

Local Food Systems the Way Forward in Combating Global Hunger

By Henrietta Champion de Crespigny

Governments around the world commonly perceive a sense of responsibility to provide housing, education and public transport. Despite 16% of the global population being undernourished, the provision of adequate food is often left to the market. The role of international trade and the global market is undeniably important as it generates revenue and fills deficits in products not readily available in that country or region. However, at the Castan Centre King & Wood Mallesons Annual Lecture in June 2012, Professor Olivier De Schutter argued that nations need to change the way in which they treat food and refocus their support to their local market and primary producers to help combat the global hunger crisis.

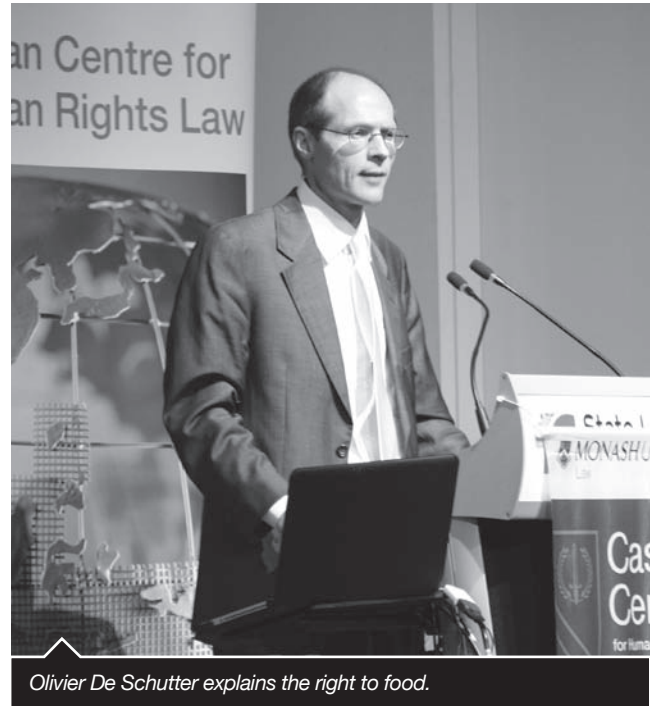
In the last 50 years, despite the percentage of global food production being higher, the percentage of hungry people has increased. With a declining number of undernourished people in the world during the 1970s and 1980s, an extrapolation might predict that today's figure would, accordingly, be less. However, from 2007-2011 the percentage of undernourished people in the world actually escalated. Professor De Schutter cautioned that as compelling as statistics are, emphasis on figures tends to be misleading. It encourages a channelled response focused on adjusting supply and demand and cost reduction, rather than effective political engagement.

Professor De Schutter anticipated that the problem is likely to increase in intensity considering global phenomena such as climate change and the burgeoning world population. As the amount of available arable land contracts, an increasing amount of pressure will mount on the already struggling small farmers in developing nations. The ascending price of fertilisers, pesticides and fossil fuels will ensure the ongoing success of large agricultural organisations to the detriment of their smaller counterparts. Due to their established trade partners, transport methods and packaging, they are better equipped to maintain their already powerful positions in the economy.

Looking back on how this agricultural dichotomy evolved helps to reveal at what level a change is needed. Norman Borlaug, "the father of the Green Revolution", precipitated an enormous boost in the production of cereal grains from the 1940s until the 1970s. One of the key developments was the development of dwarf plants that could grow faster. Credited with preventing starvation of over a billion people, the movement saw a shift for local markets to a lucrative global trading market.

A by-product of this expansion was that small farmers couldn't compete with the new global agricultural giants, as their prices were not low enough to attract buyers. In an economic climate that saw many developing countries liberalise their economies, lucrative crops in high demand such as tobacco, cacao, coffee, cotton and cashew nuts began to dominate the produce of large agricultural companies. Small farmers couldn't afford to make the change to these crops and so again, fell behind.

The result of the Green Revolution saw agriculture dependent nations in much of Africa and Southern America suffer a food price shock. As these nations had developed agriculture companies based on market export their reliance on imported foods grew. Professor De Schutter explained that the more you import food, the less you produce it yourself, which creates a vulnerability as the nation is more affected by price changes. Between 1990 and 2008 food bills of developing nations increased by 30%.



Olivier De Schutter explains the right to food.

The solution is multi-faceted, however Professor De Schutter emphasised the right to food and its capacity to accompany a socio-political response. Since the 1980s it became apparent that a new approach was needed to the problem. Fundamental to this new response was Amartya Sen's three lessons in combating global hunger: first, hunger is not a problem of availability of food but one of social justice access; second, accountability of government is essential; and third, to understand hunger you need to understand the population at a grassroots level.

In response to animated questions from the audience Professor De Schutter maintained a clear and simple approach to complex issues such as the question of what kind of government is best suited to taking action to combat this multi-national problem. He clarified that the issue is about the method and approach of governance rather than kind. A bottom-up knowledge intensive governance is vital. A government that listens to the poor will see a relevant and effective implementation of laws surrounding the right to food. Guatemala and Brazil are two nations that have implemented laws which have successfully regulated the ways in which farmers, consumers, companies and NGOs interact, to encourage a rebalancing of the support to remote rural communities.

In summary, Professor De Schutter recommended a process of reconnection of local producers with their urban populations that rely on their produce to help recreate local food systems. This can be achieved through providing tax incentives for primary producers on all levels, encouraging the setting up of farmers' markets, improving storage facilities and marketing strategies. As the audience filed out of the State Library conversation was abuzz with the complex and exciting ideas put forward by the world's leading expert on the right to food.