory settings, and through which governments set benchmarks for themselves within a specified timeframe, and allocate responsibilities across various departments for the adoption of the measures required to achieve these targets. This increases the accountability of the government, since it will have to justify not taking action and explain its failure to comply with the goals it has set for itself.
Q: Is food likely to be used as a weapon of war?

A: It can. Interrupting the transport of food aid to war-torn zones under the pretext that this can support guerilla troops in those zones, starving a population to punish it for being hostile to the central government, or destroying crops and thus depriving a population from its ability to feed itself, are all serious human rights violations — in some cases, they may constitute war crimes or crimes against humanity.

What, however, is more frequent, is the use of food as a political tool - to reward your partisans while punishing those who oppose you. It is this, for instance, that Human Rights Watch has alleged in a recent report on the use of aid money in an Eastern African country, but that is not an isolated example. It is precisely against this kind of abuse that the right to food, with its requirements of non-discrimination and accountability, should guard against.

(END/2010)