Famine is predictable result of broken food system – UN expert

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A girl waits in queue to receive relief food supplies at a hospital in Kakuma Refugee Camp, Turkana District, northwest of Kenya's capital Nairobi, August 8, 2011. REUTERS/Kabir Dhanji

LONDON (AlertNet) - Viewing hunger and famine as extreme and unexpected events prevents aid agencies and policymakers from building effective systems to deal with hunger, a senior U.N. official on food issues said on Monday.

Olivier De Schutter, the United Nations special rapporteur on the right to food, argued that drought and famine are not extreme events but “merely the sharp end of a global food system that is built on inequality, imbalances and – ultimately – fragility.”

“This flaw is fatal, for it means failing to acknowledge that the food system is broken,” De Schutter wrote in an article in Britain's Guardian newspaper. “It means failing to build readiness for persistent famine into international development and humanitarian policy. And it means waiting until people starve before doing anything.”

The current food crisis in the Sahel region of west Africa and last year’s famine in the Horn of Africa are the surface cracks of a broken food system in drought-prone areas rather than abnormal events, De Schutter said.

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Poor local governance is one of the reasons why hunger crises happen, he wrote.

Governments in the Horn of Africa – with the help of international relief and development agencies - should have set up comprehensive anti-drought plans in advance, and should have sounded the alarm earlier, De Schutter added.

He noted that signs are already more promising in the Sahel. Apart from Senegal and Burkina Faso, all affected governments have been quick to declare an emergency, devise plans, and call in international aid, De Schutter wrote.

But a better response at the international level is also needed, he argued. Food aid is often counter-cyclical, De Schutter pointed out.

“Donors are more generous when prices are low due to significant harvests, which tends to be when needs are lower.”

A more efficient – and ultimately life-saving – way would be to set up standing regional food reserves to enhance access to affordable stocks as soon as needs begin to rise. This would allow emergency stocks to be pre-positioned in risk-prone regions, so that humanitarian agencies have access to food stocks below the market rate when local purchases are not possible, he said.

Diverse farming systems, agroforestry and reservoirs to capture rainfall are also needed in drought-prone areas, De Schutter said.

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