Food security eludes almost 1-billion

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Building democracy into food systems would put an end to the logic of constantly putting out fires, writes Olivier De Schutter

FOR the past six years, it has been my responsibility to report to the United Nations (UN) on how well people’s right to food is being upheld. The picture that has emerged is a troubling one: the ability of millions to produce or access adequate food has been imperilled by dysfunctional global food systems.

These systems are efficient only from the point of view of maximising agribusiness profits and producing huge volumes of exportable cereal commodities.

They are highly inefficient on every other count: almost 1-billion people are still hungry and undernourished, while 1.4-billion are overweight and obese; millions of small-scale farmers are unable to live from food production; and the natural resource base on which food production depends is being rapidly degraded.

This catalogue of poor outcomes raises questions about why we would freely choose a system whose benefits accrue to so few at the expense of so many. The answer is: we haven’t. Our food systems have emerged by default, by diktat and by virtue of the effective veto power of agribusiness to any reform running against its interests. The greatest deficit in the food economy is the democratic one.

Food democracy must start in cities and municipalities. By 2050, when the world population will have reached 9.3-billion, about 6.3-billion of these inhabitants 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.

Many cities are already making strides in rebuilding their food systems. Toronto boasts an ambitious local food strategy. Durban’s Agroecology Delivery Programme has reinforced local, sustainable supply links, while city-level strategies to integrate local family farms into the food supply have flourished in Brazil.

However innovative these local initiatives are, they can succeed only if they are supported and complemented at national level. Governments can bring policies into coherence across various sectors and can ensure that actions are effectively sequenced. But it is only by being democratic and rights-based that national strategies will be truly responsive to the diverse imperatives of smallholders, pastoralists, fishers, indigenous groups and the urban poor alike.

Meanwhile, it is the paradox of an increasingly interdependent world that for cities, regions and countries to be able to choose the food systems they want, there must be deeper co-operation between states. Since its reform in 2009, the Committee on World Food Security has led these international efforts by bringing together governments, civil society, international agencies and the private sector to collectively frame the challenges the food systems face.

But the committee is still the exception in bringing participation and democracy into the global governance arena. The Bali Ministerial Conference of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in December showed how global processes can block ambitious food security reforms. Though India could temporarily safeguard its National Food Security Act, the message to all other WTO members was that they should think twice before increasing support for their farmers — even though rich countries have provided much higher support for years with impunity.

At the local, national and international levels, the policy environment must accommodate alternative, democratically mandated visions for our food systems. Objectives such as supplying diverse, culturally acceptable foods to communities, sustaining soil and water resources, and raising food security within particularly vulnerable areas, must be able to find their place alongside the quest to produce cheap grains for global markets.

Global food systems operate on a dangerous treadmill: emergency nutritional interventions are called in to deal with widespread micro-nutrient deficiency; extra fertiliser and pesticide are poured onto already degraded land in order to squeeze out further productivity; and urban services rush to adapt as migrants pour into city slums from rural areas where livelihoods have become unviable.
Building democracy into food systems would put an end to this logic of constantly putting out fires.

By harnessing people’s knowledge and building their needs and preferences into the design, we would arrive at food systems that are built to endure.

- De Schutter is the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food, whose second three-year mandate comes to an end next month.