Governments Urged To Take the Right to Food Seriously

By Jaya Ramachandran

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BRUSSELS (IDN) - The right to food is a human right, and unless governments follow up on their pledges, it will remain a utopia. Broad-based social movements and human rights defenders the world over should therefore continue to demand change, says Olivier De Schutter, an independent United Nations watchdog.

Setting out his agenda for the next three years, De Schutter has urged civil society organisations to speak out against corruption and mismanagement. So that the right to food permeates real life, social movements and human rights defenders "must resist the current tendency to deprive peasants from the land and water on which they depend from their livelihoods."

De Schutter was appointed the Special Rapporteur on the right to food in May 2008 by the United Nations Human Rights Council. He is independent from any government or organization. His mandate has been renewed for the next three years.

Spelling out his priorities, the UN monitor said on May 2, 2011: "The right to food movement is composite, and it speaks different languages -- but it is emerging as a major voice in public debates about the direction in which our food systems should move."

Hunger is a political question, not just a technical problem, he argues and adds. "We need markets, of course, but we also need a vision for the 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."

De Schutter pleads for eight priorities to be followed in order to avoid the resurgence of food crises:
-- Support countries' ability to feed themselves.

-- Establish food reserves, not only for humanitarian supplies in disaster-prone, infrastructure-poor areas, but also as a means to support stable revenues for agricultural producers and ensure affordable food for the poor.

-- Limit financial speculation.

-- Establish a global reinsurance mechanism.

-- Support farmers’ organizations.

-- Protect access to land; stop land grabbing to the detriment of food security.

-- Complete the transition to sustainable agriculture.

-- 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.

The significance of these demands is underlined by the fact that since the early 1990’s, 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," says De Schutter.

Mozambique, for example, imports 60 percent of its wheat consumption, and Egypt imports 50 percent of its food needs.

"Rising prices directly affect these countries' ability to feed themselves at an acceptable cost. This trend must be reversed by allowing developing countries to support their farmers and, where domestic supply is sufficient, protect them from dumping by foreign producers," UN right to food monitor adds.

Limiting financial speculation is of vital importance. The reason: though it is not a cause of price volatility, speculation on derivatives of essential food commodities significantly worsens it.

De Schutter points out that such speculation was enabled by massive deregulation of commodities-derivative markets that began in 2000 -- and that now must be reversed. "The major economies should ensure that such derivatives are restricted as far as possible to qualified and knowledgeable investors who trade on the basis of expectations regarding market fundamentals, rather than mainly or only for short-term speculative gain," he insists.
A global reinsurance mechanism is crucial because "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."

Farmers’ organizations need support, De Schutter told G20 leaders, adding: "One major reason why the majority of the hungry are among those who depend on small-scale farming is that they are insufficiently organized."

The UN Special Rapporteur advises farmers to form cooperatives, which will enable them move up the value chain into the processing, packaging, and marketing of their produce. IN doing so, they can improve their bargaining position, both for input purchases and for the sale of their crops. And they can become an important political constituency, so that decisions made about them are not made without them.

Explaining why it is important to defend the human right to food. De Schutter says: "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 health care, and safe conditions for the world’s 450 million agricultural workers by enforcing the conventions on labor rights in rural areas, subject to independent monitoring."

Over the past three years, De Schutter has explored various ways to break the impasse. His key concern has been about how to make a transition: How to move from a system that ruins small-scale farmers in order to feed the cities, to a system in which better incomes for rural households slow down rural-to-urban migration, improve the bargaining power for urban workers, and create multiplier effects on the local economy even beyond agriculture?

Among issues that has drawn his attention is: How to move from ways of producing food that create inequality, poverty and environmental degradation in rural areas, to sustainable agricultural systems, that can at the same time increase incomes of food producers and be more resilient to climate change?

"National strategies for the realization of the right to food are of particular relevance here because they are a tool to manage the conflict between short-term fixes and long-term visions: they ensures that policy decisions shall not be myopic and discount the future costs of present decisions, and that we shall not be held hostage to the short-term," says De Schutter.

He pledges to continue working towards these ends: "using the right to food as a compass to guide choices that should move us towards food systems that are more resilient and more sustainable."

But De Schutter says he will also integrate new themes and concerns in his work,
like the evolution of diets and non-communicable diseases, and the contribution
of women's rights and empowerment to food security -- a vital and often
underestimated part of the answer.

He says he will organise consultations on issues such as the future of fishing and
the impact of the rising demand for agro-energy on the right to food. He also
plans to convene expert meetings in Latin America and in Africa on the legal and
institutional frameworks that protect the right to food. (IDN-
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