Hunger on Our Doorstep

What is a U.N. human rights expert doing examining food systems in the developed world while millions are starving in poor countries? This was the first question many people raised when in May of this year, after having visited a range of countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, Latin America and Asia, I conducted my first right-to-food mission in a developed country -- Canada.

The question is itself a legitimate one. Given the wealth that abounds in Europe and North America, many have assumed that poverty has, and must have been, eradicated. Yet this assumption is the measure of just how well our societies have managed to keep the uncomfortable fact of food poverty out of sight and out of mind. The two-track economic processes that have mired some communities in disadvantage have in fact marginalized them far enough as to make them invisible to the rest of society.

The point is not to compare the degree of "seriousness" of food insecurity in rich countries with the levels it is reaching, for instance, in the Sahel, where 18 million people are now on the brink of starvation. U.N. human rights monitoring procedures do not rank countries against one another; they consider countries' performances against what they could achieve, by learning from good practices and by dedicating the maximum use of available resources for the full realization of economic and social rights.

There is a perception that losing out, in our advanced societies, means struggling through tough times and doing away with luxuries. Yet the true face of first world poverty is a very different one: for many people food is the luxury that is done away with, and the tough times can last a lifetime.

In Canada, one of the wealthiest nations in the world, nearly one million people access food banks each month. Breaking down the figures into ethnic or geographic sub-groups reveals staggering discrepancies. Some 17.8 percent of First Nations adults (age 25-39) reported not eating due to lack of money in 2007/2008. For women in these communities the risk of dying from diabetes and its complications is five times higher than among the general population.

Inequality on this scale exists in many parts of the developed world. The neighborhood of Calton in Glasgow, Scotland, has a male life expectancy of 54, more than twenty years lower than the U.K. average. Here, the breakdown of local food systems and the spread of diet-related disease is seen to have played a pivotal role.
Access to food is in fact the perfect bellwether for broader socio-economic inequalities. Food insecurity hotspots generally correlate not only with poverty, often the result of inadequate levels of social protection, but also with a series of factors that marginalize people and narrow their options. Poor communities may lack local fresh grocery stores providing alternatives to the foods high in saturated fats, sugars and salt sold by local retailers. They may cut down on food expenses first, because the costs of rents are incompressible. In these cases people eat badly -- or eat less.

The various faces of poor nutrition crop up across the world, and do not follow simple macro-economic patterns. Obesity has long been seen as the scourge of wealthy countries such as the U.S., yet in Mexico -- far poorer than most OECD countries -- seven out of 10 adults are overweight or obese. Meanwhile, according to the Stanford Center for the Study of Poverty and Inequality, U.S. child poverty rates of 21 percent are not far behind the 25 percent posted in Mexico. In this regard, developed and developing countries may resemble each other more than they think.

No country is therefore beyond reproach when it comes to tackling food insecurity, and it is crucial to examine the situation of the right to food in Canada, the U.S. and Mexico alike. The point is not to compare these with the most flagrant human rights abuses occurring in non-democratic countries such as Syria or Bahrain, where deplorable violence is used to silence opposition movements. It is to insist that economic rights such as the right to food are not forgotten, especially as existing social safety nets come under threat in the midst of the global economic crisis.

Just as it is our duty to speak out against hunger in poor and developing states, it is our duty not to forget about those who, on our own doorstep, find themselves unemployed, unable to pay their bills, and whose children shall pay the price for poor diets. Indeed, not only are the two not contradictory, they are complementary. Only by being irreproachable at home and accepting to play by the same rules will rich countries be credible in criticizing the human rights records of poor countries. That is why Canada, to its credit, invited a visit dedicated to inquiring into the right to food. Freedom from fear must go hand in hand with freedom from want. This is what the founders of the United Nations had in mind when drafting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Olivier De Schutter is the UN Special Rapporteur for the right to food. In May 2012 he conducted an official visit to Canada. His preliminary findings are available here and here.