Column: From farm to fork – healthy people depend on healthy food systems

We produce enough food to feed 9 billion people – more than the world’s entire population. Despite that, millions go hungry because of unsustainable food production, writes Olivier De Schutter.

THOUGH SIGNIFICANT PROGRESS was made on a number of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that were adopted in 2000, the goal of reducing the proportion of undernourished people by half until 2015 will not be reached. We produce enough food to feed 9 billion people, but according to the most recent figures, 842 million people worldwide still go hungry. And while undernourishment is declining, malnutrition still affects one person out of three.

The international community is now firmly focused on 2015 when a summit will take place to adopt the next set of anti-poverty goals. Governments, civil society groups, the private sector, and over one million people have had a chance to voice their opinions on what direction the next set of goals take and what should take precedence.

Defeating hunger simply must remain our number one priority. But providing food is not enough. Food and nutrition security must be developed in a sustainable way, and the status quo is no longer viable.

Sustainable food security

This World Food Day, the UN has chosen the theme of ‘healthy people depend on healthy food systems’. This theme focuses on the need to produce nutritious and balanced diets for all people, while also protecting the ability of future generations to feed themselves. Sustainable food systems use resources efficiently at every stage, from farm to fork. They aim to reduce waste and inefficiencies. They aim to get the maximum amount of food from every drop of water, every plot of land, every piece of fertiliser and every minute of labour.

Conventional forms of agriculture increasingly appear ill-suited to achieve these aims. A heavy reliance on fertilisers, water, pesticides and energy has led to increased crop amounts. But this has been at the cost of exhausting the long-term production potential of the environment that created the crop yield: the soils are being mined from their nutrients; the water reserves are fast being depleted; peak oil shall hit energy-thirsty agriculture first.

But there are alternatives. All over the globe, more knowledge-intensive forms of production are emerging; those preserve the ecosystems better, and aim at building on the complementarities between crops, trees and animals, following agroecological principles. Such types of production rely more on the recycling of agricultural waste to fertilise the soils, and less on external inputs. They maximise the interactions between the different components of nature - the diversity on the farm, often results in diversity
in the plate, with improved nutritional outcomes.

Because of their connection with the small plots of land that they cultivate and their knowledge of the local ecosystems, small scale farmers are better equipped to practice this kind of agriculture, if they are trained to do so. Across the globe, 70 per cent of food production comes from small scale farmers. They can produce nutritious, essential food for millions of people – but they need our support.

Support can come in various forms. Guarantees to the ownership of their land must be given, better access to education, more information and training, increased access to markets and fair prices for their products will all contribute to more successful, sustainable agricultural processes.

**Gender equality is vital**

Because more and more women are active in agriculture – as men exit the sector first, seizing opportunities in other sectors – improving the position of women food producers is key to the success of such a strategy. Development goals simply cannot be fully realised unless gender equality is reached and both men and women participate to the same extent in the process. While women provide represent an increasing proportion of the agricultural workforce, their access and control over resources and decision-making is severely restricted due to societal and parochial attitudinal norms.

These are the key components of sustainable food systems. They are systems which are efficient in reducing waste and losses; they invest in smallholders and in agroecological practices, in support of diverse farming systems that improve the adequacy of diets; and they take into account the specific constraints of women, which they seek to overcome. To move in this direction, governance reform will be key.

Governments should be expected to draw up multi-sectoral strategies that integrate agriculture, health, and social protection, and they should be held accountable for results. Civil society and the private sector should be involved in shaping such strategies, to ensure that they are informed by the real obstacles people face, and that implementation will follow.

**It’s time to bring governance back**

And, for such strategies to succeed, they should be supported by an enabling international environment, ensuring that trade and investment policies, as well as development cooperation programs, assist rather than impede them. Accountability, participation, and policy coherence, were insufficiently emphasised in the design and implementation of the MDGs: it is time to bring governance back in.

At the most recent summit in New York which dealt with the progress of the MDGs, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon said that our attitude to development post-2015 ‘must be bold in ambition yet simple in design’. It is the time for boldness, for ambition, for challenging the norm and moving on from the conventional status quo in food production.

*Olivier De Schutter is the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food and is addressing the Gorta World Food Day conference in Dublin on the 16 October.*
Mr De Shutter is a Professor at the Catholic University of Louvain and at the College of Europe (Natolin). He is also a member of the Global Law School Faculty at New York University and is visiting Professor at Columbia University. Prior to his appointment as the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food in 2008, he was the Secretary General of the International Federation of Human Rights (FIDH) on the issue of globalisation and human rights.

About the author:

Olivier De Schutter
@DeSchutterUNSR