Reimagining Food Systems in the Midst of a Hunger Crisis

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WASHINGTON, Jun 3 (IPS) - Today one billion people are living in hunger, not because of scarcity of production or a shortage of food on shelves in the global marketplace, but because they "lack the most basic purchasing power needed to acquire it", Olivier De Schutter, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, said Thursday.

Currently, 35-40 percent of harvests are lost due to inadequate transportation and storage facilities, while a further 35-40 percent goes to wealthy Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries.

According to experts like De Schutter, the inability of 10 percent of the world's population to feed itself is also a reflection of unsustainable patterns of consumption and deeply flawed models of industrialised agricultural production which, if allowed to continue, will divert 50 percent of global cereal harvests towards feeding cattle by the year 2050.

"From the food crisis in 1974, to the crisis in 2007-2008, and even now during the food crisis of 2010-2011, governments have had the same Pavlovian reaction - to increase production in order to lower prices and alleviate the burden of food price inflation on the population," De Schutter said at a panel discussion in Washington.

He added that while the reaction was understandable, it has been undeniably proven to be incomplete, short-sighted and based on an inadequate diagnosis of the complexity of the problem.

"A food system that is increasingly industrialised and commodified is not the only one available to us," he stressed. "We can and must re-imagine other food systems that take numerous social dimensions into account."

Inter-connected crises

In his recent report "Agroecology and the Right to Food", which was presented to the Human Rights Council in March this year, De Schutter outlines the global hunger catastrophe as an amalgamation of three distinct but inherently inter-related problems.

These are poverty, caused by trade policies that dump heavily- subsidised produce from developed countries on third world markets, thus rendering local farmers jobless; environmental degradation brought on by industrialised farming, which now accounts for nearly one-third of global greenhouse gas emissions; and an epidemic of malnutrition caused by the colonising effects of mono-crops and a flood of processed food from the global north to the global south.

Only by examining these three challenges together can a strategy for ending hunger be successfully designed and implemented, he argues.

A study released Friday by the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR)'s programme on Climate Change, Agriculture and Food Security (CCAFS) bolstered this argument by identifying future climate change "hotspots" in countries already crippled by severe food shortages and chronic hunger.

By consolidating detailed maps of scores of different agricultural regions across the world, the seven scientists behind the study tracked the impacts of climate change on food security and identified highly-vulnerable populations - principally in Africa and South Asia, with dark clouds hanging over China and parts of Latin America as well - that would suffer the double blows of hunger and environmental crisis.

"When you put these maps together they reveal places around the world where the arrival of stressful growing conditions could be especially disastrous," Polly Ericksen, lead author of the study and a senior scientist at the CGIAR's International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI) in Nairobi, Kenya, told the press in Copenhagen Friday.

"These are areas highly exposed to climate shifts, where survival is strongly linked to the fate of regional crop and livestock yields, and where chronic food problems indicate that farmers are already struggling and they lack the capacity to adapt to new weather patterns," she said.

Swathes of South Asia, including virtually all of India's territory and vast areas of sub-Saharan Africa are home to 369 million food-insecure people, all of whom live in climate-vulnerable, agriculture-intensive areas.

Over 56 million hungry and crop-dependent people in West Africa, India and China inhabit areas which, in less than 40 years, will likely experience daily growing season temperatures of 30 degrees Celsius - virtually impossible conditions for essential crops like corn and rice.

Reimagining food systems

In 2006, a team of researchers from the University of Essex carried out a study on "agro-ecological" approaches to farming and development.

Spanning 57 developing countries and 286 different models of sustainable farming techniques in an area covering 37 million hectares - three percent of cultivated land - the study unearthed how low external-input farming that utilized surrounding ecosystems and cyclical practices resulted in a 79 percent yield increase, more than double the average yield under the normalised agricultural system.

"Agro-ecology, which includes systems that produce their own fertiliser using materials and waste from the surrounding environment, is being increasingly viewed as the only viable solution to the hunger crisis. Since prices of fertiliser doubled during the 2008 food crisis, continents like Africa which import 95 percent of their chemical fertilisers could see radically different outcomes in production by adopting agro-ecological techniques.

Analysing the data from the 2006 study by region, the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) found that in some parts of Africa the
yield increase was a stunning 213 percent.

However, De Schutter warned, this agricultural "revolution" will not come about by chance but will require swift and determined government action.

In addition to investing in education, gender-sensitive solutions and public goods and services such as the infrastructure required to nurture farmers’ unions and peasant cooperatives, De Schutter’s recommendations to governments include an urgent appeal to revolutionize markets to reward best-practices rather than short-term profit.

"The market as it exists today is too focused on global supply chains and does not give enough importance to local farmers, and producers of diversified crops," De Schutter told IPS.

"Governments must move away from export-led supply models and reinvest heavily in regional, sustainable food systems."

He added that governments should set solid agendas, which development agencies and private sector actors would align with, that incorporate a cultural shift away from a broken structure and towards a visionary, resilient food future.

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