



FOOD

is a universal right

Olivier De Schutter is the United Nations special rapporteur on the right to food. He aims to inform people at the highest political levels about the role that smallholders play in the world's food production systems. He hopes that this will make decision-makers more sensitive to their needs and rights.

Interview Mireille Vermeulen. Photo Folkert Rinkema



Olivier De Schutter's efforts to promote the full realisation of the right to food and the implementation of national food security measures, may have contributed to the fact that agriculture is back on the political agenda after some 30 years of neglect.

Politicians and policy-makers now frequently discuss the crucial role of agriculture in development. What will be the future of agriculture? There are contrasting views about precisely what needs to be done, and the question is complex because many policy-makers seem to think that today, there is a trade-off between the various objectives that any agricultural policy must combine: improving levels of production and raising the revenues of small producers, while respecting the environment. There is also a clear schizophrenia within governments: while more market liberalisation is sometimes seen as a solution to encourage production, many realize on the other hand that this squeezes out the smallest and least competitive production units, which is exactly not what we want to achieve, as this increases inequality and poverty, and therefore hunger. In this context, a serious ideological battle is being fought. The problem, as I see it, is that large agribusiness corporations exercise a disproportionate influence on governments, while small farmers are not involved in most processes.

Then what is the relevance of all your high-level meetings for the lives of small farmers in Africa and Asia? There is often a serious disconnection between the high-level officials I meet and the poor farmers, living in the most marginal areas. I see my role as trying to understand the needs of the most vulnerable, and ensuring that policy-makers are made sensitive to those needs and are more accountable. The right to food is about raising accountability. It's based on the idea that you cannot work for the poor without the poor.

But what is the impact of high-level declarations to global developments in agriculture? Will they really convince governments to implement better policies? There are important vested interests in the existing system, despite its failures: it has succeeded relatively well in raising production, but failed in addressing the root causes of hunger. Things can change, however. Two levers are important. First, through international meetings and the preparation of declarations, we can change the perception of

governments about what needs to be done, and gradually arrive at a common diagnosis. Second, through improving accountability at the domestic level, particularly by encouraging countries to set up national strategies by participatory means and to establish consultative bodies, we can increase pressure on governments, and ensure that their efforts will be appropriately targeted to the needs of the most vulnerable. These tools should not be underestimated. Together, they can lead to real change.

During the last world summit on food security in November 2009 in Rome, the UN have called for a reform of the Committee on Food Security (CFS). What real impact can this reformed committee have for small farmers in the world? It will be important to see how the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) will function, under its new composition and with its new role. During a second phase of its work, the CFS should adopt a global strategic framework – a plan of action at global level, identifying measures that governments and international agencies should take. It should set priorities and guide the work of development co-operation and investment in agriculture. This has the potential to improve the understanding of governments about what needs to be done to eradicate hunger and malnutrition, and of raising the accountability of all actors – donor governments, their partners in developing countries, and international agencies. It also has the potential to improve co-ordination across different international agencies. For it is bizarre, to say the least, that within the World Trade Organisation,



Olivier De Schutter. Photo: UN

countries are pressured to relax the measures that protect their agricultural sector in the face of foreign competition, while at the same time they are told to support smallholders and to diminish their dependency on international markets to feed their populations. The CFS should ensure that these inconsistencies do not persist. All governments and international agencies (both from within the UN system as well as outside it, such as the World Bank, IMF and WTO) and also civil society and the private sector will have to justify their choices in the face of a shared diagnosis of the priorities. This can be significant. But whether or not real change will result, will depend on whether they in fact agree to subject themselves to this collective evaluation. Will they act co-operatively? Or will they continue to prioritise their national interests and ideological agendas? This is the real test for the future.

What should small farmers do to get their voices heard? They must organise themselves! I am encouraged to see, for instance, how fast co-operatives of small farmers are developing. This means that small farmers improve their bargaining position and can improve their access to infrastructure or to public goods such as storage facilities, information about prices, or transport. It also means that they will find it easier to be heard at all levels, from the domestic to the international level. I am convinced that we would not have seen the mistakes of the past if small farmers' organisations had been better involved in decision-making. I refer for instance to marketing boards that bought crops from farmers at very low prices either for export or to ensure low-priced food for the urban populations. But also the insistence on export-led agriculture in general, which has increased inequalities between larger, better-off producers and small farmers living on the most marginal lands. Farmers' voices need to counterbalance the corporate sector in setting the agenda for agricultural and rural development.

Agriculture is affected by climate change, but also contributes to it. Livestock production has a big influence on the emission of greenhouse gases. Is this not a

dilemma in promoting farming? The increase in livestock production, in response to a growing demand for meat, tightens the competition for land between its various uses. Together, grazing land and cropland dedicated to the production of feed-crops and fodder already account for 70 percent of all agricultural land, or about 30 percent of the land surface of the planet. And in certain regions it is a major cause of deforestation or soil degradation, as a result of overgrazing. In a 2006 study called *Livestock's long shadow*, the FAO noted that if we take into account deforestation as a result of the creation of pastures and production of crops for feed, livestock is responsible for 18 percent of the total greenhouse gas emissions, almost double the share of transport.

Yet, at the same time, we must recognise that no two kilogrammes of meat are the same. Farm animals raised in industrialised countries consume more than five calories in feedstock for each calorie of meat or dairy food produced, and some estimates put that figure much higher, establishing a relationship of up to 17 units to one. But these figures represent the production of meat in rich countries, which is heavily industrialised, and it relates to animals fed on grains. In India, the ratio is a less than 1.5 to one. In Kenya, where animals are not fed grain but live off grass or agricultural by-products which humans cannot eat, livestock actually yield more calories than they consume. And it is equally important to acknowledge that livestock rearing represents a source of income for perhaps up to one billion people, representing one third of the poor in the rural areas.

In 2008, the IAASTD report on the world's agriculture was published. You often urge governments to take this report more seriously, but even the extensive summary is difficult to read. Can we expect governments to use this report as an input in their agricultural policies? The IAASTD is the result of a considerable amount of work, by some of the most renowned experts in the world. The obstacle its reception faces is that it calls for a paradigm shift in the way we conceive agricultural development and innovation, with a focus on the needs of the most vulnerable and on

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sustainable agriculture, away from the technological approaches of the past. We may need to break down the conclusions of IAASTD into parts, and treat separately those that relate to trade, those that relate to seeds and genetic resources, and those that relate to rural development, for example. Of course, all these issues are linked. But the task seems insuperable unless we cut it down in separate chunks.

China as a growing economy is becoming a more and more important player in the global political and economic system. China supports Africa with money and advisors. Their relationship with developing countries is very different from that of the EU or the UN. What does this mean for small farmers in Africa? China has to feed approximately 20 percent of the world's population with about seven percent of the world's arable land. Its population is still increasing, and its capacity to

employment. These risks cannot be underestimated, and it is therefore vital that investment in agriculture be carefully guided, and that local communities be involved in negotiations that are conducted with such investors.

Some people plead for a clearer dichotomy between big and small farmers in the West: on the one hand, industrialised farms competing on international markets and on the other hand, more ecological farmers, near to markets and consumers. Would that be a strategy for the whole world or should all efforts go to small farmers on a global level? This is still an open question, in my view. The coexistence of very large, agro-industrial farms, and small-scale, sustainable farming, is something a country such as Brazil is trying to achieve. At a minimum, it requires strong support of family farming by the state. Smaller farms, while very productive



If governments do not protect small farms, they won't be able to survive in increasingly competitive markets.

Photos: Folkert Rinkema, Willem van Weperen

expand agricultural acreage is limited. They are in fact facing a rapid loss of arable land and a large amount of soil erosion, and their access to water is precarious. The melting of the great glaciers of the Himalayas will make their position less and less tenable in the future. It should therefore come as no surprise if they seek to invest in agriculture abroad, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa where land is available and where labour is relatively inexpensive. For the local communities, the arrival of investors often means that their access to land, and therefore their livelihoods, will be affected. Some small farmers will be moved to more marginal, less fertile land. Others may be offered waged employment on the large-scale plantations that investors will develop. Others still will have no alternative but to migrate to the cities, with little prospect of decent

per hectare, are more labour intensive and thus produce at higher costs. Therefore they must be supported, or they will be wiped out in increasingly competitive markets. Governments can support family farms by providing loans at lower-than-market rates, by adequate public procurement policies, by supporting farmers' organisations, by providing access to credit and insurance against weather-related events or crop losses, and by supply management policies or buying policies to establish public stocks that can ensure stable revenues. I don't think we should place too many hopes on the attitudes of individual consumers. Although these attitudes are changing (consumers pay greater attention to where food comes from and how it was produced), price remains a determining factor for them. ■