I wish Olivier de Schutter had the power to match the acuity of his analysis, but it’s great that we’ve had an advocate whose vision is as broad as that of the corporations who have for the last 50 years determined global food policy. Since 2008, the human rights lawyer has had the title of United Nations special rapporteur on the right to food. (His second three-year term ends this week.) This is obviously not a genius marketing title and, even worse, the position carries no real power.

Still, the notion of an impartial observer who can see trends as corporations do — across political borders, and agnostic to them — is a valuable one. It’s easy enough for individual Americans to see how our problems may resemble Canada’s; it’s much more difficult to imagine ourselves struggling the way Indonesians do. That’s what De Schutter has done: shown us that the issues with the food system are as global as trade.

With increasing depth, De Schutter has analyzed a food crisis that is international and systemic, with common threads in countries rich and poor. He’s revealed how we can change things, how the will of the citizens and countries of the world can be powerful tools in making a new food system, one that is smart and sustainable and fair. “All over the world,” he says, “food systems are being rebuilt from the bottom up, often on a small, city-wide scale. That’s food democracy, which should be promoted just as in the early 20th century people dreamt of
workplace democracy.”

De Schutter’s job has been to travel the world, observe and report. He’s spent time in countries as disparate as Malaysia and Mexico. During his term, he says, the “entire discourse” about food has changed (these quotes are from conversations we’ve had over the years and a phone interview this past Monday), and that more and more the solutions are seen to be moving away from what he calls “productivism”: the focus on chemically intensive monocrop agriculture with high yields and cash profits as the main goals.

The way of the future, he believes, is agroecology, a sustainable form of agriculture that draws on science, tradition and wisdom to treat farmers, earth and consumers respectfully. (In other words, it’s sustainable. I wrote about it three years ago.)

“We’ve learned,” he says, “that investing in the monocrop growth of cereal or soybeans may produce a lot of calories but it does not contribute to adequate diets.” This linking of nutrition to agricultural policies — what you grow determines to a large extent what you eat — is a big shift.

Put another way, producing an adequate number of calories to feed the world has not resulted in either feeding the world completely or well: People still go hungry, and dietary diseases among seemingly well-fed people are the result of failed agricultural policies and malevolent marketing practices. Productivism, of course, has also pushed against ecological limits that were not imagined 50 years ago.

Even if De Schutter’s focus on “the right to food” had been interpreted narrowly, his analysis is damning: “Poor countries should be supported not by dumping food on their local markets but by helping them reinvest in their own local food systems, by investing in their helping them feed themselves.” This is especially true of poor farmers who may be driven off the land by an inability to compete with food sold at international commodity prices, people who subsequently cannot afford that commoditized food. Think, please, about the horrible irony of that situation, and of what food justice actually means.

The above paragraphs will serve as a crude and barely adequate
summary of some of De Schutter’s overview. As usual, however, solutions or at least positive maneuvers are harder to come by, and this is where I focused the most recent of my conversations with him. The major surprise here is how mainstream and international what once seemed like radical thinking about diet has become, especially in our anti-regulatory climate.

Because when I asked De Schutter where we are going now, he promptly said, “Many of us have arrived at the conviction that junk food and sugary drinks are like tobacco and deserve to be treated in the same way.”

This is significant because the United Nations has acted meaningfully and powerfully regarding tobacco. About 10 years ago, the World Health Organization (W.H.O.) sponsored the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, which was then adopted by the World Health Assembly. (Nothing describing the machinations of the United Nations is simple.) It uses language such as “the right of all people to the highest standard of health,” which like much United Nations language is self-evident but rarely gets said in daily conversation and is often overlooked in government policy.

What it’s meant in practice over the past decade is that more than 100 cities and countries have participated in an effort to limit tobacco consumption, and that we’ve seen local and national regulations around the world limit bystanders’ exposure to smoke; increase awareness of the dangers of tobacco; limit and prevent sales of cigarettes to minors; and regulate the marketing of tobacco. (In 10 or so countries tobacco displays are banned at the point of sale.)

But as De Schutter says: “It isn’t the regulations that make civilization shift but social norms. In the last 15 years people have come to feel odd smoking in public. Imagine that people consuming glutinous quantities of junk food, candies and sugary drinks would be offered better choices — with that support, their behavior would change and we’d be addressing the societal costs of that over-consumption.”

This is not to blame the individual, nor to condemn individual behaviors. “Right now,” he says, “advertising and availability are so
pervasive and unavoidable that in many places people cannot choose to exist in a healthy environment; we must give them that choice.”

No one argues with tobacco regulations any more; the same, obviously, cannot be said of regulating junk food. Yet when people like De Schutter say, in an international arena, “These foods are toxic, which makes this a global public health issue as well as a huge strain on national budgets,” we know we are making progress. In the same way that the control of secondhand smoke was taken out of the hands of smokers, the choice of consuming large quantities of (say) sugar-sweetened beverages must be taken out of the hands of individual consumers. “It’s the duty of governments to take action against consumption and against the advertising that encourages it; unhealthy diets are now a greater threat to global health than tobacco,” he says.

Despite a now-10-year-old official W.H.O. strategy (not unlike Michelle Obama’s “Let’s Move” campaign) on diet, exercise and health, the diet-related chronic disease epidemic continues unabated. Thus De Schutter believes “that W.H.O. must convene a framework convention on healthy diets like the framework convention in 2003 for tobacco.”

De Schutter is at a Stockholm conference this week, one whose aim is to form the International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems, a rough equivalent of the International Panel on Climate Change. Its stated goals will be to “encourage and guide research on sustainable food systems and diets,” which basically means “to transform the food system and everything that surrounds it.” It’s good that someone other than multinational corporations is trying to see the big picture.