



Photo: Joyce Fabriek

Agroecology and the right to food

Oliver De Schutter speaks about sustainable food systems at a conference in Wageningen, the Netherlands

Interview: Margriet Goris

"Agroecology is really common sense. It means understanding how nature works, to replicate the natural workings of nature on farms in order to reduce dependency on external inputs. Agroecology preserves the ability for future generations to feed themselves. I believe we should teach more about agroecology and encourage exchanges between farmers. We cannot continue in this impasse of an oil dependent food production system."

As the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food (2008-14), Olivier De Schutter has spoken out many times on the urgent need for changes in global food systems. In March 2014, he published his final report, making strong recommendations in favour of agroecology.

Why do you recommend supporting small scale farmers?

We know that small farms are very productive, and more so than large monocropping farms per unit area of cultivated land. The

confusion arises because we calculate output only by looking at the commodities that these large farms deliver. And yes, they are productive, but small farms combine *different* outputs and are much more efficient in the way they use resources. Taking into account all the different products, yields from a small farm can be very impressive. The key problem is that we have developed a situation with industrial farming systems where we have become addicted to fossil fuels and have accelerated greenhouse gas emissions as a result. Food systems have become highly dependent on petrol, but we're running out of oil. So, in the future they may not be sustainable. We need alternatives, and there are good arguments from the points of view of resource efficiency and resilience to support food systems that are much more agroecological and make much better use of our natural resources.

How is agroecology linked to the right to food?

First, agroecology is not the same as organic agriculture. It means understanding how nature works, to replicate the complementarities between plants, trees and animals and the natural workings of nature on your farm in order to reduce dependency on external inputs such as chemical fertilizer. This is a sustainable way of producing food as it preserves the ability of future generations to feed themselves. It supports the health of the soil much better, reduces dependency on fossil energies, and is also a low cost way of farming. So for farmers in developing countries who have little access to credit and who are much more vulnerable to risk than farmers in developed countries, agroecology is a very interesting solution for agricultural development.

You say production systems should respond to 'needs' and not 'demands'.

Indeed. The problem is that once food is a commodity that responds to the laws of supply and demand, it will serve only the needs of those who have the greatest purchasing power. In other words, it will not serve the basic needs of the poorest people who have no money or not enough money to spend. Food production will be geared towards satisfying the tastes of the richest segments of the population. Markets for land and water are increasingly global and populations with widely diverging purchasing powers in the North and the South that have to compete for the same resources. This is creating a paradox in which the luxury tastes of some parts of the world's population are satisfied whereas the basic needs of others are not recognised and cannot be satisfied.

What is the role of consumers in changing food systems?

Consumers have much more power than they generally acknowledge, and I am hopeful that this next generation will make choices that are much more responsible and informed about the social and environmental impacts of their ways of purchasing and consuming food. In fact, 15 years ago, very few people had concerns other than to have a large diversity of cheap food available all year round. Now people are much more attentive to the impacts of their purchasing practices and they ask questions about labour rights, sustainability, food miles, etc. I think it's a good thing. Does it go far enough? Maybe not. In part because, it still only concerns a relatively small part of the population, the best informed and the most aware. And also because we have to accept that consuming more responsibly, also means consuming less of certain things and less meat in particular. We are coming to realise our overconsumption of meat has a huge impact on natural resources, making land and water more scarce. Our current level of meat consumption in the EU is 75 kg per person per year on an average. This is far too much for the environment and also creates a range of health problems. So a move towards healthier lifestyles and changes in how we consume food is desirable and perhaps on the horizon.

Why is access to land so important?

For many years we thought there was plenty of land available and that there would be no competition for this resource. But the 2008 global food price crisis drew the attention of many governments to the need for securing access to land because global markets were not sufficiently reliable. There was interest for farmland not just from governments but also from private investors. This led to what many call 'land grabbing'. Huge areas were bought or leased from 2008 to 2011, though the trend is declining slightly now. So land has become a commodity for which there is competition. The problem is that in many regions, those who use and depend on the land for their livelihoods have no secure access to it. They risk being priced out from land markets and being evicted from the land on which they depend because someone with more purchasing power can buy it instead of them. It is becoming a serious problem,

including for younger generations in industrialised countries. Access to land for them is becoming problematic, just like for peasants in the global South. Because of the inflation in land prices, it's becoming very difficult for 25 year-olds to start in farming today unless their parents were farmers. For young farmers in the European Union, it is hard to enter into farming because land and machinery is becoming so expensive. It is therefore necessary to have programmes to improve access to land and to credit, and to ensure that land is used by those who treat it best.

What policies are needed for fairer and more sustainable food systems?

We need policies that are much more coherent from the local to the global. I see many examples of local food systems being rebuilt, with consumers being more active, linking with producers and supported by municipalities. Local resources can be better used to shape food systems that are more sustainable and fair for both consumers and producers. However, very often, such local initiatives are *not* supported by national policies or by the global framework. Most of the time, national agricultural policies do not pay attention to local dimensions of food systems. And the global framework supports the expansion of export-led agriculture but does not support governments to take into account dimensions of food systems other than those that increase production volumes. We need more coherence across different levels of governance and much more food democracy. People must be able to hold governments accountable for the results of what food systems deliver. There is a need to move agricultural policies into food policies so that these other dimensions are taken into account. That is why issues of governance are key in achieving the transition towards sustainable food systems.

In which international body should trade in food and agriculture be discussed?

There was an attempt in the past four to five years to improve the coherence of different sectoral policies that affect global food security. That led to a reform of the Committee on World Food Security that convenes in Rome under the auspices of the FAO (the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations). It is a widely representative committee, including all governments, all international agencies with a relationship to food and agriculture, the private sector, NGO's and farmers organisations, who work together to deliver recommendations for governments. It is my hope that in future, this committee, because it is inclusive and transparent, can have greater influence in shaping reforms at global and national levels. Unfortunately, trade is very much off limits, and the committee is not authorised to discuss in any depth the impact of trade policies on food security. This is all under the mandate of the WTO (World Trade Organization). I think that this is a mistake, and this should be seen as part of the problem. It makes no sense to discuss agricultural investment, food security and climate change and not to discuss trade, as it has such a huge impact on the shaping of agricultural and food policies.

