Democracy and diversity can mend broken food systems

In his final report to the UN Human Rights Council after a six-year term as Special Rapporteur on the right to food, Olivier De Schutter has called for the world’s food systems to be radically and democratically redesigned.

The report critiques the industrial system of agriculture that has boosted food production over the past 50 years, yet still leaves 842 million people hungry. For example, the Green Revolution, while boosting agricultural production, led to an extension of monocultures, a loss of agricultural biodiversity, accelerated soil erosion and pollution of fresh water from the overuse of chemical fertilizers. “Objectives such as supplying diverse, culturally-acceptable foods to communities, supporting smallholders, sustaining soil and water resources, and raising food security within particularly vulnerable areas, must not be crowded out by the one-dimensional quest to produce more food,” the Special Rapporteur urges. Another potentially devastating effect of industrial-scale agriculture has been the rise in greenhouse gas emissions. Climate change will affect future agricultural productivity, he warns.

As an alternative, the Special Rapporteur champions agroecology to improve the resilience and sustainability of food systems. This approach would not only be more environmentally friendly, but would provide social and health benefits, such as contributing to more diverse diets and improved nutrition, as well as improving the livelihoods of farming households. Although easier to implement on smaller-sized farms, agroecology can be disseminated on a large scale, and should also inspire reforms in how large farms operate.

The Special Rapporteur recommends that actions should be launched at three levels to democratize food security policies. At the local level, the key is to rebuild local food systems, decentralizing them and making them more flexible, but also creating links between the cities and rural areas, for the benefit of both local producers and consumers.

At the national level, democratically-designed right to food strategies are needed, wherein the following are supported: reinvestment in local food production, focused in particular on small-scale food producers; diversification of the economy, to create opportunities for income-generating activities; and establishment of standing social protection schemes, to ensure that all individuals have access to nutritious food at all times, even if they have access neither to productive resources nor to employment.

This must be accompanied by reform in rich countries, including an overhaul of trade policies, which have allowed for subsidies that lead to overproduction in rich countries while impacting negatively on developing countries producers. The developed world should rein in the demand for animal feed and agrofuels, and reduce food waste. An enabling international environment is essential, and global governance bodies should follow the example of the efforts of the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) to foster inclusive decision-making.

The report includes a summary of recommendations issued over the course of De Schutter’s mandate as Special Rapporteur (2008–2014), covering food price volatility, trade and investment in agriculture, regulating agribusiness, agrofuels, food aid and development cooperation, nutrition, social protection, women’s rights, Human Rights Impact Assessments, national strategies, agricultural workers, contract farming, small-holder farmers, agroecology, and the reinvestment in agriculture.

The full report is available at:

With best wishes,

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Item 1


Democracy and diversity can mend broken food systems - final diagnosis from UN right to food expert

[10 March 2014] GENEVA – The United Nations Special Rapporteur on the right to food, Olivier De Schutter, today called for the world’s food systems to be radically and democratically redesigned to ensure the human right to adequate food and freedom from hunger.

“The eradication of hunger and malnutrition is an achievable goal. However, it will not be enough to refine the logic of our food systems – it must instead be reversed,” Mr. De Schutter stressed during the presentation of his final report* to the UN Human Rights Council after a six-year term as Special Rapporteur.

The expert warned that the current food systems are efficient only from the point of view of maximizing agribusiness profits. “At the local, national and international levels, the policy environment must urgently accommodate alternative, democratically-mandated visions,” he said.

Objectives such as supplying diverse, culturally-acceptable foods to communities, supporting smallholders, sustaining soil and water resources, and raising food security within particularly vulnerable areas, must not be crowded out by the one-dimensional quest to produce more food.”

“The greatest deficit in the food economy is the democratic one. By harnessing people’s knowledge and building their needs and preferences into the design of ambitious food policies at every level, we would arrive at food systems that are built to endure,” Mr. De Schutter said.

Local food systems

“Food democracy must start from the bottom-up, at the level of villages, regions, cities, and municipalities,” the rights expert said.

“Food security must be built around securing the ability of smallholder farmers to thrive,” he noted. “Respect for their access to productive resources is key in this regard,” he added, calling for priority investments in agroecological and poverty-reducing forms of agriculture.

Mr. De Schutter urged cities to take food security into their own hands. “By 2050 more than 6 billion people – more than two in three - will live in cities. It is vital that these cities identify logistical challenges and pressure points in their food supply chains, and develop a variety of channels to procure their food, in line with the wishes, needs and ideas of their inhabitants.”

“Emerging social innovations in all parts of the world show how urban consumers can be reconnected with local food producers, while at the same time reducing rural poverty and food insecurity,” he said. “Such innovations must be supported.”

National strategies

The expert warned, however, that these local initiatives can only succeed if they are supported and complemented at the national level.

“Governments have a major role to play in bringing policies into coherence with the right to food, and ensuring that actions are effectively sequenced, but there is no single recipe,” he said.
“In some cases,” Mr. De Schutter noted, “the priority will be to promote short circuits and direct producer-consumer links in order to strengthen local smallholder farming and reduce dependence on imports. In other cases, the prevailing need may be to strengthen cooperatives in order to sell to large buyers under dependable contracts.”

The key lies in democratic decision-making, he stressed. “National right to food strategies should be co-designed by relevant stakeholders, in particular the groups most affected by hunger and malnutrition, and they should be supported by independent monitoring.”

**International coherence**

“Just as local-level initiatives cannot succeed without support from national strategies, efforts at the domestic level require an international enabling environment to bear fruit,” the Special Rapporteur added.

Mr. De Schutter highlighted in his report the promising efforts of the UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS) to bring together governments, civil society, international agencies and the private sector to collectively address the challenges that food systems face, but warned that “the CFS remains the exception in bringing participation and democracy into the global governance arena, and in accommodating different visions of food security.”

“Other global governance bodies must align themselves with the strategic framework provided by the CFS. The WTO, for example, must not hinder developing countries undertaking ambitious food security policies and investing in small-holder agriculture,” he said.

The Special Rapporteur underscored that attempts by developing countries to improve their food security will only be successful if there are parallel reforms in the global north.

“Wealthy countries must move away from export-driven agricultural policies and leave space instead for small-scale farmers in developing countries to supply local markets,” Mr. De Schutter said. “They must also restrain their expanding claims on global farmland by reining in the demand for animal feed and agrofuels, and by reducing food waste.”

*In addition to his report, the expert presented a summary of recommendations issued over the course of his mandate as Special Rapporteur (2008-2014), covering food price volatility, trade and investment in agriculture, regulating agribusiness, agrofuels, food aid and development cooperation, nutrition, social protection, women’s rights, Human Rights Impact Assessments, national strategies, agricultural workers, contract farming, small-holder farmers, agroecology, and the reinvestment in agriculture.*

*) Read the Special Rapporteur’s final report to the UN Human Rights Council.*

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**Item 2**

**Food system that fails poor countries needs urgent reform, says UN expert**

Mark Tran

Guardian, Monday 10 March 2014


*UN special rapporteur on the right to food champions agroecology as sustainable alternative to existing framework*

The existing food system has failed and needs urgent reform, according to a UN expert who argues there should be a greater emphasis on local food production and an overhaul of trade policies that have led to overproduction in rich countries while obliging poor countries – which are often dependent on agriculture – to import food.

In his final report, Olivier De Schutter, the UN special rapporteur on the right to food, offers a detailed critique of an industrial system of agriculture that has boosted food production over the past 50 years, yet still leaves 842 million – 12% of the world's population – hungry.

"Measured against the requirement that they should contribute to the realisation of the right to food, the food systems we have inherited from the 20th century have failed," he told the UN human rights council. "Of course, significant progress has been achieved in boosting agricultural production. But this has hardly reduced the number of hungry people."

The right to food is defined as the right of every individual to have physical and economic access at all times to sufficient, adequate and culturally acceptable food that is produced and consumed sustainably, preserving access to food for future generations.

De Schutter, professor of law at the University of Louvain, Belgium, was appointed rapporteur in 2008, during a sharp rise in global food prices, and has had plenty of time to diagnose what ails food systems. A major culprit, he says, is the "green revolution", which boosted agricultural production through the use of high-yielding plant varieties, irrigation, mechanisation and subsidised fertilisers and pesticides. The flipside, however, was an extension of monocultures (wheat, maize, soybean), a loss of agrobiodiversity, accelerated soil erosion and pollution of fresh water from the overuse of chemical fertilisers.

A potentially devastating effect of industrial-scale agriculture has been the rise in greenhouse gas emissions, which represent 15% of total manmade emissions. Climate change will affect future agricultural productivity, he warns.

"Under a business as usual scenario, we can anticipate an average of 2% productivity decline over each of the coming decades, with yield changes in developing countries ranging from -27% to +9% for the key staple crops," says the report.

The increasing demand for meat is another area of concern. The UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation estimates that annual meat production would have to reach 470m tons to meet projected demand in 2050, an increase of about 200m tons from 2005-07.

"This is entirely unsustainable ... Demand for meat diverts food away from poor people who are unable to afford anything but cereals ... Continuing to feed cereals to growing numbers of livestock will aggravate poverty and environmental degradation," says De Schutter, who urges governments to discourage meat consumption where it has already reached levels that are more than enough to satisfy dietary needs. He is optimistic that public attitudes towards meat will change in rich countries, but less so about attitudes in emerging economies such as China, where eating meat is akin to a status symbol.

As an alternative to existing systems, De Schutter champions agroecology, a range of techniques including intercropping, the use of manure and food scraps as fertiliser and agroforestry (planting trees). This approach would not only be more environmentally friendly, but would contribute to more diverse diets and improve nutrition. Although easier to implement on smaller-sized farms, agroecology is also applicable to large farms.

Other measures to improve the system would be to abandon mandates for biofuels and cut down food waste in rich countries and post-harvest losses in poor countries.

Changes to support small-scale farmers in poor countries – access to land, support for local seed banks, storage connection to makers – must be accompanied by reform in rich countries, where the farming sector has become highly dependent on subsidies – $259bn in 2012. This has encouraged the expansion of the food processing industry thanks to cheap inputs and facilities such as silos and processing plants.

"Large agribusiness corporations have come to dominate increasingly globalised markets thanks to their ability to achieve economies of scale and because of various network effects ... the dominant position of larger agribusiness corporations is such that these actors have acquired, in effect, a veto power in the political system."

De Schutter says he is not completely opposed to agribusiness as it is incredibly efficient in connecting consumers and producers far away from each other.
"It is not desirable to get rid of agribusiness," he says. "It is incredibly efficient, connecting far away consumers and producers, and many needs can only be satisfied by agribusiness. But we need alternative systems to serve different needs. There is an imbalance, as there has been a priority on large-scale farming and underinvestment in local food markets. It is more realistic to have different systems co-exist. Brazil shows you can have huge, efficient farms along exemplary family farms, but you do need high-level political commitment to small farms and a participatory tradition."

De Schutter sees possibilities for change. Rebuilding local food systems, for instance, would decentralise food systems, making them more flexible and creating links between cities and rural hinterlands. He cites urban agricultural initiatives in Montreal and Toronto, Canada, Durban, South Africa and Belo Horizonte, Brazil, where "family farmers" are encouraged to feed urban populations.

At the national level, governments should encourage investment in local food packaging and processing industries. Social protection schemes should be established, says De Schutter, offering a social safety net to protect vulnerable families from falling into poverty. Globally, meanwhile, states should limit excessive reliance on international trade and build capacity to produce the food needed to meet consumption needs, with an emphasis on small-scale farmers.

"The expansion of trade has resulted in the luxury tastes of the richest parts of the world being allowed to compete against the satisfaction of the basic needs of the poor," says De Schutter.

As for the power of agribusiness corporations, states should use competition law to check the abuse of power. "This requires having in place competition regimes sensitive to excessive buying power in the agrifood sector, and devising competition authorities with mechanisms that allow for affected suppliers to bring complaints without fear or reprisal by dominant buyers."