



Mandate of the Special Rapporteur on the right to food



Report of the Special Rapporteur on the right to food, Mr. Olivier De Schutter

Crisis into opportunity: reinforcing multilateralism¹

When the global food crisis put hunger at the top of the political agenda in 2008, important efforts were made, at both international and national levels, to increase the supply of food. The report reiterates that producing more food will not reduce hunger and malnutrition if we do not reflect on the political economy of the food system and do not produce and consume in ways which are both more equitable and more sustainable. Nor will increased production suffice if we do not ground our policies on the right to food – as a means to ensure adequate targeting, monitoring and accountability, and participation, all of which can improve the effectiveness of the strategies put in place. The report, the second one on the global food crisis submitted to the UN Human Rights Council, seeks to explain why, and what responses the right to food can offer, at the operational level, to address this crisis.

Even if the world's attention has shifted to the economic crisis, the food crisis is not over. It continues to have devastating consequences, and is further aggravated by the financial, economic, and ecological crises we have been witnessing lately. In the face of growing uncertainty about future prices on the markets of agricultural commodities, we should have worked to increase the resilience of food systems. Instead, it is the crisis that has proven resilient.

The crisis has shown that we have failed, until now, to tackle decisively hunger and acute malnutrition and to advance the realization of the right to food. There are five reasons for this failure, and they are not new. They are an indication of the structural character of such failure: (1) an almost exclusive focus on increasing agricultural production, instead of the adoption of a more holistic view of the causes of food insecurity; (2) a failure of global governance to overcome existing fragmentation of efforts; (3) a still incomplete understanding of how to work in certain areas which have an impact on our ability to achieve food security for all; (4) a failure to follow upon commitments, itself a result of a lack of accountability; and (5) the insufficiency of national strategies for the realization of the right to food at domestic level. The report examines, for each of these issues, what we can learn from the responses to the global food crisis, and what to do next with the understanding gained from these lessons.

In the face of a crisis of such magnitude, it is tempting to see the right to adequate food as a long-term objective, clearly beyond reach for the moment, and thus of little immediate relevance. This betrays a fundamental misunderstanding about what the right to food is about. The role of the right to food is more central, not less, in times of crisis. It is not simply an objective: it also shows the way towards fulfilling it.

An approach grounded in the right to food requires that we address the root causes of hunger and malnutrition. The right to food should also serve as a benchmark in order to achieve increased consistency across the different sectors which are relevant to the realization of the right to food, including not only food aid and agricultural and rural development, but also

¹ This note provides a brief informal summary of a report that will be part of the official documentation of the 12th session of the UN Human Rights Council (September 2009). The reference of the official report – which should be available in early August 2009 - will be A/HRC/12/31.

social protection, the protection of agricultural workers, land policies, health and education, or trade and investment.

At the national level, the right to food framework requires targeting the most vulnerable, identified through systems mapping food vulnerability and insecurity. It also demands that accountability mechanisms be put in place, ensuring that victims of violations of the right to food have access to independent bodies empowered to control choices made by decision-makers. This framework requires prioritization too, whereby trade and investment policies and choices in modes of agricultural production, for instance, are to be subordinated to the overarching objective of realizing the right to food. To this effect, States should put in place national strategies for the realization of the right to food encouraging participation, monitoring governments' commitments and ensuring that choices in a range of policy areas, such as agriculture and land, fit into a broader strategy aimed at realizing this right. For example, the right to food should guide governments' choices in choosing among different models of agricultural production. It should also guide negotiation and implementation of transnational large-scale land investments, one of new trends that emerged out of the 2008 global food crisis².

The global food crisis is primarily the result not of too little food being available, but of food prices being too high in relation to the incomes of individuals. The recent sharp increase in food prices came about without affected persons' incomes increasing commensurately. Where food can be procured provided the purchasing power is sufficient, implementing the right to social security, as required under Article 9 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights,³ may be the most effective means of ensuring food security in the presence of real income volatility. The provision of social assistance in the form of food vouchers, cash transfers, employment guarantees or other mechanisms may thus be useful.⁴

At the international level, responding to the food crisis and preventing its re-occurrence could be facilitated by creating an environment conducive to the realization of the right to food. This means strengthening multilateralism in order to effectively address the structural causes of hunger and introducing actions and initiatives on a number of fronts, including agrofuels, large-scale land acquisitions or leases, trade and financial speculation. The reform of the global governance of our food system needs, therefore, to be achieved without delay and the revitalization of the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) represents in this respect a real opportunity.

The report's message is one of hope and a call to transform this crisis into an opportunity. To do so, we must ensure that the right to food guides national and international efforts to eradicate hunger and malnutrition, including: (a) policies and programmes aimed at revitalizing agriculture and guaranteeing social protection, (b) policies to enable countries to cope with, and reduce, volatility of prices and (c) initiatives to reform the global governance of food security.

² On this issue countries and investors should consider principles and measures based on human rights in dealing with large-scale transnational land acquisitions and leases. For further information, see: "Large-scale land acquisitions and leases: A set of core principles and measures to address the human rights challenge" 11 June 2009 at <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/issues/food/docs/BriefingNotelandgrab.pdf>

³ See General Comment No. 19 of the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, E/C.12/GC/19 (4 February 2008).

⁴ High-Level Task Force on the Global Food Crisis, *Comprehensive Framework for Action*, July 2008, para. 1.1.