Ending hunger - the rich world holds the keys
Olivier De Schutter
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I took on the role of UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food in 2008, unprecedented heights on global markets.
Food riots ensued and hunger deepened in poor, food-importing countries. The imbalances of our food systems, which had been building up over the years, became visible.

We learned that summer that the global food supply was only a few spoons away from global demand.
But we also glimpsed the unjust logic at the heart of our globalized food system: divergent purchasing powers have effectively entered a bidding match for resources.

The brutal efficiency of the food market
The global marketplace is brutally efficient at allocating resources to the places where they are needed.

Its simple magic allows large areas of farmland in developing countries to be used to cultivate feed for livestock that will satisfy burgeoning meat consumption in the West.
According to some estimates, as much as six million hectares of African land were bought up by British and US companies between 2009 and 2013. The ‘virtual land’ embodied in the EU’s imports of protein crops to feed livestock in 2010 was the equivalent of almost 10% of the EU’s own farmland.

Meanwhile, rather than be consumed directly by local populations, smaller species of fish are shipped to farms where they command more money as feed for the salmon and trout rich consumers will buy.

Throwing food away
And this food can be wasted in huge quantities in wealthy countries - the average European or North American consumes more than 100 kg per year - because food expenditure represents a sliver of their household budget.
Overall, wealthy consumers are able to command the resources that will allow their lifestyles to continue unchallenged, even as others are deprived of basic calories and the environment is imperilled.

Indeed, food systems are failing spectacularly on these counts: close to one billion people are still overweight or obese, while food systems contribute almost one third of man-made greenhouse gas emissions.
It is estimated that the livestock sector alone is responsible for a staggering 31% of global greenhouse gas emissions.
Livelhoods and the loss of forests and woodlands for pasture and feed crops are taken for granted. Yet many believe that the main challenge for the future is simply to raise global food production a respond to market signals and boost aggregate supply.

The whole system needs reform - beginning in the global North
The problem with this approach is that it ignores the gaping failures of the present, and prescribes the magic bullet of fertilizer and an extra storey on the factory farm.

We badly need an alternative paradigm for the 21st century. There is much that can be done by governments to support small-scale farmers with the land, credit, technology and market access they need.

Environmentally-sustainable and potentially high-yielding agroecological systems can be promoted in these producers with local consumers.

However, these reforms cannot be made in a vacuum. In our globalized food systems, patterns of production and consumption have become linked on a global scale.

Rich countries’ farm subsidies are an attack on the poor
Change must also occur on the supply-side, and here it is a question of how we produce, not merely how we trade. Rich countries subsidize farmers in wealthy countries, the meat and food processing industries have benefitted from recent decades.

This has made it tempting for developing countries to rely on food imports. But it has not been so easy for farmers in the developing world to compete.

And it does not compensate for the loss of genuine income-earning opportunities by small-scale farmers in their local markets in the developing world.

By gradually reducing their farm subsidies, wealthy countries would give small-scale farmers the opportunity to sustain their livelihoods and feeding local communities.

The luxury of the rich - or the survival of the poor?
Only when this model is given a chance to succeed will developing countries have a real alternative to the current scale of export-oriented production units, in the hope that global prices will be kind enough to allow them to enjoy their basic needs.
Six years on from the 2008 food crisis, there has been a ‘reinvestment in agriculture’, but too little, and the productivist box.

Without reform in the North and the South, and without a new paradigm, globalized food system where the luxury tastes of the rich world compete against the basic needs of the poor - and win.

Olivier De Schutter is the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food. His second three-year mandate begins in 2014. This editorial article represents a summary of the key messages he would like to leave behind.

He will be Keynote Speaker at the Forum on the Future of Agriculture (FFA) in Brussels on 1st April, ‘Feeding Countries to Supporting Countries’ Ability to Feed Themselves: Trade and Investment in Agricultural Systems’.

http://www.theecologist.org/blogs_and_comments/commentators/2333245/ending_hunger_the_rich_world_holds_the_keys.html