

## 2011 Lecture Series: 'Agriculture, Rural Employment, and Inclusive Growth'

Lecture Report:

Olivier de Schutter – *A Tale of Four Hungers?*

With comments by Frances Moore Lappé

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On Monday December 12, 2011, **Olivier de Schutter**, UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, delivered the fourth and final lecture in the 2011 Lecture Series 'Agriculture, Rural Employment, and Inclusive Growth'. After outlining the alternatives to the dominant food systems of today, **Frances Moore Lappé** (Small Planet Institute) offered an additional response. This was followed by discussion with the audience, chaired by **Max Spoor** (ISS).

### A Tale of Four Hungers

The current food crisis is not about one, but about three crises at the same time, De Schutter argues. A *poverty crisis*, a result of small scale farmers receiving too little support, and rural-to-urban migration that cities cannot cope with; An *ecological crisis*, a result of producing food that depends on external inputs which exerts pressure on ecosystems; And a *nutrition crisis*, in which undernutrition coexists with ever greater waste of micronutrient deficiency.

De Schutter offers an alternative proposal to the food crisis, summarised under four pillars:

*1) We need to rebuild local food systems in order to link urban populations to local food producers.*

A number of problems are associated with the current system. First, the dependency of poor developing countries on food imports is a major source of vulnerability and risk, because of the volatility of international food prices. Second, the increased importance of long, globalized food chains creates a challenge regarding nutrition. Usually, developing countries export high quality food to rich countries while importing grains. Poor families in developing countries have had to shift to monotonous, micronutrient poor diets as more diverse diets became unaffordable for them, while disease patterns in countries like China, India and South-Africa are shifting from nutrition deficiency diseases to higher rates of hot diseases like diabetes and cancer, because of a higher proportion of fat and sugars in their diets. Third, the promotion of export led agriculture and the increased weight of imports in local diets, have made small scale farmers victims of pressure on land, water and natural resources.

Accessing global value chains is hard for small farmers, and improving access to local markets could result in the development of local food processing industries, which creates employment in sectors outside agriculture and benefits the poor by improving access to fresh food. Local food systems are required to overcome the separation between local food producers and urban consumers. As a result of increased urbanization, competition for land increases between industrial and urban users and agricultural users. For poor families, the often great distance between food production and food consumption can present the problem of increased transportation costs and dietary shifts. In order to build local food systems the infrastructure needs to be improved to connect local farmers to urban markets and we need land planning to allow the emergence of urban and pre-urban agriculture. Local governments are key in moving towards this solution. The government needs to take a number of initiatives like establishing mobile food distribution services and supporting family agriculture. Such initiatives will encourage the use of organic production methods, improve the links to urban markets, generate jobs and reduce the speed of migration to cities.

*2) Power relations in the food chains need to be rebalanced to make food systems more hospitable to small scale farmers.*

The sourcing and pricing policy of large agro-food corporations explain why small holders in developing countries are suffering from hunger. Again states have a number of tools to strengthen the position of small holders. They can support farmers cooperatives with appropriate legal frameworks and capacity building programs. These cooperatives allow farmers to obtain higher prices, achieve certain economic scale, encourage dialogue with public authorities and give them a voice. States can also act against the unfair practices of buyers by extending the reach of competition law. These tools to rebalance power relationships however, have a limited impact unless they are part of a much more fundamental change in the food system; farmers need more channels to have access to markets and they need to improve their capacity to negotiate better deals.

*3) Agro-ecological processes that make efficient use of natural resources en reduce the dependency of the food production on fossil energies need to be supported.*

By applying ecological science, we can make farming less vulnerable to price variations of fossil energies and more affordable to small holders. Agro-ecology is knowledge intensive and it cannot be separated from the social dimension; The farmers voice needs to be heard, in order for him to shape research and identify solutions that suit best.

*4) Citizens must regain control over food systems and food chains that have been increasingly corporate driven and shaped under the pressure of international markets.*

Current reclaiming of the food system takes a number of forms. First, at the local level citizens are increasingly united, because they are aware of the dependencies of the system and the risks involved. Second, at the national level participatory forums are being established, allowing permanent dialogue between governments and civil society and farmers organizations. Third, the monopoly of the governmental delegates is coming to an end. The demands for participation and inclusiveness in the shaping of food policies are being heard, best presented in the creation of the Committee on World Food Security in 2008. This is an inclusive forum in which governments and international organization work together with civil society organizations, farmers organizations and the private sector in order to identify ways to combat hunger and malnutrition. It is highly legitimate because of the collective will it expresses. What we see in fact is the democratization of decision making at the global level.

Yet these advances remain largely rhetorical; First there is a considerable gap between facts on the ground and the new consensus that is emerging from international conferences. While the potential of small scale agriculture is widely recognized, it is the small farmers who are facing the threat of being priced out by land markets. Second, there is a gap between governments' food security policies and the direction of agricultural development which is shaped largely by private investments and policies of agro-food companies. Buyers in the global food chains are focusing on large or midsize farmers because of the transaction cost involved and the difficulty of small farmers to meet the set compliance requirements. As a result, small scale farmers are left to depend on public programs or local markets which are underfinanced and underdeveloped. Third, within each level of governance a segmented approach dominates, while the reform of food systems requires more coordination across different policy areas. Fourth, commitments and recommendations made at high level meetings are too often forgotten as immediately as the delegates leave the scene.



In order to overcome these obstacles to the transformation of food systems we need to adopt multiyear strategies that identify the range of measures that must be adopted in various policy areas with a clear timeline for action and an allocation of responsibilities across different levels of

governments. Such multi-year national strategies should be participatory and co-designed between governments, unions, civil society organizations and farmers organizations. By linking these strategies to appropriate indicators and benchmarks based on the components of the right to food, we can improve the monitoring of the choices made by policymakers. Such monitoring could be further strengthened by tasking independent bodies with this role.

### **Hunger and democracy**

Frances Moore Lappé emphasized that hunger is not caused by scarcity of food, but by scarcity of democracy. Democracy means the dispersion of power, transparency in human relations and mutual



accountability. But what we have created is exactly the opposite of that, while we still use the word democracy to describe it. We all support the value of social justice. Justice however can never be fully realized, without a truly accountable, living democracy that permeates economic, cultural and political life. Lappé furthermore argued that the right to food is also about the human need for dignity, which can be achieved by democracy. Dignity is to Lappé the most democratic value, because it requires that we are respected, included and heard.

### **Discussion with the Audience**

One of the participants asked De Schutter how the World Bank, the IMF and the WTO reacted to the report, especially to the advice on the ways forward. He answered that it is quite encouraging to see that organizations which initially seemed hostile, end up being allies. There are not many choices left when looking at the current climate change, and the ability of large regions to do without climate resilient agriculture. De Schutter thinks that there is hope in the absence of alternatives within dominant systems. His dialogue with governments and organizations would be useless if he was not considered to be a representative of many constituencies across the world. De Schutter believes in his position to make a change, because worldwide social movements demand answers to the questions that he raises.

Another question from the audience related to the value chain approach which means trying to strengthen the ability for small holders to have access to larger food chains. Should development cooperation agencies stop supporting the value chain approach? De Schutter replied to be still searching for a clear understanding of this issue: there are different views on these questions. One is that local systems are much better suited to the needs of small farmers. We can only encourage them to access long value chains. Another view is to say that the two systems are at war with one and another. Export-led agriculture is robbing land and water resources from local food systems. The question is whether it is manageable to protect small farmers from unfair competition by large producers, and to build a sustainable local system.



*This Lecture Series is part of 'Food First', a program supported by NCDO aiming to put the food and agriculture-issue at the heart of the political debate. For more information and other activities, visit: <http://www.foodfirst.eu>*