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Interview of Olivier de Schutter

Former UN special Rapporteur for the Right to Food

*Interview of **Olivier de Schutter** former UN special Rapporteur for the Right to Food, co-chairs the International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems (IPES-Food), done this summer by Marijn Bouwmeester from De Helling, the scientific bureau of the Dutch Greens, Groen Links, and also the quarterly magazine of Groen Links:* https://bureaudehelling.nl/ *A shorter version of the interview was published in Dutch in the autumn edition of the magazine:* https://bureaudehelling.nl/tijdschrift/%092016-3/voedsel

Politicians must learn from citizens' food experiences

IPES- report

In the IPES report one of the main recommendations is that we need to develop diversified agroecological systems. What do you mean by this? The big question is always whether diversified/sustainable systems will be able to provide food security (i.e “feed the world in 2050”). Why has there so far been little scientific evidence that diversified agroecological food systems are able to provide food security?

- We identify the narrative according to which we shall find it difficult to "feed a world of nine billion" as one of the key obstacles to the transition to agroecological farming systems that are more diverse and resilient. This narrative is problematic in three ways. First, it neglects to consider the huge inefficiencies and waste or losses in the food systems as they currently are organized, which should be the priority. Second, it leads to promote forms of industrial agricultural production, operating at a large scale that in fact would only increase volumes of calories available at the expense both of the viability of small farms on which many rural poor in the world depend,

and of the quality of nutrition. Third, implicit at least in this productivist message is the idea that smaller-size farms, operating diversified farming systems, are less productive. In fact however, these farms are highly productive per hectare: they are far more resource efficient (efficient in their use of land and water) than large industrial farms, although they are also more labour intensive and thus less competitive in the "low-cost" food economy that we have developed. All the studies that we have converge to demonstrate that there exists an inverse relationship between farm size and productivity per hectare: the smaller the farm, the more output per surface of land -- but the more active agricultural labourers are involved.

Quote from the IPES report (summary): “However, it should not be assumed that ‘food security’ would be jeopardized by a shift towards diversified agroecological systems. As described above, the tendency to frame food security in terms of ‘feeding the world’ (i.e. net volumes of commodities on global markets) does not reflect what really matters in terms of improving the lives of the food insecure.” So, what does matter in terms of improving the lives of the food insecure?

- Those who are hungry today are the poor, in their vast majority in the global South, whose purchasing power is insufficient to allow them to purchase food on the market and who are unable to produce food for their own consumption: these are people who have no regular employment or are paid too low wages, and have no access to social protection; or landless or land-poor farmers who struggle to live from subsistence agriculture or hire their labor, occasionally, on large farms. All these problems need to be addressed: decent employment, the extension of social protection floors, and support to small-scale, "family" agriculture, all need to be promoted. Unless we address these issues, increasing production, however much to manage to do this, will not reduce hunger.

Why is it so difficult to make the claim "that hunger is not a technical problem but a political problem" get across and more prominent in the public debate?

- Hunger results from the fact that people have too little to eat to keep them alive and healthy. It is one of the various forms of malnutrition in the world today -- the other forms are micronutrient deficiency and obesity, all three kinds of malnutrition being connected in complex ways. Because hunger is at this primary level a problem of meeting physiological needs, it is seen as a problem whose solution should be in the skies or in the soils -- a challenge for agronomists and plant breeders. But it is in fact a problem of social justice. Amartya Sen perfectly summarized the issue in his Poverty and Famines in 1981, the opening line of which is (if I recall correctly: "Lack of food availability is one cause of hunger. It is not the cause of hunger". He meant by this that lack of access, the low purchasing power of whole groups of the population, is in fact the chief cause.

What political steps ought to be taken to shift to new sustainable / diversified food systems? Also, how do European and national politics collide? What specific measures can be taken at the national levels and how should European politics be approached?

- The shift to agroecological, diversified farming systems is required in all regions, but how to achieve it will be very different from place to place because of the different pathways that agricultural production has followed. In Europe, the priority is to ensure that the considerable social, health and environmental externalities of industrial agriculture are gradually internalized (i.e., reflected in the production costs and thus in the end-prices paid by the consumer), combined with robust social policies to strengthen the purchasing power of low-income families and with much more support to agroecological farming practices, including the development of new markets to allow them to sell their produce at better conditions and to be less dependent from the demand for standardized agricultural commodities of large commodity buyers. This is a complex endeavour, because it requires the coordinated action of various policy sectors that must move together in this direction and so at an adequate speed. For instance, it would be dangerous to force

the internalization of externalities, leading to higher retail prices for basic food items, unless social policies protect low-income families from price increases. This is why, in the EU, a common food policy is required.

Alternative food networks

At the Voedsel Anders conference in Wageningen in February 2016 you spoke about creating alternative food networks and specifically about their challenges: how they cannot delegitimize but broaden politics, complementary to vote and voice. Your concern was that many of the networks do not seem to need politics and sometimes even resent politics. This may cause a gap at the risk of delegitimizing politics. What do you think both these networks and (local) politicians can and should do in order to bridge this gap?

- Representative democracy as it developed in the 20th century - in which political parties and professional politicians are the main actors and in which people are simply asked to vote every four or five years to give a mandate to their representatives to decide for them - is at the end of a cycle. The gap between populations and the class of politicians has increased, and people are better informed, and more impatient, than in the past: they want more politics, not less, and they realize that politics as usual is losing the race against time, against the depletion of resources and environmental threats. The development of alternative food networks, together with a large range of social innovations in areas such as energy production, the recycling of waste or transport, reflect this impatience: people don't want to wait for the political system to get in motion, they want to invent their own solutions. The role of politics is not less important for that matter, but is takes a different form: rather than simply adopting regulations and economic incentives to steer society, politicians should think of how to empower citizens to take such initiatives, that respond to local circumstances. Local-level politics, at the city or region levels, therefore grows in relevance.

You also addressed a question about the potential of small initiatives that often rely on few people/volunteers and whether they should scale up (become bigger) or scale out (multiply). Could you elaborate on this and also address the role of politicians?

- During the initial stage of a social innovation, innovators are rather isolated: they invent new ways of moving around, of producing or of buying food, or of producing energy, against the mainstream system. In time however, these "innovators" shape a new social norm, that others will gradually follow, and in fact not following the new norm that has been set could lead to reputational costs for those who remain behind (for instance, today, for people who do not recycle or who use their car even on short distances). So, the initially small size of social innovations, that are sometimes very local and involve very few people, does not mean that they are unimportant. Moreover, their small size may be a condition of their success, since it allows such innovations to be well suited to local resources and context and to the motivations of local actors. In fact, it may be illusory to seek to "grow" such innovations in size, and more promising to create "space" for people to invent their own solutions. Politicians can and perhaps must accompany this movement: by learning from such experiments, understanding which obstacles they face, and gradually remove such obstacles for all society, in time, to be put in motion.

Food democracy

Our food systems now mostly based on legal regulations and economic incentives, as you have mentioned more often. You often plead for food democracy. How should this be installed or created? Where would you identify the big power shifts? And which voices are now silent and need to be heard?

- Food democracy means improving transparency, participation and accountability in decision-making about farm and food policies, including by developing new participatory processes such as by the setting up of food policy councils. Food democracy is crucial because governments otherwise are mostly captured by the big players of the agrifood systems, and may lose sight of the general interest and of the long-term impacts of industrial food systems. The problem of the under-representation of large and diffused interests (including those of consumers concerned about the health impacts of processed foods, for instance) has been identified a long time, however there is something else: unless these other, currently underrepresented interests, have a greater say in how food systems are being shaped, the political imagination shall remain limited, solutions "as usual" shall prevail, and even the most progressive politicians will not be supported in their push for reform.

What are, according to you, the specific (political) challenges for The Netherlands, as we are one of the big food exporters in the world? Will (green) politicians be able to get everyone on board, from the farmers to the companies and consumers? What will be, according to you the biggest challenge?

- There are a number of challenges associated with the transition towards sustainable, diverse farming systems. They include cultural factors (the belief that only industrial, fossil energy-dependent agriculture can deliver enough volumes), economic factors (the competitiveness of such agriculture, because it is less labor-intensive, on markets as they are currently organized), and political factors (the dominance in decision-making of the interests of certain economic actors). Perhaps the biggest challenge of all is the path-dependency in which we are caught: past choices, which are reflected in sunk investment costs for large-scale infrastructure and subsidies, are very difficult to reverse. This is why it is necessary for all actors of society to mobilize, and for new alliances to be formed -- for instance, between environmental NGOs concerns about the environmental impacts of industrial agriculture and development NGOs who wish countries in the global South to be encouraged to invest in their own farming systems and to reduce their dependency on food imports, or between public health advocates concerned about the impact on health of our diets and politicians worried about the fiscal consequences of increasing health-care costs linked to overweight and obesity.

You are a big fan of urban food policies, such as in Milan and Utrecht. As an inhabitant of Utrecht I do notice some movement towards a common food strategy, but at the moment it is limited to the health department within local administration. Local/national/international governments are very departmentalized in general, whereas food policy is related to so many departments. How do you think politicians/administration can address this more holistically?

- This is precisely why we need such integrated policies, at all levels. What we see currently are two failures of governance that in combination explain the difficulties communities face, at all levels (local, national, international), to ensure well-being and health -- and to effectively transform the obesogenic environment into one that supports these objectives. The first failure is the lack of coordination and consistency between different policy areas (agriculture, education, environment, rural development, physical infrastructures particularly for transport, etc.). The second failure to the inability to address the dominance, both economic and political, of the major actors of the mainstream food system -- agrifood corporations (including commodity buyers and major food processors) and large retailers in particular.
  To address these failures, two transformative tactics are emerging. One tactic is to develop multisectoral strategies, improving consistency across policy areas by multiyear action plans allocating roles (and thus defining responsibilities and improving accountability); defining timelines; setting up indicators to assess progress; and establishing, in some case, independent monitoring mechanisms. We see this happen at the level of cities (as illustrated by the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact of 2015), at the level of national governments (various national strategies or

action plans have been adopted, under various labels, sometimes explicitly referring to the right to food, more often referring loosely to "food security and nutrition", with the fight against obesity listed among the priorities), and at the global level (with the strengthening of the mandate and influence of the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) in November 2009, and its positioning as the most important forum at global forum for coordinated action against malnutrition).
Another tactic is to build on local innovations: short food chains and direct farmer-to-consumer links, urban and peri-urban agriculture including vegetable gardens in cities, farm-to-school programs, etc. These innovations are generally developed at the initiative of communities (parents, neighbours, non-profit organisations, etc.), rather than led by public authorities, although local authorities (at municipal level) often are supportive and, in many cases, a key partner.
As I see it, the challenge today is to build on these promising developments, by highlighting best practices as well as conditions of success or potential obstacles / causes of failure, and by identifying how these two developments can converge. In other terms: how to develop a form of governance, at all levels, that both improves consistency across policy areas and moves us towards a "whole-of-government" approach to transforming the obesogenic environment, and at the same time maximizes the considerable potential of bottom-up, community-led initiatives that have the same transformative ambition?

Monsanto Tribunal

You are a member of the steering committee of the Monsanto Tribunal which will take place October in The Hague. What are the main aims of the Monsanto Tribunal?

- The International Monsanto Tribunal is staged to provide a forum for victim to voice their concerns, and to allow a legal assessment of these claims. This should encourage legal action at country level, encouraging victims to take action to seek reparation for the damage they have been inflicted. It also should encourage governments to take more seriously their duty to protect human rights threatened by the activities of Monsanto. It is, in a way, a new form of activism, that seeks to connect the legal community with social movements, in the hope that this alliance will allow to combat impunity more effectively.

The Tribunal will also assess the conduct of Monsanto as regards the crime of ecocide, but will also examine whether international criminal law should include ecocide. To what extent do you think ecocide can be considered a crime?

- For the most part, the Monsanto Tribunal will base itself on existing international human rights law. However, it will also assess the conduct of the company as an example of ecocide, in order to illustrate the need to recognize the crime of ecocide as part of international criminal law. This should fulfil a pedagogic aim.

Biotechnology/GMOs

Do you think GMOs should be abandoned altogether? Why? Is this a principal question and is it the right question to be asked?

- GMOs are a minor part of a much larger debate concerning different pathways of agricultural development, and it is strange that it has polarized so much attention. Much more important is the choice between uniformizing, industrial agriculture (a story of which biotechnology is a part) and agroecology, and this is where the debate should focus. That said, GMOs pose serious questions that relate to food safety (the long-term impacts on health of consumers of the ingestion of GM foods), to the environment (with the loss of biodiversity and the emergence of "super-weeds" following the introduction of herbicide-resistant crops), and to economic viability for farmers of a

system in which they have come to depend on such a small number of input suppliers for their seeds, pesticides and fertilizers. The real question to be asked is that of opportunity costs: Are such huge investments in research and development of new GM traits justified, once we consider these various liabilities? Is this not postponing further the transition to more resilience and sustainable forms of agriculture? Are we not selling as "solutions", in fact, short-term fixes?

What do you think about the claim by the biotech sector and many of your scientific colleagues that we need biotechnology in agriculture to feed the world in 2050? Recently 109 scientists (Nobel prize winners) equally made this claim and asked the green movement to drop their resistance to GMOs.

- Unfortunately, these Nobel laureates, very few of whom are specialists of agriculture or poverty reduction in the global South, have been misled; their letter contains a number of factual mistakes. Golden Rice has not failed because of Greenpeace, the only role of which was to expose to the public certain facts about broken promises in this line of research: Golden Rice failed because it does not perform well in the field, from the agronomic point of view. This is why it is still at trial level in the field, and whether it would be able to expand, Greenpeace or not, is very doubtful at this point. There are also serious doubts as to the ability for Golden Rice (whether in its original version, which has now been abandoned, or in its new version patented by Syngenta) to effectively combat vitamin A deficiency. It is a pity that scientists, instead of informing the public based on scientifically established facts, have been co-opted into a public relations operation that is based on a biased presentation of the reality.

You have studied as UN rapporteur the effects of biotech for farmers in developing countries, can you make a general assessment?

- No, because there is no general conclusion that can be reached. For instance, Bt cotton has benefited certain farmers in India: those who have access to credit at acceptable conditions, who have access to markets, and whose land is sufficient to allow for certain economies of scale and to support a certain degree of capitalized agriculture, may gain. But many other farmers -- particularly the poorest farmers who depend on money-lenders for credit and who cultivate very small plots of land they must mortgage and may lose if the harvest is poor -- have been severely and negatively affected by the technology. General statements are difficult to make on this issue. What is clear to me is that solutions that have "worked" for the average US farmer in the Midwest shall not necessarily serve the needs of farmers in the South who cultivate on a much smaller scale, and under very different conditions.

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