Political Will Crucial for Eradicating Hunger

Interview with Olivier De Schutter, UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food

By Milenko Srečković

Since it is estimated that world population will grow to 9.7 billions of people by the middle of this century and at this moment already three millions of children die of hunger every year, one of the most important global political questions today is how to provide food for all those people. Belgian professor Olivier de Schutter, Special Rapporteur of UN on the Right to Food, reveals that South American countries have for now taken the most adequate political and legal steps in order to solve this problem, going far ahead of the rest of the world when it comes to realizing the right to food. Those steps, believes Schutter, are of great importance since, according to him, hunger and malnutrition are primarily the question of political will and accountability of ruling structures and politico-legal system. Economical growth by itself is not a solution if it is not connected with more equitable distribution of goods.

Mr. Schutter, how many people in the world is facing hunger and what are according to your analysis the root causes of hunger in different parts of the world?

According to the latest figures from the FAO, in 2011-13 a total of 842 million people, or around one in eight people in the world, were estimated to be suffering from chronic hunger and not getting enough food to lead an active life. This however seriously underestimates the challenge, for two reasons. First, the figure is based on the needs of adults leading sedentary lifestyles, when most of the poor in the developing world perform physically demanding labour; and the figure is based on estimates of household-level needs, and therefore problems of allocation within households — for instance, discrimination against women and girls in many countries in South Asia — are not captured by this global estimate. Second, though undernutrition (lack of calorie intake) is one problem, it is by no means the only problem. Micronutrient deficiency (malnutrition) is at least as significant and worrisome. More than 100 million children in the world lack vitamin A, and about two billion people are anemic. From a severe lack of iron: when this afflicts pregnant women, it means the child will be severely hampered in his or her physical and mental development. Let us not fool ourselves: despite the progress made in reducing the proportion of hungry people — from 20 per cent of the world’s population to about 13 per cent today —, the twin problems of hunger and malnutrition remain huge, and demand strong political action.

What are your basic recommendations to the governments — what should governments do in order to eradicate hunger and what kind of system should be implemented in order to protect people from hunger? Is fostering GDP growth proper and sufficient way to eradicate hunger?

It is important not to look at hunger simply as just a problem of food availability. There is no simple solution: increasing net calorie availability per capita by increased production does not guarantee less hunger; nor does economic growth per se constitute the solution, if its benefits are not much more equitably distributed. The countries that have made major inroads against hunger are not necessarily richer than others. But they made reducing hunger and malnutrition a
priority across all sectoral policies, and they implemented strong, multi-year strategies to eradicate them. Political will was key. And this, in turn, can be strengthened by democratic empowerment, social justice, and accountability. This requires an enabling legal framework as provided by human rights law.

The types of measures that arise within this approach include 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 are combined. Governments defined food security and nutrition 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. Establishing institutions to monitor progress can also help significantly, as this can ensure that political pressure — and the resources committed — will remain present throughout the implementation phase of the strategies.

Are there specific countries that treat access to food as a legal entitlement and can they be used as an example that could be implemented around the globe to avoid starvation and malnutrition?

The right to food is a human right recognized under international law which protects the right of all human beings to feed themselves in dignity, either by producing their food or by purchasing it. There is no simple best practice case for other countries to follow. Indeed, the strength of right to food approaches has been their rooting in domestic processes and their ability to address specific food security challenges in the country in question. However, several countries have led the way in taking the legal and political steps that pave the way for realizing the right to food, particularly in Latin America. For example, right to food framework laws have been adopted in Argentina, Guatemala, Ecuador, Brazil, Venezuela, Colombia, Nicaragua, and Honduras over the past decade. The implementation was at times deficient, and adopting such a legal and policy framework grounded in the right to food is not a magic bullet. But, since hunger and malnutrition are primarily a problem of lack of political accountability, this can help significantly.

What usually causes reduction of food stocks and mounting tensions between supply and demand in the International marketplace? Are food companies responsible for an increase in food prices?

Many factors contribute to food price spikes, and to the unbalancing of supply and demand. Some of these are 'fundamental' factors, such as population growth and shifting diets, as well as the merger between the food and the energy markets due to the industrialization of the processes of food production and processing. However, new factors unrelated to the fundamentals of supply and demand have recently exerted pressures on international commodity markets — and must be reined in.

Food commodity speculation is a major threat to food price stability, and thus to food security and the realization of the right to food across the developing world. Speculation occurs in various forms and with diverging impacts on food prices and food security. On the physical markets a form of speculation occurs when traders hoard food by delaying sales or accelerating buying, thus creating an artificial scarcity. This can lead to significant price increases under certain conditions — particularly where the food distribution channels are dominated by a small number of actors, or where a particular commodity is produced by only a handful of countries. The interests of this type of speculation are to cloud the market and benefit from the ensuing uncertainty. But the actors are primarily commercial operators from the agri-food sector.

Another type of speculation occurs on the markets for derivatives, where financial products are traded: futures, swaps, options. The nature of these markets has changed significantly over the past ten years, as a result of the deregulation of 2000, when the Commodities Futures Modernization Act was adopted. But also, because institutional investors such as pension funds or hedge funds have decided to invest in commodity markets as a hedge against inflation at a time where stock markets are not offering good returns, and in order to spread the risks in a portfolio strategy. Speculation on physical and financial markets has combined and interplayed to create havoc for those depending on fair and stable prices in order to make a living or to put enough food on the table. The European Parliament is now examining proposals from Commissioner Barnier to reduce the negative impacts of financial speculation, for instance by imposing position limits on financial actors or by improving transparency in the trading of over-the-counter derivatives. It is essential that we regulate this sector better.

You promote 'agro-ecological' agriculture as a way to oppose climate changes. What would be the impact of the agro-ecological measures realized on local, national and international level?

Conventional farming relies on expensive inputs, fuels climate change and is not resilient to climatic shocks. It simply is not the best choice anymore today. A large segment of the scientific community acknowledges the positive impacts of agroecology on food production, poverty alleviation and climate change mitigation — and this this is what is needed in a world of limited resources.

Today’s scientific evidence demonstrates that agroecological methods can actually equal the performance of synthetic fertilizers in boosting food production in the regions most affected by food insecurity. Agroecology applies ecological science to the design of agricultural systems; it enhances soil productivity and protects the crops against pests by relying on natural cycles.

Big sums of money will most likely be transferred towards the developing world in the remit of food security and climate change initiatives over the coming years and decades. It should not be used to support models of land use and food production which continue to push nature’s self-sustaining capacities too far. Rather, it should be channelled to the agro-ecological alternatives at our fingertips.

Tell us more about your cooperation with social movements and civil sector. In what way pressure from below should be exercised in order to increase food security and right to food?

Civil society has an essential role to play in supporting the adoption and implementation of right to food frameworks at every level. In many countries civil society has been instrumental in driving forward right to food movements, participating in the design of policies, taking part in monitoring, and developing new forms of accountability. For example, the 2011 reform to insert the right to food into the Mexican constitution followed 20 years of advocacy from civil society groups, under the "Frente por el Derecho a la Alimentación." Meanwhile, Brazilian civil society established its own National Rapporteur for Human Rights in Land, Territory and Food, whose legitimacy allows him/her to become an interlocutor to the authorities. The emergence of a global right to food movement is an opportunity to be seized. Together with the adoption of food laws on the right to food and of rights-based national food strategies, it represents a chance to move towards policies that are designed in a more participatory fashion and are therefore better informed and reach all intended beneficiaries.

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