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UN rapporteur emphasises North’s responsibility in food challenge

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The report, the 6th by Olivier de Schutter to the Human Rights Council in Geneva, the UN special rapporteur on the right to food, attempts to identify structural problems in global food systems.

De Schutter, who presented the report in Geneva on Monday (10 March), visited 13 countries during his six-year term as special rapporteur, including low-income countries such as Benin, Cameroon and Madagascar, and middle-range countries like Brazil, China and Malaysia. He also visited Canada, a high-income country.

“Far greater attention should be paid to demand-side issues. Three priorities emerge in particular,” says the report, citing the need to mitigate the “negative aspects of industrial livestock production”, to “constrain the demand for liquid biofuels in the transport sector”, and to take measures to improve the efficiency of food systems, including reducing waste.

“My departure point is that we have inherited food systems that have been shaped by concerns that are those of the 1960s and that they are not adequately delivering on a number of issues”, De Schutter told journalists in Brussels on Thursday. “Some estimate that we produce 4,800 kilocalories per day per person, yet we still have a large number of hungry people … due to issues of inefficiency of distribution, of inequity in the food systems, but clearly increasing production cannot continue to be our sole answer to the challenges we face.”

Agricultural productivity has now significantly outpaced population growth, according to the UN expert, increasing 2.1% compared to 1.4% per year, respectively.

De Schutter, a legal expert, called for a “reversal” of the logic behind the food system, with policies that protect and promote agro-ecology and small-holder farming, rather than the profits of large agri-businesses, whose power he said meant that they now had a “veto” in the political system.

“It is the [UN] International Year of Family Farming for good reason. We’ve realised that it was a mistake not to dedicate sufficient attention to family farmers … Investing in small-scale farmers has huge multiplier effects on the local economy. When you increase the income of 60-70% of the population by investing in their small-scale type of production, you also create a demand for manufactured goods, you create a demand for local service providers … which you do not get when only reward the large landowners in export-led agriculture,” he said.

The UN rapporteur explained that by not improving the productivity, and therefore the incomes, of small producers in developing countries, huge numbers of rural poor had migrated to cities, putting greater pressure on food systems. This had then created a “vicious
cycle” of dependency on large businesses, which “must be broken”, he said.

De Schutter added that his message was “not to condemn large food businesses” but to work with the private sector to mend the current food systems, including channelling investment towards more sustainable practices.

"We need many types of farming for all sorts of needs to be satisfied," he said.

One of the Global North’s main challenges would be to reduce food waste. The report cites a 2011 study by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization which estimates that 1.3 billion tons of food produced for human consumption, about one third, is wasted.

"In low-income countries, losses occur primarily as a result of inadequate storage and packaging and processing facilities, and a poor connection of farmers to markets, resulting in economic losses for food producers. In contrast, the levels per capita food waste are much higher in rich countries than in developing countries", the reports says. Europeans and North Americans waste between 95 and 115 kg of food per year, compared to between 6 and 11 kilos per person in sub-Saharan Africa or South and South-East Asia.

De Schutter added that governments, including the EU, had begun to carry out policies favouring small-scale farming and self-reliance in food production, but that they had simultaneously negotiated international trade deals that undermined this goal.