Right to Food Prophet Completes His Mandate

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Olivier de Schutter, the United Nations’ Special Rapporteur on the Right Food, has issued his final report.

You may recall that de Schutter made but a brief appearance on the Canadian national stage in 2012. His findings after a 10-day cross-Canada study mission were enough to earn him a public dismissal by two prominent federal Conservative cabinet ministers. But then, prophets rarely win popularity contests.

De Schutter is one of a growing group of experts who believe that there are many links between hunger in developing countries and hunger and food systems in countries like Canada. That’s why he included a rich country like Canada in a five-year mandate that focused on poor and middle income countries.

Now at the end of his mandate, de Schutter has issued a veritable manual on ending global hunger and food insecurity.

It’s a remarkable achievement, covering everything from farming methods to consumer choices and biofuels. Unimpeded by the niceties of international political processes, he gives a clear, unvarnished and comprehensive view of a pathway to a hunger-free world.

Among the most striking (and likely controversial) of his findings concerns livestock production and meat consumption.

Noting that livestock production, including the production of livestock feedgrains, takes up almost 70% of total arable land, de Schutter quotes the UN Food and Agriculture Organization and other experts who report that raising livestock may account for over half of the human activity generated greenhouse gasses. This is more than double the contribution from all global transportation.

Biofuel production, encouraged by government mandates, and food waste resulting from poor storage in low income countries and inefficient production in rich countries, are the two other of a ‘big three’ of global hunger.

Looking at the increasing food needs of a growing population, de Schutter says that the deepest debate is not about whether agricultural productivity should be raised but how this should be achieved.

Looking particularly at the needs of poor for livelihoods as a way to stimulate growth in the wider national economies, he focuses on the potential of a wide range of farming methods intended to increase food
production, reduce chemical fertilizer use and reduce the impacts of climate change. Through techniques like conservation agriculture, reducing fertilizer use both contributes to stopping climate change (chemical fertilizers generate high levels of greenhouse gasses) while at the same time protecting the soil from drought and sudden heavy rainstorms.

Overall, his prescription to end hunger focuses on the development and strengthening of local food systems, supported by a more local and democratic decision making on food related issues. Given the difficulty of international agreements of any sort alone, this seems to make good sense. We should all take note.

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