Olivier De Schutter, United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on the right to food, spoke yesterday to an audience in Cabot Auditorium about ensuring food security worldwide.

The lecture, entitled “The Right to Food: A Weapon Against Global Hunger,” was sponsored by the Global Development and Environment Institute and co-sponsored by the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy’s Food Policy Club, the Institute for Human Security at Fletcher and the Agriculture, Food and Environment program at the Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy.

De Schutter began by discussing the history of the concept of the right to food, noting that it was recognized in the UN’s 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The turning point in the application of the right to food came at the 1996 World Food Summit in Rome, Italy, which prompted a more clarified definition of the right so that governments would be able to take concrete steps toward reducing world hunger, he said.

“The right to food is increasingly used as a reference point in global discussions on food security in ways it had not been until the mid-1990s,” De Schutter said.

De Schutter outlined four elements that define the legal right to food: availability, or ensuring that there is enough food to feed a given population; accessibility, or guaranteeing the population’s access to food; adequacy, or guaranteeing a healthy diet; and absorption, or utilization.
“The right to food means a duty imposed on governments to adapt action plans that shall allow governments to be held accountable in the long run for implementing the promises they make,” he said. “To put in place strategies, action plans, that define a timeline for measures ... based on an understanding of what people face by listening to what people say [and] having them participate.”

According to De Schutter, governments are responsible for not infringing on the right to food and creating sustainable policies that allow all to have access to adequate food.

Government strategies must therefore encourage civic discussion over priorities and obstacles and demonstrate that food security is a government priority, he said.

“[These strategies are a] way for us to avoid becoming hostage to the short term [and] keeping in mind the long term,” De Schutter said.

Although governments may adopt short-term strategies, such as reducing import tariffs when food prices increase, he explained that these measures can have negative long-term repercussions that ultimately preclude food security.

De Schutter instead encouraged "long term, multi-year strategies" that establish accountability mechanisms to build national food policies.

He also emphasized participatory civic involvement and dialogue in forming policies.

“The right to participate shall be granted by civic ... organizations, and will not be denied to them based on government’s technocratic solutions rather than participatory approaches,” De Schutter said.

He believes that the effort to ensure global food security cannot be treated in isolation from other initiatives, such as biofuels, climate change or trade policies, as this can have a negative effect.

“Biofuel policies were shaped and implemented completely apart from their importance for food security concerns,” he said.

De Schutter recognized current priorities facing the local effort to ensure global food security, noting that action must be taken to “re-localize” the food system to establish a better connection between domestic producers and the urban population, as well as support the move toward a more sustainable food system.

In order to accomplish this, he said that government initiatives should be monitored and amended if necessary.
“We must measure the effectiveness of policies, examine whether the policies are effective, and if not, revise,” De Schutter said.

Those most affected by global hunger should also be consulted when making policy decisions, he added.

“We will never succeed in reducing poverty without listening to the poor,” De Schutter said.