Olivier De Schutter

World Bank president Robert Zoellick recently listed nine measures that the G20 should adopt under its current French presidency. These range from improving information about grain stocks and developing better weather-forecasting methods to strengthening social safety nets for the poor and helping small farmers benefit from tenders from humanitarian purchasers such as the World Food Programme.

These measures tackle only the symptoms of the global food system's weaknesses, leaving the root causes of crises untouched. They may mitigate the consequences of peak prices, but they are inadequate to avoiding the recurrence of shocks, for which the G20 should act on eight priorities.

One, support countries' ability to feed themselves. Since the early 1990s, many poor countries' food bills have soared five- or six-fold, owing not only to population growth, but also to their focus on export-led agriculture. A lack of investment in agriculture that feeds local communities makes these countries vulnerable to international price shocks, as well as to exchange-rate volatility.

Second, food reserves should be established, not only for humanitarian supplies in disaster-prone, infrastructure-poor areas, as Zoellick proposes, but also as a means to support stable revenues for agricultural producers and ensure affordable food for the poor. If managed in transparent and participatory ways, and with regional coordination, food reserves can be an effective way to boost sellers' market power and counteract speculation by traders, thereby limiting price volatility.

Third, financial speculation should be limited as well. While not a cause of price volatility, speculation on derivatives of essential food commodities significantly worsens it. The major economies should restrict derivatives as far as possible to qualified and knowledgeable investors.

Fourth, many cash-strapped developing countries fear that social safety nets, once put in place, may become fiscally unsustainable, owing to a sudden loss of export revenue, poor harvests or sharp increases in prices for food imports. The international community can help overcome this reticence by establishing a global reinsurance mechanism, with premiums being paid, at least in part, by the country seeking insurance.

Fifth, farmer organisations need support. One major reason why the majority of the hungry are among those who depend on small-scale farming is that they are insufficiently organised. By forming cooperatives, they can move up the value chain into the processing, packaging and marketing of their produce. They can improve their bargaining position, both for input purchases and for the sale of their crops. And they can become a political constituency that cannot be ignored.

Sixth, we must protect access to land. Each year, an area greater than France's farmland is ceded to foreign investors or governments. This land grab, which is occurring mostly in sub-Saharan Africa, constitutes a major threat to the future food security of the populations concerned. Whatever gains in agricultural production result from these investments will benefit foreign markets, not local communities. The G20 could call for a moratorium on these large-scale investments till an agreement on appropriate ground rules is reached.

Seventh, the transition to sustainable agriculture must be completed. Weather-related events are a major cause of price volatility on agricultural markets. In future, climate change can be expected to cause more supply shocks. And agriculture is also a major culprit in climate change, responsible for 33% of all greenhouse-gas emissions if deforestation for cultivation and pastures is included in the tally. Governments must support...
agricultural systems that are more resilient to climate change, and can contribute to mitigating it.

Finally, we need to defend the human right to food. People are hungry not because too little food is being produced, but because their rights are violated with impunity. Victims of hunger must be allowed to access remedies when their authorities fail to take effective measures against food insecurity. Governments must guarantee a living wage, adequate healthcare and safe conditions for the world's 450 million farm workers by enforcing the conventions on labour rights in rural areas, subject to independent monitoring.

Hunger is a political question, not just a technical problem. We need markets, of course, but we also need a vision for future that goes beyond short-term fixes. The global food system will always need firefighters. But what we need more urgently are architects to design a more fire-resistant system.

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