Food Worries Rise in China

Analysis by Mitch Moxley

BEIJING, Jan 19 (IPS) - In China, a country with a history of famine and where rural dwellers still use the greeting "have you eaten?", food is close to sacred. Feeding the country’s massive population remains one of the biggest threats to future economic growth and social stability, experts warn.

Since 1997, China has lost some 8.2 million hectares (20.2 million acres) of arable land to urbanization, industrialization, re-forestation and damage caused by natural disasters. Thirty-seven percent of China’s territory suffers from land degradation and the country’s per capita available land is 40 percent of the world average.

"China has made remarkable economic and social progress over the past three decades, lifting several hundred million out of poverty, and food security has benefited significantly from this overall progress," said Olivier De Schutter, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, when he visited China in December.

"However, 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."

The right to food requires people to have incomes that allow them to purchase food, and that food systems be sustainable enough that satisfying current demands does not jeopardize future needs.

"It’s obvious that these two conditions are facing important challenges today," De Schutter said.

Recent food price increases may be a sign of things to come, the UN Rapporteur added, urging China to make the shift to more sustainable types of farming. Without mitigating actions, including a shift to low carbon agriculture, climate change will cause agricultural productivity to drop by five to ten percent by 2030.

In 2010, China recorded its seventh consecutive record grain harvest with production of 546 million tons, according to state media reports. The government has said current grain stocks exceed 200 million tons and that grain self-sufficiency has stood at 95 percent for the last decade.

China has pledged to maintain a grain self-sufficiency level of more than 90 percent in the decade to come by developing agricultural technologies and improving land use, He Bingsheng, president of China Agricultural University and one of the country’s leading economists, told China Daily.

But He warned that shrinking farmland and an imbalanced use of land pose challenges for the country’s grain producers.

"A certain amount of imports are necessary. But for the whole country, food security has to be ensured, because for a country as big as China the international market falls far short of our demand," He said.

Li Guoxiang, a researcher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences’ Rural Development Institute, says China’s food security remains stable for now.

Li says China has pursued a food security policy that is mostly autonomous, with only a small percentage of agricultural products coming from abroad, meaning China is only marginally affected by rising food prices worldwide.

"We’ve had record grain harvest for seven years in a row, with a growth rate of 3 percent in 2010," Li tells IPS. "Although international grain prices grew over the past year, in general the grain price in China remained stable. Most people’s lives haven’t been impacted."

Li admits that threats to China’s food security remain, including soil degradation and desertification. He notes that the government has taken steps to tackle the issue, such as increasing the share of fixed capital investment allotted to agricultural areas and increasing agricultural subsidies. In 2010, the central government invested about RMB 800 billion (120 billion dollars) on the agricultural sector, a number that is expected to reach 900 billion RMB this year.

But Li says the government still has much to do, including protecting farmland and improving agricultural productivity and water infrastructure.

"Food is the most powerful political weapon," Li says. "There is no substitute for food consumption. No one can live without food, so food security is the basis of national security. A lack of food security will hinder social development and trigger social unrest."

Zhao Xiaofeng, a researcher at the China Rural Governance Research Centre at Huazhong University of Science and Technology in Wuhan, Hubei province, says drought – often the result of large-scale dam building – continues to be a major threat to China’s food security.

Places such as Henan province, one of the country’s core grain producing regions, have been severely impacted by droughts, Zhao says, adding that the government needs to improve water infrastructure around river ways and reservoirs to protect nearby agricultural land.

Zhao tells IPS that China’s risk to food security will reach dangerous heights if more than 10 percent of the food supply comes from imports. It currently stands at five percent.

"China is the most populous country in the world. You can imagine what it will be like if its people don’t have enough food." (END/2011)