The Transformative Potential of the Right to Food

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By Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi, Truthout | News Analysis

Transitioning from an industrial model of agriculture to a system benefiting small-scale producers - a step governments must support - will not only alleviate worldwide hunger and poverty, but will reduce carbon emissions, the UN's Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food concludes in a new report.

Middle-class Americans take it for granted that whatever hardships we face in life, we can always count on food appearing on the table. Supermarkets feature well-stocked shelves, restaurants bustle with business, and the choice of cuisines available to us would even dazzle Old World aristocrats.

But the great majority of the world's peoples don't enjoy such blessings. For them, the task of feeding their families is a challenge they face anew each day. Chronic hunger and malnutrition afflict close to 850 million people; another billion subsist on substandard diets; and billions more spend a huge portion of their income, even as much as half, on their humble meals of rice, wheat or corn.

The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights recognizes the right to food as integral to a satisfactory standard of living, affirming "the right of every individual, alone or in community with others, 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."

Yet too often this right is neglected or trampled upon. To remedy this situation, in 2000 the UN Commission on Human Rights established the post of UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food. Since 2008, this position has been held by Olivier De Schutter, who has spent the past six years seeking ways to ensure that the right to food is fully realized. His final report, issued in March, documents his conclusions and recommendations. Though written in the cool, impersonal language of the policy expert, the report conveys a truly bold message with transformative implications for the future of the global food system.

De Schutter sees the major obstacle to the achievement of global food security to be the dominant paradigm of industrial agriculture, which favors giant agricultural corporations over small-scale producers and sanctions profits rather than the eradication of hunger as the driving force behind food production. Just two pages into the report he bluntly asserts: "Measured against the requirement that they should contribute to the realization of the right to food, the food systems we have inherited from the 20th century have failed."

While agricultural productivity has certainly increased and helped to reduce extreme hunger over the past half century, he points out that glaring inequalities in the distribution of food persist, with women and children at a comparative disadvantage. Apart from those who lack a sufficient intake of calories, 2 billion people, especially in the developing world, suffer from "hidden hunger," a lack of critical micronutrients such as iodine, vitamin A and iron, all essential to optimal health.
Over 165 million children worldwide are stunted, unable to reach their full physical and cognitive potential. But even in the more affluent parts of the world, the diets promoted by modern food systems, rich in fats, salt and carbohydrates, have sharply increased obesity and set off epidemics of diabetes, heart disease and gastrointestinal cancer.

The report explicitly links these problems to the dominance of the industrial model of agriculture, which negatively impacts not only personal health but also communal well-being through its imperial reach and destabilization of the environment. Its commitment to monoculture has led to loss of agrobiodiversity and soil erosion, while its overuse of chemical inputs pollutes fresh water and leads to the emergence of resistant super-pests. However, the report states, "the most potentially devastating impacts of industrial modes of agricultural production stem from their contribution to increased greenhouse gas emissions."

Heavily reliant on carbon-powered machinery, the modern food system contributes to 15 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions at field level; but when all facets of industrial agriculture are taken into account, the figure doubles to 30 to 32 percent.

Climate change and agricultural productivity lock together in a mutually detrimental relationship. Not only does agriculture intensify climate change, but disruptive weather events driven by a warmer climate, such as droughts and floods, turn fertile lands barren and destroy harvests. Beneath the threshold of perception, the slow heating up of the planet causes gradual declines in crop fecundity. Thus it is predicted that over the coming decades, yields of key staple crops such as wheat and corn could fall by as much as 27 percent.

**Demand for Meat**

Another concern the special rapporteur focuses on is the unsustainable demand for meat, which is expected to rise to 470 million tons in 2050, an increase of about 200 million tons over 2005–2007 levels. Already a third of the world’s cereals are being used as animal feed, diverting critically needed grain and beans away from poor people so that those in the richer countries (including the emerging upper classes in the newly industrialized nations) can enjoy their steaks, pork sausages and burgers. By 2050, it’s expected that half the world’s cereals will be used as animal feed.

Meat consumption not only upsets the scales of food justice but also exacerbates global warming. A study by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, cited by De Schutter, estimates that the livestock sector accounts for 18 percent of greenhouse gas emissions, a larger share even than transport. When deforestation and the loss of grasslands to grazing are taken into account, livestock is found to be responsible for 51 percent of anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions."This provides a further argument for reducing meat consumption even in the affluent West.

Finally, among the negative impacts of industrial agriculture, De Schutter mentions its role in concentrating the benefits of food production in the hands of large farms, landholders and giant food corporations at the expense of small-scale producers. These giant farms are often so profitable because of the massive subsidies they receive from their governments.

The subsidies enable them to dump their surplus at low prices into the poorer countries of Asia and Africa, thereby undercutting local farmers and driving them into poverty. Unable to sustain themselves by producing for local consumption, many farmers in developing countries are forced to work on large agricultural estates that specialize in the cultivation of export items for the North. Others abandon the land altogether and migrate to the cities in search of work, thus intensifying urban sprawl.

When the prices of imported foods spike, as has happened several times in the past few years, the poor find they cannot afford the foods they need. This has led to food riots in these countries and set the stage for social and political instability.

The remedy that De Schutter prescribes for the ills in the global food system is a bold one. To resolve with a single stroke the interwoven problems of hunger, climate change and endemic poverty, he advocates a transition away from the dominant industrial agricultural model to "agroecological modes of production." Agroecology encompasses a range of techniques that align agricultural production with natural processes, maximizing resource efficiency while reducing the use of external inputs. Its methods include intercropping, agroforestry, drip irrigation and the recycling of manure and food scraps into fertilizers.

Agroecology lowers fossil fuel use, and, by applying natural fertilizers, avoids the chemical pollution of land and water. It reduces the cost of farming, alleviates rural poverty and, by keeping farmers on their
farms, helps to stem urban migration and the resultant growth of megacities. Surprisingly, its yields in productivity have been found to equal and even surpass those of industrial farms.

The obligation to ensure that everyone obtains nutritious food in sufficient quantities to sustain health and well-being has both moral and pragmatic implications. In its moral dimension it raises once again the big question: Whom should the world's interdependent economic system be designed to benefit? Should it serve the powerful transnational corporations - in this case, the giant agricultural conglomerates and the global food chains, along with their allies in the fossil fuel, chemical and shipping industries - or should it benefit the ordinary people of the world, many of whom daily stare down the abyss of poverty and hunger?

Economies do not function autonomously. They are molded by laws, rules, and policies, both national and international. Over the past 30 years, under the reign of neoliberal ideology, the global economy has been drastically reshaped to serve the interests of those in the seats of power. It channels more and more wealth into the hands of the few - the corporate and financial titans - who use their wealth to bend government policies to their advantage, without regard for the impact these will have on the vast numbers of people who do not share their privileged position.

**Decisive Moral Stance**

To promote the realization of the right to food, the report takes a decisive moral stance on behalf of the world's great majority of workers and farmers. DeSchutter situates the international food system at the crossroads, as it were, of the struggle for global social justice. He contends that ensuring the right to food requires that the old productivist model give way to "a new paradigm focused on well-being, resilience and sustainability." While he does not quite place the blame for global hunger, poverty and climate disruption on corporate capitalism, his analysis clearly implies that a network of policies governed by a different set of values - more democratic, communitarian, decentralized and respectful of human values - is needed to offset the perilous concentration of wealth and power that has resulted from corporate domination of the food system. This is surprising at a time when so many official policy statements issued by international experts reflect the dominant consensus of neoliberalism, with its bias toward corporate hegemony.

As a matter of pragmatic policy, his report calls for changes at the local, national and international level that will meet "the imperative of achieving food security and ensuring adequate nutrition" for everyone. He sees the key to fully realizing the right to food the idea of "food sovereignty" - the freedom of communities to choose which food systems to depend on and how to shape those food systems to maximize the well-being of their members. This aligns his own position with that of the international peasant organization *Via Campesina* and other peasant movements around the world, which seek to withstand the pressure to yield to the authority of big agribusiness.

To facilitate this transformation, he assigns a role to governments, which he says should provide "strong support to small-scale food producers, based on the provision of public goods for training, storage and connection to markets, and on the dissemination of agroecological modes of production." Governments can also help to develop trade policies that support such efforts and at the same time "reduce the competition between the luxury tastes of some and the basic needs of the others."

Yet De Schutter should not be seen as taking sides in any exclusive way, for in the final analysis his recommendations are likely to prove beneficial to everyone. Given industrial-scale agriculture's harmful impact on the environment - its high level of carbon emissions, its pollution of water and air, its degradation of the soil, its drain on water resources and disruption of ecosystems - the adoption of a new agricultural paradigm may turn out to be the most prudent way to avoid massive calamities to which all would be vulnerable. By hastening the transition to agroecological models of production, as the report proposes, we can simultaneously tackle the problems of food justice, nutritional health, ecological sustainability and poverty alleviation, and thereby help create a world that works for everyone.

*To read the full report (28 pages),* [go here.](http://truth-out.org/news/item/23086-the-transformative-potential-of-the-right-to-food?tmpl=component&print=1)

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VEN. BHIKKHU BODHI

Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi is an American Buddhist monk well-known as a translator of Pali Buddhist texts. He is also the founding chair of Buddhist Global Relief, an organization dedicated to helping communities worldwide afflicted with chronic hunger and malnutrition.

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