World hunger can't be solved with more food

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It is tempting to see the fight against hunger and malnutrition as a rare point of consensus amid an otherwise conflicted international agenda.

The issue is seen as above politics, merely a question of technical adjustments: producing more food and getting it to the deficit areas. Yet this is a fundamental misconception. Increasing net calorie availability does not guarantee less hunger.

Across the globe, many governments are struggling to meet the 2015 Millennium Development Goal target of halving the proportion of people who suffer from hunger. The food price spikes of 2010-2011 have complicated the task for many governments.

In February 2011, the World Bank Group estimated that since June 2010 an additional 44 million people have been driven into poverty.

However, a number of countries - including Bangladesh, Brazil, Malawi, Mozambique and Peru - have managed to defy the trend by significantly reducing hunger and malnutrition within their borders.

What has allowed these countries to succeed where others have failed?

These countries are not necessarily richer than others, and nor were they immune from the volatile food prices and turmoil of the global economic downturn. The answer is to be found in their political processes, and more specifically in the ambitious steps taken to remedy deficits in democratic empowerment, social justice, and accountability.

A recent study identified a range of political factors that allowed the countries in question to reduce hunger and malnutrition. These included the adoption of multi-sectoral approaches to combating hunger and malnutrition, combining an attention to agriculture with the mainstreaming of nutrition in health policies,
and coordinated policies in the areas of education, gender, water, sanitation, housing, pro-poor economic development, and trade. In many cases, short-term interventions and long-term approaches to nutrition were combined.

By and large, these governments defined food and nutritional security as core priorities, sending a clear signal that the strategies were to be more than window dressing.

Meanwhile, civil society participation helped to represent the views of those suffering from food insecurity and to ensure that policies and programs reflected the challenges they faced as well as their needs.

And crucially, the countries established institutions to monitor progress, ensuring that political pressure – and the resources committed – would remain present throughout the implementation phase of the strategies.

What is clear is that there is no simple macro-economic recipe for addressing hunger and malnutrition. What best practices show is that hunger hinges on cross-cutting, distributional factors which are as much about access and social inclusion as they are about economics.

This is why cities and provinces can succeed in reducing hunger while a country fails, and why a country can make progress while the rest of a region continues to struggle. We must therefore understand hunger as the highly political question that it is – political in the sense that the mechanisms of participation and accountability that engage people with political processes are the very same things that provide a buffer against the social marginalisation at the heart of hunger.

As Amartya Sen once remarked, "the law stands between food availability and food entitlement". What he meant is that unless we take seriously our duties towards the most marginalised and vulnerable, and the essential role of legal entitlements in ensuring that the poor have either the resources required to produce enough food for themselves or a purchasing power sufficient to procure food from the market, our efforts at increasing production will hardly change their situation.

For people are hungry not because there is too little food: they are hungry because they are marginalised economically and powerless politically. Securing the right to food is therefore the only path to durably tackling hunger.

The importance of improving the incomes of the poor, facilitating internal and foreign investment, and increasing agricultural yields cannot be downplayed in the hunger equation. But for genuine, sustainable progress to be made in tackling hunger and malnutrition, political processes must first be made accountable, participative, and attuned to the cross-cutting complexities of the hunger question.

Only when the political process is human rights-proofed in this way can we be confident that the reinvestment in a country and its agriculture will truly benefit the poor and food insecure.

**Olivier De Schutter will deliver the Castan Centre for Human Rights Law/King and Wood Mallesons Annual Lecture in Melbourne tonight.**

**Olivier De Schutter is the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food. View his full profile here.**
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