

EDITORIAL



Accountability to combat hunger

by Olivier De Schutter, UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food

The most recent figures concerning global hunger and malnutrition are alarming. More than one billion people are hungry. At least twice that number lacks the essential micronutrients that are needed to lead a healthy and active life. Deficiencies of iron, vitamin A, and zinc still rank among the top ten leading causes of death through disease in developing countries. One of three children born in developing countries is stunted.

What makes this calamity a scandal is that it is not inevitable. Of course, climate change represents a major threat, and it already is affecting food security in many areas because of increasingly unpredictable rainfall and a multiplication of droughts and floods, such as those that have recently afflicted India, Central America or East Africa. But the challenge of producing enough to feed the planet is one we have met: this year's cereals harvests, for instance, only modestly fell short of the record high levels of 2008, when 2287 million tons were produced. This is amply sufficient to feed the world, even though we may have to rethink in the future certain unsustainable modes of consumption that threaten our natural resource base.

But hunger is not just a technical problem. It is deeply political. It is the result of policies that have increased inequalities both within and between countries. Because it has not been supported by adequate services and investment and because of unfair trade rules, farming has become unaffordable for the poorest farmers living in marginal areas, resulting in massive rural flight and in the exponential growth of slums in large cities. The purchasing power of large groups of the population is now insufficient to buy the food that is available on the markets. They are hungry because they are poor, and they are poor because they lack the political power to bring about real change: they do not count. Accountability, therefore, is key to solving hunger and malnutrition. It must be seen as triangular: governments should be accountable to the needs of their populations, and mutual accountability should be strengthened between donor governments and their partners. Accountability should be increased at domestic level, to make sure that the efforts of governments are well targeted and that policies that leave out those who are in poverty shall be corrected. And accountability should be improved at international level, to ensure that we make progress towards an international economic system, and a regime of foreign aid, that is enabling and that supports national efforts.

The proposals I made in the context of the debate of the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) seek to enhance accountability. I proposed that each State should set in place at domestic level a strategy for the implementation of broad guidelines adopted at regular intervals by the CFS, setting clear benchmarks with associated indicators to measure progress, and defining timeframes within which those benchmarks are to be achieved. These benchmarks should not necessarily relate to the full set of guidelines adopted by the CFS, since not all guidelines will be relevant to the situation of all States; and they should be realistic, i.e., achievable within the specified timeframes. But these benchmarks should

also be ambitious enough, and because they will be result of a participatory process at domestic level, they will enhance the accountability of governments. The strategies in turn should facilitate a dialogue at international level, within the CFS, as to what works and what doesn't. This discussion should also allow an identification of the obstacles faced by each State in the realization of the right to food: it should therefore also guide the efforts of the international community in assisting States to realize the objectives they set for themselves.

What for? The current approaches have failed, in no small part because of the absence of accountability and follow-up on solemn commitments made summit after summit. We now have a historic opportunity to fix the system of global governance, in order to ensure that this trend is reversed. If we fail to seize this moment, we will be judged harshly by those who will succeed us: the generation which will inherit the world we are shaping will simply not understand. This will be for us a source of embarrassment and shame; for the very poor, it will mean even more wasted lives and avoidable deaths of children who asked nothing but to live.

Olivier De Schutter is the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food since 1 May 2008.