China's ability to feed its people questioned by UN expert

Shrinking arable land making it harder to maintain agricultural output, says Olivier De Schutter, as food prices surge in China

Jonathan Watts in Beijing
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Vegetable sellers wait for customers at their stalls in a street market in Hefei, eastern China. Recent food price surges in the country have underscored the supply challenges it faces. Photograph: Str/AFP/Getty Images

China's ability to feed a fifth of the world's population will become tougher because of land degradation, urbanisation and over-reliance on fossil-fuels and fertiliser, a United Nations envoy warned today as grain and meat prices surged on global markets.

With memories still fresh of the famines that killed tens of millions of people in the early 1960s, the Chinese government has gone to great lengths to ensure the world's biggest population has enough to eat, but its long-term self-sufficiency was questioned by UN special rapporteur on the right to food, Olivier De Schutter.

"The shrinking of arable land and the massive land degradation threatens the ability of the country to maintain current levels of agricultural production, while the widening gap between rural and urban is an important challenge to the right to food of the Chinese population," said De Schutter at the end of a trip to China.

He told the Guardian his main concern was the decline of soil quality in China because of excessive use of fertilisers, pollution and drought. He noted that 37% of the nation's territory was degraded and 8.2m hectares (20.7m acres) of arable land has been lost since 1997 to cities, industrial parks, natural disasters and forestry programmes.

Further pressure has come from an increasingly carnivorous diet, which has meant more grain is needed to feed livestock. The combination of these factors is driving up food inflation. In the past year, rice has gone up by 13%, wheat by 9%, chicken by 17%, pork by 13% and eggs by 30%.

"This is not a one-off event. The causes are structural," said the envoy. "The recent food price hikes in the country are a harbinger of what may be lying ahead."

With climate change expected to increase price volatility and cut agricultural
productivity by 5% to 10% by 2030, De Schutter said it was essential for China to wean itself off fossil-fuel intensive farming and adopt more sustainable agricultural techniques, including organic production, and to make even better use of its two great strengths: a huge strategic grain reserve and a large rural population.

He said other countries should learn from China's food reserve, which accounts for 40% of the nation's 550m-tonne grain supply and is released to minimise the impact of market price fluctuations.

He also cautioned against a shift towards industrial-scale farming, which increases economic competitiveness at the cost of natural productivity. "Small-scale farming is more efficient in its use of natural resources. I believe China can show that it is successful in feeding a very large population." However, he acknowledged that this may prove difficult in the future as more of China's 200million farmers move to the cities.

The widening rural-urban gap has hit supply and demand of food in other ways. Nationwide nutrition levels have risen, but the growing income disparity has left sharp discrepancies in access to food. While some poor rural families in western China scrape by with two meals a day, wealthy urban households on the eastern seaboard eat so well that they are increasingly prone to the "rich diseases" of obesity and diabetes.

In his report to the Chinese government and the UN, De Schutter also raised the case of Tibetan and Mongolian nomads who have been relocated from the grasslands under a controversial resettlement scheme, and pressed the Chinese government to ensure that consumers have the freedom to complain when food safety is compromised.

He spoke specifically about Zhao Lianhai, a former food-safety worker who was jailed last month for organising a campaign for compensation over a contaminated milk scandal that left 300,000 ill and killed at least six babies.

"I'm concerned this will have a chilling effect on consumers who want to complain," he said. "You cannot protect the right to food without the right to freedom of expression and organisation."