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New production system needed to tackle global food crisis, says UN expert.

The violation on a daily basis of the right to food for hundreds of millions of people worldwide has its roots in an outdated and inadequate production system, rather than in the actual quantity of food available. The solution lies in a rights-based approach, says the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food, Olivier De Schutter.

The situation of hunger in the world is alarming. As a result of the current crisis, over 100 million more people have been driven into extreme poverty. Today, 925 million people are hungry in the world, up from 848 million in the period 2003-5. Progress towards the realization of the first Millennium Development Goal, to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger, has been reversed in all regions.

Even though prices of food commodities on international markets have been going down since their June 2008 peak, when the levels of real food prices were 64 percent above those of 2002, prices on domestic markets remain at historically high levels.

In many countries, particularly developing net-food-importing countries, the brutal increase in prices in 2007 and the first half of 2008 has left severe marks on the poorest households. These families have reduced the quantity of food they consume. They have switched to poorer diets, often lacking the necessary micronutrients children require for their development. They have cut back on schooling and on health care, leading to irreparable damage to the health and education of millions of children. They may have sold productive assets – land or tools – which will take time to restore.

But there is hope in this crisis. Indeed, if the right choices are made now, this shock may even prove salutary, for it provides governments and international agencies with an opportunity to learn from what happened.

What this crisis has demonstrated is that the fight against hunger in the world should not be confused with a fight to boost volumes of production, nor even with attempts to lower global prices by any means. Of course, demand for agricultural commodities is increasing, and climate change threatens the ability of entire regions to feed themselves. This is a challenge we must meet. And high prices have impacted severely on the poorest, for whom they constitute a regressive tax – since it is they who spend the largest proportion of their family budgets on food.

Yet, the real challenge lies elsewhere: not just in increasing volumes produced, but in ensuring that this increased production will raise the incomes of those who need it most – smallholders hardly capable of living from their crops, landless labourers, and fisherfolk. This means not just maintaining prices at affordable prices, but reducing the gap between farm-gate prices and prices paid by the consumer, so that relieving the poor from the impact of high prices does not occur to the detriment of smallhold producers, who constitute the majority of those whose food supply is insecure in the world today.

Grounding the search for solutions to the global food crisis in the right to food, means first of all that the governments will have to take into account the needs of those who are most vulnerable: public initiatives should ensure that such solutions will benefit them, rather than simply increase the quantity of agricultural commodities available for those who can pay.

Solutions can be found that answer the needs of small farmers and of the urban poor alike: these two groups of victims should not be seen as having opposing interests, but as needing to be helped by twin-tracked strategies.

Smallholders should be helped by reinforcing their ability to produce while at the same time protecting them from the consequences of volatile international prices and the risk of unfair competition from agricultural producers in industrialized countries who benefit from massive government subsidies. Other means include strengthening their ability to negotiate prices with the large agri-business firms which impose their prices on producers; and facilitating more environmentally friendly forms of agricultural production, by the use of inputs less dependent on the price of oil or on the expectations of companies holding patents on plant varieties.

The urban poor should be helped by social safety nets, and cash-for-work or food-for-work programmes, which increase their purchasing power and help them to cope with periods of higher prices.

Both these groups are entitled to be protected from the volatility of international prices: public interventions through storage of food reserves, public procurement and distribution, on the one hand, and protection of local producers from dumped agricultural products from abroad on the other hand, should better insulate the evolutions on the domestic markets from the unpredictability and frequent irrationality of the global markets.

The daily and massive violation of the right to food has its source, not in the production of insufficient quantities of food, but in a system of production whose limits have now become clear. A new system should be put in place, building on the ruins of the old one.

We should take the human right to adequate food as a compass, guiding us in this enterprise. This is because the right to food requires a coordination of initiatives at the international and national levels. The institutional implications of recognizing the right to food as a human right asserted in international law may offer a decisive contribution to combating hunger, by favoring the establishment of recourse mechanisms against governments that violate their obligations towards the right to food; by strengthening the rights of land users or the rights of women to have equal access to productive resources; and by affirming the responsibilities of companies towards the right to food.

We should uphold the right to food now. This is the first step towards making it real.