Why aren’t we using government purchasing to promote the right to food (among other things)? Great farewell paper from Olivier de Schutter

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Olivier de Schutter, UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food reaches the end of his term at the end of May, leaving some pretty big shoes to fill.

He summarized his arguments in March with a final report to the Human Rights Council, but kept on going til the end, with a really thought-provoking briefing note on government procurement. Sounds dull, I know, but reading it made me realize just how much unexplored potential there is here. I think he’s onto something.

Think about it; what area do governments have most control over? Their own spending would be high up any list, and in food, that is significant:

‘Governments spend on average 12% of their GDP on public procurement in OECD countries, and slightly less in developing countries, although estimates vary. All over the world, public authorities award contracts for food provision and food-related services for cafeterias in civil service buildings, hospitals, prisons, schools, universities, as well as social programmes such as in-kind transfers or social restaurants. For instance, the public catering sector in the UK represents some £2 billion per year (approx. US $3 billion or €3,16 billion).’

De Schutter points out that governments ‘buying social justice’ is not new – government purchasing power has been used to promote racial and gender equality in the US, South Africa, Malaysia and Europe. But the right to food has been missing from that work, and in recent times, negotiations on government procurement at the WTO and in trade agreements have got stuck in a Washington Consensus style terrain of openness, transparency and efficiency, rather than the impact in inequality and poverty.

So he proposes a truly monstrous acronym – PPPPP (pro-poor public procurement policies). Let’s call it 5P for short. Building on areas such as Africa’s ‘Home Grown School Feeding Programme’ and the World Food Programme’s Purchase for Progress scheme, De Schutter identifies (appropriately, I guess) 5 principles that should underpin any 5P approach (see table).
Brazil seems to be furthest along this road:

‘Brazil’s Act No.11, 947 of 16 June 2009 provides that a minimum of 30% of the financial resources transferred by the federal government to states and municipalities in order to implement the National School Feeding Programme (PNAE), now covering more than 49 million children, must be used to buy food sourced from family-based farms, including indigenous communities, Quilombolas (descendants of Afro-Brazilian slaves), and beneficiaries of land redistribution programmes……

The quota system established by Brazil in 2009, as part of the Zero Hunger strategy, is the first example of an innovative policy and a powerful tool for supporting family-based farms and specific vulnerable groups.’

De Schutter argues that a 5P approach has nothing to fear from the WTO – there is plenty of flexibility within the Government Procurement Agreement to address sustainable development concerns and right to food principles.

Seems to me that government procurement is something policy and advocacy types need to take much more seriously – the ground has been surrendered too easily to old school liberalizers, and it’s time to take it back. What we need to do is identify successes in making sure procurement schemes avoid ending up as ‘snouts in the trough’, as has happened many times in the past (in all countries – I’ve just been watching the Sopranos box set again, plenty of local government procurement in there). And that should take us into looking at the accountability mechanisms and governance arrangements that ensure 5P stays pro-poor.

Success may be easier to achieve at city level than national. Take the work we’ve been doing on linking farmers and urban markets in Bogota for example.

So (a) what other examples of 5P can people point to and (b) assuming he has actually left the UN, has anyone got a job that keeps Olivier pumping out ideas of this quality? He has been elected to a position on the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights from January 2015 – hope that gives him the platform he deserves.

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**Table 1: Five principles for aligning public procurement modalities with the requirements of the right to food**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>The requirements of the right to food</th>
<th>Principles for public procurement schemes</th>
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<tr>
<td>Targeting vulnerable food-insecure groups, and in particular small-scale food producers</td>
<td><strong>Principle #1:</strong> Source preferentially from small-scale food producers and actively empower them to access tenders</td>
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<tr>
<td>Improving food accessibility</td>
<td><strong>Principle #2:</strong> Guarantee living wages as well as fair and remunerative prices along the food supply chain</td>
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<td>Ensuring adequacy of diets</td>
<td><strong>Principle #3:</strong> Set specific requirements for adequate food diets</td>
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<td>Ensuring environmental sustainability</td>
<td><strong>Principle #4:</strong> Source locally whenever possible and impose on suppliers that they produce food according to sustainable methods</td>
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<tr>
<td>Guarantee participation, accountability, empowerment and coherence in policy-making</td>
<td><strong>Principle #5:</strong> Increase participation and accountability in the food system</td>
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