



Interview with Olivier De Schutter
United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food

Afronline (Italy), Sud Quotidien (Senegal), Les Echos (Mali),
Addis Fortune (Ethiopia) and L'Express de Madagascar (Madagascar)

In 2007 and 2008 Africa was subject to growing riots, due to the booming food prices. In the second semester of 2008, prices registered a 40% decrease, but in the last few months they have started going up once more. Is Africa protected from another food crisis?

We cannot understand the tragedy of hunger based only on the evolution of food prices on international markets. By focusing on these aspects alone, we ignore all the problems related to the production chain and to the distribution of food. Poor people in African countries do not buy rice or manioc on the Chicago Stock Exchange, but in local markets or village shops; producers sell the goods to intermediates, and not to the international market.

Therefore, even when prices do go up, few producers may in fact enjoy an increase in revenues. Similarly, the decrease of prices on the global markets does not automatically lead to lower prices for consumers: in April 2009 FAO published a report made in 58 developing countries showing that in 80% of the countries being looked at, foodstuffs were being sold at higher prices compared to April 2008, and 40% of those surveyed had seen prices increases from January 2009.

In January 2008, hunger affected 923 million people, but today the hungry amount to 1.02 billion people worldwide. The crisis has never been this strong.

That being said, the increase of prices does weigh a lot on the balance of payments and on the trade balances of poor countries, among which are many African net-food-importing countries.

Due to this dependence – resulting where for the past 30 years, investment has been in crops for the export market to raise foreign currency rather than growing food – countries remain extremely vulnerable.

Finally, it is obvious to all that the link between agricultural production and oil is an intolerable situation.

To date we have not acted on the root causes of price volatility and other jolts are inevitable.

The United Nations has several agencies to alleviate the problems of global food shortages, in particular among poor countries; the FAO and WFP. What more can an UN Special Rapporteur on Right to Food do to help world's poor access food?

Hunger is usually seen by the international agencies either as a production problem or one of availability – the FAO seeks to encourage more production, and the WFP to deliver food where it is needed, for instance following bad harvests or resulting from conflict situations... The root causes of hunger are discrimination and marginalisation, lack of accountability of governments to the needs of their population, or in adopting of policies that aggravate hunger instead of alleviating it.

A framework based on the right to adequate food obliges us to include these questions – questions of governance if you like, or of accountability – into our answers to the hunger issue. Without this – without accountability mechanisms and a protection of the entitlements of the poorest – our solutions will remain short-term, insufficiently targeted, and ultimately ineffectual. It may result in increased production but completely fails to reduce the scourge of hunger. The right to food is therefore a vital part of the panoply of answers we have to develop against hunger.

In a recent article, *The Economist* claims that until agricultural productivity in poor countries increases, the balance between supply and demand will remain precarious. Do you agree?

Although not false, this assertion is over-simplified.

Firstly, it focuses on supply side without taking demand into account. For instance, the desire of Northern countries for animal protein, and more recently our thirst of agro-fuels, have a responsibility in the reduction of stocks and mounting tensions between supply and demand in the International marketplace.

It is dangerous, however, to diminish the issue of hunger to an issue of just supply and demand.

In 2008 harvests were excellent, but the number of hungry people increased. Why? Of course, the answer does not lie in a lack of production. The problem is that 80% of families do not have access to social protection, the purchasing power of poor countries did not increase sufficiently and smallholders are not being helped out.

And we cannot consider production without also considering distribution: it is a very important sector. Many production systems now do not minimise the problem but, by accelerating the duplication of the sector, the system is creating rural exodus and poverty as towns grow.

About one billion people are facing hunger, according to research, or a population of the United States, Canada, and the European Union combined. It is a population that is often described as 'bottom-billion'. A challenging

phenomenon to governments in ‘bottom-billion’ societies is the additional need to import food. This has brought about a serious imbalance in the balance of payments, leading to yet another cycle of foreign debt. Ironically, the world has not moved fast enough to disperse the US 50 billion dollars promised in 2005 at the G20 Summit, in Gleneagles (United Kingdom). What is your office doing to speed things up?

We have to stop mystifying numbers. The last G8 summit in L’Aquila pledged 20 billion US dollars in three years to boost agriculture in developing countries. But what does it mean exactly? This is not sufficient compared to the 25-30 billion US dollars per year for a period of five years which the UN agencies, and firstly FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization), have said is needed for African agriculture alone.

All too often pledges are not respected: last year both the G8 summit in Hokkaido and the food summit in Rome promised more funds, but they have so far only given half of the sum pledged.

However, we also care about the way in which these funds are going to be invested, the kind of projects they will support and whether policies are planned at a national level.

As far as I am concerned, I recommend two things: firstly, governments need to be made more accountable and a more severe control on pledges must be put into place, but this can be made through a reform from the FAO Committee on World Food Security, (CFS). Additionally, more should be invested in families and sustainable agriculture through providing such as storage tools, communications and stronger investment in agro ecological practices’, rather than in simply supplying farm inputs. My mandate does not require that I work as policeman or that I personally manage allocation of funds.

Why have poor and rich governments as well as international institutions abandoned agriculture over the last decade?

Since the 80s, agriculture has increasingly been ignored in many developing countries. This has happened both in development cooperation policies – where the share for agriculture dropped from 18% in 1980 to 4% in 2007 – and in national budgets. There are three main reasons.

Firstly, looking at the huge supports – such as export subsidies – to agricultural producers in the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) area – 258 billion US dollars in 2007 – and the high competitiveness of agriculture in nations such as Argentina, Thailand or Uruguay the agricultural sector came to be seen as unprofitable in the majority of developing countries, particularly the least developed countries (LDCs).

It seemed easier to export raw materials such as minerals, oil, diamonds or crop cultivations such as cotton, coffee, tea and tobacco; and to import foodstuffs which were often already transformed, rather than strengthen family and subsistence agriculture.

Then structural adjustment plans of the 80s stimulated a production fall-off, for instance through either the organization of production processes or of mechanisms that would allow to maintain price levels, with the aim of favouring the emergence of «the truth of prices» – but the private sector has not taken up the relay and agriculture has been deserted, sometimes in a literal sense. Finally, - and this third reason explains, at least partially, the two preceding ones, small farmers displaced in the countries are relatively marginalised on a political level. Their demands do not have clout compared to inhabitants of cities, for whom it was decided that less expensive imported foodstuffs bought on international markets should be encouraged with the use of food aid, at the expense local production, which accelerated the rural exodus. All the ingredients of the disaster we are now paying for were in the making.

On a political level, *good governance* has become a fashionable word, but it has been discredited by African leaders who rarely practise political transparency. Do you think that the current generation of African leaders is up to the challenge of dealing with the current food insecurity?

From what I have seen during my meetings with African leaders, a definite change is one course. A new consensus is forming around the need to sustain agriculture and additional, new re-investments in the public rural sectors. There is often a lack of discussion on the ways to promote a green revolution which means failing to take up all the opportunities of agro-ecology and participative production, and this happens despite their potential, which has been widely proved.

However, there is a real consciousness of the danger linked to a strong dependence on imports to guarantee food security: crops cultivation is coming back into fashion.

At long last, the threat of climate change is being taken seriously: Agriculture has to transform radically and ready itself for an up-coming revolution, breaking its bonds with fossil energies and increasing its resilience.

The current generation of planners is conscious of the challenges ahead and Northern countries have to help them. I have made concrete proposals in this respect on development aid, food aid and International trade reform, but the considerable efforts that have been deployed on the national level will only be reaped if the international atmosphere is favourable. The contrary is also true: without positive policies at a national level, international aid – useful in the short term - will be inadequate to improve the situation in the long run. We have to cease with palliative measures.

In Sahel (Senegal, Chad, Mali, Burkina Faso etc.), millions of US dollars have been used to fight desertification and drought. Access to water had a part to play in this process. In your view, were funds wasted?

It is true that what is at stake is really important. While 85% of fresh water resources on the continent are used for agriculture, 95% of agriculture in Sub Saharan Africa does not benefit from irrigation.

Now, this agriculture, strictly tied to rainfall levels, is particularly vulnerable to climate change, which is characterized by a higher level of unpredictability of

meteorological phenomena. The report published in 2007 by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) claims that due to weather conditions, harvests will have decreased 50% by 2020.

We have two possibilities, which are not mutually exclusive, except in the definition of budgetary choices. Firstly, we could enlarge the extent of irrigated agricultural, for example, from 5% to 10% of irrigated land in Africa. The second option is to prioritise the 95% of the area which is still not irrigated.

We should promote new techniques that will not accelerate exhaustion of the water table: new agricultural systems are being developed to better retain rainwater and so that water stays in the ground waters for longer periods.

These models have already proved to be effective even if they are still only at the pilot stage. However, success is not only about finding good ideas or the right models, but also about developing them on provincial, national or regional levels.

Investments in these kinds of models could be doubled thanks to farmers' and donors' help and financial support.

Large investments need to be made in human resources too, for example in encouraging interaction between farmers bringing about good practices.

Because of this concern, I started writing to African governments about the 'green revolution' which the African continent is in the process of launching and inviting these governments to show that change is possible and that Africa can be a pioneer in the field of sustainable agriculture.

Genetically modified (GM) products have been introduced, mainly in the cotton sector. Are you worried?

The GM debate is currently not on the right track. Around the world, scientific and social debate on the impact of GM foodstuffs are spreading, notably the risks for health and the environment, as well as the uncertainties that surround their development.

We know that in Mexico new hybrids have been developed, mixing local and hybrid species. This is quite worrying and could generate rampant genetic pollution.

Another example is that new forms of herbs are becoming resistant to weed killers such as Roundup, and this is causing a greater use of pesticides.

In Africa, Benin – a country that I visited in March 2009 and that I know quite well since I have been teaching there for the last eight years – decided to extend a moratorium on GM production, but researchers at the same time are authorised to go about their work in specific environments. I think this is a good way of promoting both safety principles and scientific progress at the same time.

But there's more. The GM debate must be framed in the context of improving agriculture and food. It is not about deciding whether we are for or against GM but about what kind of agriculture we want to promote and which kind of possibilities we have to improve and renew our systems. 'Agro-ecological' methods, which intensify production on a sound ecological basis, have strong potential.

In Tanzania, for example, agro-forestry has made the provinces of Shinyanga and Talora green again after being subject to desertification in the 1980s.

The application of agro-forestry principles on 350,000 hectares has significantly changed things and made families' earnings grow by more than 500 US dollars a year, according to the Agro-forestry Research Centre in Nairobi.

In Western Africa, anti-erosion tools such as zaï or stone retaining walls that used to keep water in the ground worked well.

In Mali, cotton production projects with the use of bio-pesticides instead of chemical pesticides were sometimes more productive for farmers than conventional ones. These kinds of projects were carried out in partnership with local communities and in areas where vulnerable groups live: this is contributing to increasing food rights.

Naturally, science will bring more progress in many areas of our concern, but we should not expect any miracles from GM. We should rather try to multiply and promote, immediately and with urgency, those pilot projects that have proved successful, and which are more in tune with the challenge of climate modifications that we are facing.

On the seeds issue, we have to strengthen and improve systems of exchange of local seeds based on traditional varieties. There are encouraging models, whereby farmers set up self-organized groups to exchange, preserve and stock their seeds and plan their needs.

Seeds banks and seeds' fairs are being developed all over the world, but too slowly. I think that these kinds of systems are compatible and complementary with science, but only if the farmer is able to take part.

At the end of October, I will present a report to the General Assembly of the United Nations, which will focus on the seeds' issue, even the main focus will be on intellectual property.

In Berlin you took part in a consultation with many representatives of food companies. The finger is often pointed at these groups for being responsible for an increase in food prices. What was the outcome of the meeting?

Many NGOs, companies and experts took part in this multi-stakeholder consultation to reflect on the private sector's role to attain the right to food. Today, there is a form of consensus which allows to state that companies have to respect human rights, and that means food rights too. Nations have to do more to protect these rights against possible harm provoked by companies. We also reflected on the role of food

companies: on what basis should they draw up their relationships with suppliers? How could we manage to link up little farmers with supplying chains? How can we promote a responsible way of consuming?

I am working on a dossier which will become a report that will be delivered to the Human Rights Council in March 2010. It will include concrete proposals to improve the respect for food rights in the agro-food system.

A growing number of foreign investors are planning to use land for cultivation in Mali, Madagascar and other African countries. Do you foresee any problems arising from this? (Les Echos) On the other hand, considering that governments have neglected such land, could this be rather an opportunity for poor nations like Madagascar? A lot of land cultivated during colonialism has since been neglected, depriving the country of a valuable source of income.

Many of us have regretted the disinvestments in agriculture since the early 1980s. Public and private investors have once more started to take an interest in agriculture, which should be good news.

However, the pace at which cultivable lands are currently sold to public investors or, more frequently, to private ones, the size of the arable lands that are involved in this process and land speculation which started during the food crisis in 2008, leave many questions unanswered.

Farmers and nomadic breeders' rights of access to the land are at risk of not being taken into account: frequently they do not have property titles to the land upon which they depend for their survival and well-being and they do not have possibilities of legal recourse in the event of expropriation.

It is necessary to be cautious about talks concerning land that is « available » or « not used » or « not exploited », which, even though not used intensively, is very often useful to semi-nomadic agriculture or to livestock breeding, which can insure support and help maintain local populations.

Furthermore, investors are not forced to generate local employment, the transfer of new technologies or the respect of the environment: negotiations are often unbalanced, because they are made without transparency and without the local population on board.

Thirdly, this approach could very well increase the dependence of these countries for investments on the international markets; it seems like a paradox, but as these countries are showing that they will be able to increase their production capacity, their dependency upon external forces will increase, and this could occur when they start re-exporting agricultural produce to foreign countries.

With global markets now being less reliable, prices will climb and be subject to fluctuation. That is why investors want to buy lands instead of foodstuffs on international markets; it appears to give more guarantees. However, there is fourth problem: we do not have any guarantee that the earnings made through the handover

of lands will benefit the local population, in terms of new infrastructures, schools and hospitals.

In this context, I drew up eleven principles that come from the applications of the international laws on human rights. Early reactions are very positive, and they strengthen my vision: human rights laws do not just contain obligations, but opportunities too. Land represents not only the most important means of access to food for millions of small farmers and their families; it is also part and parcel of the identity of certain people and communities, but if the agreements for investing go against these realities, it could lead to the opposite effect.

Non-food growing countries with a bounty of oil riches are currently obtaining lands in poor countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America. Obviously, where there is the supply, those with the demand are moving in. The UN is one of the multilateral organisations against this new development, which it describes as ‘land grabbing’. Why?

Various positions have been taken within the UN system on this issue. In June, I drew up eleven principles which, based on Human Rights, should ensure that these large-scale leases or acquisitions of land benefit the local population, rather than undermining their livelihoods and increasing inequalities within countries.

In my view, if those principles are complied with, ‘land deals’ can work for the benefit of both investors and local communities, and I am therefore delighted that the Mr. Taro Aso, Prime Minister of Japan, has more recently proposed that such principles form the basis of an international consensus on this issue – which he hopes to achieve at the September session of the UN General Assembly.

We must view the recent interest of investors in agriculture as an opportunity. But we must also be aware of the risks, which are considerable. It would already be an immense step forward for negotiations to be made more transparent, and involve local communities, so as to ensure that the arrival of foreign investors creates local employment, while at the same time respecting the environment and strengthening local food security.

Wouldn’t you say that banning poor countries from relinquishing land that can be farmed to Asian companies is a deft move from the West to provide Asia with cereal?

It’s vital that the North-South aspect not be used to hide the main issue: the tension between the interests of the elite countries who host investments and those of local communities which the investments will directly affect insofar as their subsistence is concerned – small farmers, indigenous populations and cattle breeders.

The North-South aspect is naturally still there; and this is why the phenomenon of acquiring land on a large scale needs to be put in a multilateral context. By this I mean the Human Rights Council, the United Nations General Assembly or the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), or even preferably at a forum like that of the G8.

But let us not forget that a lot of these investments are made in the private sector. Most notably, big investment funds, generally American, who speculate on the increase in prices on arable land. Even if media attention has focussed on the acquisition of land by governments, especially in the South, on a quantitative level, not the most significant aspect.

What kind of guarantees and what exactly can we offer poor countries in an international development framework so that they do not feel obliged to sell their land?

It is in developing countries' interest not mortgage their futures by making concessions which are too great, in a long-run or by totally giving up their land. Because of climate change and the exhaustion of our oil reserves, in future food prices will become higher and more and more volatile on international markets.

It is very dangerous to count on international markets to guarantee food security on a national scale. Countries that rely on imports too much to feed their populations saw the consequences in the food crisis in 2008.

I therefore call on these countries to negotiate with interested investors, whilst keeping a certain margin of manoeuvre, and if possible, as Senegal does, develop long-term contractual relations in preference to giving up land.

What about contracts where the investor provides the means of production, and sets up infrastructures, etc. and in exchange receives at pre-fixed prices which do not reflect the market's fluctuations, a purchase option on a part of the harvest. This is but one scenario amongst many others that are conceivable.

Africa is preparing for the Copenhagen Climate Summit in December 2009. Since 2006, some experts have been saying this is the last chance for the continent to put across a clear common position. What can the continent expect from the conference? And in what way does the climate question influence food security?

The impacts of climate change on food security are clear: it could have negative impacts, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa. The frequency and timing of rain will change for example; both crucial for agriculture.

Even if it is hard to measure with certainty the impact it will have on every region, an increase in arid and semi-arid zones by around 60 to 90 million hectares is possible. Research of the GIEC predicts a halving of agricultural productivity in rain-related agriculture in Sub-Saharan Africa.

It is more difficult to evaluate what the African continent can expect from Copenhagen. Most people know now that financing for the adaptation of the most vulnerable countries to the effects of climate change is a sensitive and unresolved question. Developed countries have a historical responsibility when it comes to

climate change, and they must take initiatives to draw up an equally historical agreement in Copenhagen.

On the other hand, the choices that African states have with regards to their own resources, or those over which they have an influence, are not neutral from a climate point of view.

By slanting the agricultural re-launch towards the use of chemical fertilisers, the risk is run of contributing to climate change and strengthening dependence on fossil fuels. The manufacture of these fertilisers is highly energy consuming. On the other hand, investing in sustainable agricultural models can not only reduce greenhouse gasses, but also bring to the fore the development of more climate change resilient systems, and even stock carbon, as seen in the case of agro-forestry systems.

This is why the crucial question today is not only the amount re-invested in African agriculture - in terms of billions of dollars or percentage of GDP – but in the direction in which it is heading and in the earmarking of funds for specific activities. This is what I developed in my “green African revolution”; a position I reiterated in my letter to African Heads of States.

There could be a serious slide back in the achievements so far towards halving poverty by 2015. Does the UN still consider that Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are feasible?

In many regions and for many of the MDGs, the targets set will not be achieved. With regards to global hunger, the outcomes will be much worse than expected. This does not mean the MDGs were misguided, or that adopting them was foolish: they are like a scoreboard, not all members of the class can achieve the highest grades, yet, having a scoreboard and measuring progress remains useful. It is fair to say, in fact, that the MDGs have been tremendously useful in mobilising forces behind a short-list of well-defined development objectives, which correspond to certain areas of human rights.

At the same time, the MDGs also have clear limits as a means to channelling development efforts. First, they leave out the questions of accountability and empowerment, which are central in a human rights approach to development objectives.

No sanctions are attached to governments, whether donors or their partners, whose efforts have been insufficient, whose pledges have not been fulfilled, or whose priorities have not been appropriately set. I think this is a problem. We must put an end to this sort of impunity, because in the long-term, it will create a problem of credibility, and it can have deeply demobilising effects.

To improve accountability, I hence advocate reform of the Committee of World Food Security of the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) in order to improve accountability. I also fear that the MDGs are typical of a ‘top-down’ mentality in which technocrats – experts – set priorities and policies, with little or no involvement of those from ‘the bottom’, who often are the real experts about what they need most urgently.

Generally, too little has been done to take into account the human rights principles of accountability and participation in the MDG process.

Secondly, the MDGs belong to what the Norwegian economist Erik Reinert refers to as “palliative economics”. They seek to help. But they leave untouched, for the most part, the structural causes of hunger and malnutrition, or more broadly, underdevelopment: an inequitable multilateral trading system, an international division of labour that locks countries into the production of raw commodities and does not allow them to climb the development ladder. These are deep imbalances between North and South that money alone cannot solve.

Sharing money is important, but it is not enough; it's sharing production and technology that counts.