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Commentary on Comparing Food Security and Food Sovereignty Discourses

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Food security, food sovereignty and the Special Rapporteur: Shaping food policy discourse through realising the right to food

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In the second paragraph of her timely and methodical disentangling of food security and food sovereignty discourses, Jarosz mentions the appearance of Olivier De Schutter at the People's Food Sovereignty Forum in Rome in 2009. As the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the right to food over the past six years, De Schutter has played a vital role in helping to bring the food sovereignty discourse into the mainstream and thereby enabling it to gain political legitimacy. As we see the end of his term in this role – which, it might be noted, began during the food price peak of 2008 – it seems appropriate to review his contribution to the debate on how we should feed the world. In particular, as his remarks at the meeting in Rome indicate, De Schutter has proven an indefatigable supporter of small-scale farmers (as well as small-scale fishers) and a clear opponent of the 'business as usual' *productivism* that passes for global *de facto* agricultural policy.

The remit of the Special Rapporteur is to work on behalf of the progressive realisation of the right to food. This is not a new right, having been recognised in article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and reaffirmed in a host of global and regional instruments, including the 1996 World Food Summit. In 2009, the right to food was also placed at the heart of the reformed Committee on World Food Security, the main international and intergovernmental forum for coordinated action against food and nutrition insecurity. Through that, as well as within the United Nations High-Level Task Force on the Global Food Security Crisis, there is now, in De Schutter's view, a sense that the right to food is moving

from aspiration to implementation (2013). Clearly, the work of the Special Rapporteur is to encourage governments to put in place legislation including, as appropriate, constitutional reform as well as monitoring and enforcement, to ensure the strongest possible provision for the right to food. Yet while De Schutter during his period in office conducted thirteen country visits as well as missions to international institutions to evaluate progress in this respect, it is the breadth of his analysis which has proven so refreshing and empowering.

Drawing principally upon his final report to the UN Human Rights Council, 'The transformative potential of the right to food' (January 2014) but other writings besides, in this short commentary I wish briefly to examine two aspects of De Schutter's analysis that I believe have helped to shape discourses around food security and food sovereignty and that offer points for reflection on Jarosz' essay. I make no claim for De Schutter's theoretical or conceptual insights; on the contrary, his work draws strongly from research long underway and conducted elsewhere by others. However, where I believe De Schutter's contribution will be regarded as important is in the way he has helped to fashion a much more coherent case for an alternative paradigm to productivism and to deliver that case into some of the most important decision-making arenas in the world today.

From Food to *Nutritional* Security

It is worth reminding ourselves just how closely food security was once synonymous with the supply of high calorie staples such as cereals and tubers as the means to resolve problems of protein-energy malnutrition. Indeed, the logic of productivism, best exemplified by the Green Revolution and its development of high-yielding varieties, was to deliver increased calories above all. The unanticipated shortcomings of this model have been long recognised (Lappé and Collins 1982), however two issues can be highlighted here. First, it resulted in a small number of crop species dominating nutritional and calorific intake. It has been said that of the 10,000 plant species used for human food since the origin of agriculture, only 150-200 species have been commercially cultivated of which just four – rice, wheat, maize and potatoes – supply 50 percent of the world's energy needs, while 30 crops provide 90 percent of the world's calorie intake (Hunter and Fanzo 2013). The particular dominance of high yielding strains of wheat and rice were to have consequences

for native landraces of these – and other – species, for it is generally regarded that greater agricultural biodiversity – and the knowledge that sustains it – has been critical to food and livelihood security, as well as to human and ecosystem health. Increasing reliance on a small number of crop commodities implies a narrowing of diversity in global agricultural systems, increasing homogeneity of food supplies, heightened vulnerability to climate change and resource depletion, and greater threat to global food security (Khoury *et al*. 2014).

Yet, as De Schutter notes in his report: "Calorie intake alone says little about nutritional status" (p.4). In this respect nutritionists for over two decades have highlighted the extent of micronutrient deficiencies such as the lack of iodine, vitamin A or of iron. Globally, "over 165 million children are stunted and 2 billion people lack vitamins and minerals essential for good health" (*ibid*.) Indeed, an estimated 250 million preschool children are vitamin A deficient and between 250,000 and 500,000 of them become blind every year, half of them dying within one year of losing their sight (WHO 2014). While food security claims may therefore say little about *nutritional* security, proposed remedial courses of action can reflect deeply opposed paradigms.

For example, since around the turn of the millennium genetic engineering has given rise to a series of strains of a plant known as Golden Rice. Developed in the laboratory through the insertion of two genes into the rice genome thereby enabling it to generate β-carotene in the grains, the consumption of this rice can then be converted into vitamin A by the body. The Golden Rice project[1] consequently offers a magic bullet solution to the problem of vitamin A deficiency - providing the genetically modified seed is widely distributed and cultivated by farmers. Its associated campaign, Golden Rice Now[2] is engaged in a strident campaign against Greenpeace International[3] which is, in turn, fundamentally opposed to this genetically-engineered, technical-fix solution. Of course, the biologically, culturally and technically established alternatives to vitamin A deficiency (VAD) are well known: breast feeding is regarded as one of the most effective ways to ensure babies receive adequate vitamin A in their earliest life stage and this can be followed by supplementation capsules and food fortification measures which are uncontroversial fixes that have been successfully delivered at scale (McEwan et al 2013). But the single most effective and sustainable guarantee of the long-term supply of vitamin A into the diet is through a regular intake of

green leafy vegetables cultivated in the garden (WHO 2014). This fully reinforces Jarosz' argument that GM seeds are regarded as pivotal by those that make claims for solving the food security challenge presented by rising population and hunger, whereas for critics it has nothing to do with fulfilling a right to food.

Yet nutritional security is not only about deficiencies: reshaping food systems for the promotion of sustainable diets also requires tackling other forms of malconsumption (Sage 2013). Here, De Schutter recommends that states should adopt regulations on the "marketing of foods high in saturated fats, trans-fatty acids, sodium and sugar (HFSS foods) to children" and impose taxes on soft drinks and HFSS foods in order to subsidise access to fruit and vegetables (2014: 26). The degree to which he has taken seriously unhealthy eating practices was apparent in his end of mission report on his visit to Mexico in 2011 where he wrote of the 'state of emergency' facing the country from the numbers of people – seven out of ten adults – categorised as overweight or obese. This is set to cost the Mexican state nearly US$ 6 billion in medical care for non-communicable dietary diseases by 2017; indeed currently "15 percent of total health care expenses in Mexico are for the treatment of diabetes" (2012: 15). Mexico records the world's highest per capita consumption of carbonated beverages such that they constitute about 10 percent of Mexicans' total energy intake[4]; yet it is increasingly difficult for people to switch to healthier diets because: "The trade policies currently in place also favour greater reliance on heavily processed and refined foods with a long shelf life rather than on the consumption of fresh ... foods, particularly fruit and vegetables" (2012: 16). As Jarosz reminds us, the creation of NAFTA in 1994 which led to the dumping of cheap US corn on the Mexican market – a foretaste of the subsequent and predictable domination of its agri-food sector by US corporations – also led to the Zapatista uprising in the state of Chiapas. This movement gave real impetus to defining food sovereignty not least in illustrating the value – even necessity – of 'liberating' territory from the hands of global neo-liberalism if it is to be effectively achieved.

Agroecology

Access to and control of land and other productive resources consequently lies at the heart of food sovereignty, though is of course a highly contingent variable in relation to food

security too. Jarosz notes early in her paper how large scale land acquisitions by foreign interests are designed to enhance their own food and energy security invariably at the expense of those who had previously depended on the land and its water and ecological resources. For De Schutter "ensuring access to resources" is the first key recommendation made in his final report and this is briefly elaborated in a series of specific points that states should implement amongst which are the following: ensure security of tenure by adopting anti-eviction laws; conduct decentralised mapping of various users' land rights and strengthen customary systems of tenure; respect the rights of groups such as fisherfolk, herders and pastoralists for whom the protection of commons is vital; and implement redistributive land reform where a high degree of land concentration is combined with rural poverty attributable to landlessness (2014). This is followed by a series of recommendations regarding farmers' rights to their seed – including rights to save, exchange or sell - which is threatened by the development of the intellectual property rights regime.

The Special Rapporteur therefore signals a very clear understanding that security of tenure of land and control of other key resources is a precondition to the progressive realisation of the right to food. However, it is in the way that these resources are utilised that makes De Schutter's contribution distinctive, for in relation to agricultural production he is clear that the question "is not simply *how much*, but also *how*". In his view this will require measures "that facilitate a transition towards a low-carbon, resource-preserving type of agriculture that benefits the poorest farmers" (2011: 224). And in this regard he has been a steadfast proponent of agroecology: the application of ecological science to the study, design and management of agroecosystems.

But agroecology is also more than simply a system of farming techniques. Through integrating crops and livestock, diversifying species and utilising nutrient recycling it minimises external inputs while producing an abundant yet varied food output that improves nutrition. Because it is both knowledge and labour intensive it creates employment and provides livelihoods in rural areas. But it is also regarded by many as a powerful tool for food system change (Sage 2014). It is a "social movement with a strong ecological grounding that fosters justice, relationship, access, resilience, resistance and sustainability (Gliesman 2013: 19).

In the context of the IPCC's Fifth Assessment Report which highlights the likelihood of increased variability between regions, with some – especially in the tropics – expected to experience significantly falling yields as a consequence of climate warming and drying as well as from exposure to extreme weather events, the stability of future food supply arrangements are being questioned (IPCC AR5 WGII 2014). The need for a new paradigm that can demonstrate adaptability and resilience to changing environmental circumstances, deliver nutritional well-being, and provide the basis for a sustainable future is both necessary and urgent. This was spelt out by the IAASTD in its 2009 report, cited by Jarosz, which was so blatantly marginalised by corporate interests (IAASTD 2009, Feldman and Biggs 2012). It has also been clearly articulated by Olivier De Schutter who has stated that the world's food systems need to be radically and democratically redesigned.

In an opinion piece by Mark Bittman in the New York Times in June 2013 reflecting on the award of a 'World' Food Prize (sponsored by Monsanto) and made to three biotech engineers (one of whom is Executive VP for Monsanto), he canvassed some well-known figures from the world of food to nominate their own candidates for a sustainable and just food prize. Anna Lappé's nomination was for Olivier De Schutter for his promotion of agroecological solutions. It would seem entirely fitting that he would be awarded such a prize for his efforts to challenge the 'one-dimensional quest' of productivism and, through his remit of realising the right to food, to promote the aspiration of food sovereignty for all.

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Notes

[1] http://www.goldenrice.org

[2] http://www.allowgoldenricenow.org/

[3] http://www.greenpeace.org/international/en/ campaigns/agriculture/problem/genetic-engineering/Greenpeace-and-Golden-Rice/

[4] Mexico is the world's largest consumer of Coca Cola products consuming 728 beverages of 8 fluid ounces in 2011, compared to 403 in the USA. (www.coca-colacompany.com/annual-review/2011).