

Guidance in a Time of Crisis: IAASTD and the Human Right to Food
Message from the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food

“Enabling Policies for Development and Sustainability from the IAASTD”
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The conclusions of the IAASTD are a very significant step in the crucial work of identifying and addressing the structural roots of the global food crisis, as well as in paving the way to design more sustainable food systems for the 21st century. A large portion of the IAASTD work is actually impregnated by key elements of the right to food, even though it does not refer explicitly to that framework. The IAASTD conclusions and the right to food as guaranteed in international law complement each other in providing States with guidance and practical tools that can help solve the global food crisis, in particular by giving recommendations on how to make choices between the various existing models of agricultural development.

The right to food can assist in the paradigm shift recommended by the IAASTD. At a national scale, the adoption of national strategies for the progressive realization of the right to food is probably one of the most significant concrete next steps that States could and should pose. The Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) has a unique opportunity to contribute both to the implementation of the IAASTD conclusions and to the realization of the human right to adequate food. Swift action is needed if 2009 is to be remembered as the starting point of a new decline in the number of the hungry.

Although they were developed independently from what later developed as a global food crisis of planetary dimensions, the IAASTD conclusions provide the international community with much needed guidance during a period of crisis.¹ The 2008 food price crisis indeed not only highlighted the instability of the global food system. It also contributed to bring to the spotlight the long-hidden and more complex crisis of our global food system, which is summarized not only by the dramatic figure of the number of the hungry – almost one billion today – but also by alarming reports on the environmental and human health impacts of the industrial agricultural model of the 20th century.²

As previously stated, there is a risk that, in a context dominated by the fear of food shortages, opportunities will be mistaken for solutions, and that, in the name of raising production, the need for both socially and environmentally sustainable solutions will be underestimated. One indicator of the reality of this risk is the insufficient attention given, in international discussions, to the implementation of the IAASTD conclusions, despite the uniqueness of this assessment and the fact that its conclusions were approved by almost sixty governments at the IAASTD Intergovernmental Plenary that was held in Johannesburg in April 2008.

1. Implementing the paradigm shift proposed by the IAASTD

One significant, but understated, achievement of the IAASTD is its contribution to sparking a debate that has been postponed for too many years: the issue of the diversity of agricultural development paradigms.

The IAASTD calls for a fundamental paradigm shift in agricultural development. The assessment notes that ‘successfully meeting development and sustainability goals and responding to new priorities

¹ IAASTD (2008) Executive Summary of the Synthesis Report and Summary for Decision Makers of the Global Report, approved in detail by Governments attending the IAASTD Intergovernmental Plenary in Johannesburg, April 2008.
<http://www.iaastd.com/>

² See: ‘Background note: Analysis of the Special Rapporteur on the global food crisis’ (May 2, 2008) and ‘Building resilience: a human rights framework for world food and nutrition security’, report to the Human Rights Council in accordance with resolution S-7/1, adopted by the Human Rights Council on 22 May 2008 at its Special Session on the global food crisis (UN doc. A/HRC/9/23, 8 September 2008).

and changing circumstances would require a fundamental shift in [agricultural knowledge, science and technology], including science, technology, policies, institutions, capacity development and investment'. This call for a paradigm shift – similar in nature to the call of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change a few years earlier – is, first and foremost, a call for a public debate on our current agricultural development model. This debate is urgent, and it is needed. It is not closed yet: we are still in a transition period, and it is necessary and normal that we launch the search for new solutions.

Such a debate took place at the Windhoek High-level Meeting “African Agriculture in the 21st Century: Meeting Challenges, Making a Sustainable Green Revolution” (Namibia, 9-10 Feb 2009). It was confirmed there that the Green Revolution model needed to be clarified and that it was one model amongst others, with advantages and drawbacks that should be carefully considered. It was also affirmed that the potential of other models – such as conservation agriculture or agroecological approaches, and other food systems options – had been clearly established.³ Similar discussions were held during the Multistakeholder Consultation “The Challenges Facing the Green Revolution in Africa” (Luxembourg, 15 – 16 December 2009) convened under the auspices of my mandate.

Different models of agricultural development can, under certain conditions, be complementary at the crop field level: a very careful combination of fertilizers and agro-forestry is successfully promoted in some regions, such as in a few areas of Malawi. At the level of public policies, though, it is a pre-requisite for a balanced approach that we start by acknowledging the very existence of several models. The fact that these models lead to different development paths should also be discussed. Indeed, they may have very different impacts on the right to food. They may affect different groups differently. In a context of fierce competition for scarce resources such as land, water, investment and human resources, the implications of supporting one paradigm over the others must be taken seriously. Failing to consider the diversity of models that can be supported could lead to missing great opportunities. The Windhoek High-Level Ministerial Declaration expresses this clearly: “Governments, in cooperation with the research community and with support from the international donor community, should undertake rigorous comparative assessments of alternative agricultural models and cropping systems”.⁴

In its specific statement calling for the increase and strengthening of AKST towards agroecological sciences (Key Finding 7),⁵ the IAASTD strongly advocates in favour of a different direction than the one we are currently taking. This is an important message addressed to policy-makers. Agroecological approaches have recently proved their potential to improve access to food in an African context, especially in complex environments. The IAASTD is not alone in arriving at this conclusion. It is also one made in the 2006 Nairobi-based World Agroforestry Centre annual report, at the 2009 Fourth World Congress on Conservation Agriculture in New Delhi, or by the recent 2008 FAO-UNEP report on Organic Agriculture and Food Security in Africa. And it is one in support of which there is now a rapidly growing scientific literature.⁶

At the same time, some major efforts have been launched, with a very different orientation and prioritization of options, particularly in Africa. Initiatives focusing on the subsidization of high-yielding seeds and fertilizers are supported by key international organisations, governments and stakeholders. This direction is not fully aligned with the IAASTD conclusions, which caution against the role of agricultural technology: “Technologies such as high-yielding crop varieties, agrochemicals and mechanization”, they note, “have primarily benefited the better resourced groups in society and transnational corporations, rather than the most vulnerable ones. To ensure that technology supports development and sustainability goals, strong policy and institutional arrangements are needed.”

³ IISD Reporting Service, Briefing note, Windhoek High-level Meeting “African Agriculture in the 21st Century: Meeting Challenges, Making a Sustainable Green Revolution” (Namibia, 9-10 Feb 09)

<http://www.iisd.ca/africa/brief/briefing1801e.pdf>

⁴ http://www.un.org/esa/dsd/susdevtopics/sdt_pdfs/meetings/hml0209/Windhoek_final_declaration.pdf

⁵ All “Key Findings” referred to in this document are from the IAASTD Summary for Decision Makers of the Global report.

⁶ See, e.g., Pretty, J. (2006) Resource-conserving agriculture increases yields in developing countries, *Environmental Science and Technology* 40(4), or Uphoff, N. (2001) *Agroecological Innovations. Increasing Food Production with Participatory Development*, Earthscan.

The IAASTD conclusions insist on the need to take into account the full range of policy options available, stating that “innovative and integrated applications of existing knowledge, science and technology (formal, traditional and community-based), as well as new approaches for agricultural and natural resource management will be needed” (Key Finding 10): “Technological options such as new genotypes of crops, livestock, fish and trees and advances in plant, livestock and fish breeding, biotechnology, remote sensing, agroecology, agroforestry, integrated pest and nutrient management and information and communication technologies (ICTs) will create opportunities for more resource-efficient and site-specific agriculture.” Yet it is commonly known that, across this full range, some of these options are dominant today because of their role in the prevailing agricultural paradigm of the last 50 years, sometimes despite their environmental drawbacks and their social impacts. In contrast, other applications are or were until recently locked out by the current technological regime, and by the weight of established routines. Although these options compete for the attention of policy-makers, the competition between them has not been an equal one.

Governments and stakeholders must rethink the existing food system, which is neither socially nor environmentally sustainable. The current system has led to widespread hunger, malnutrition, and obesity. It is depleting natural resources and accelerating climate change. We have a duty to revise our past choices. We must therefore consider the full range of options available to us, and balance them against each other. It is in this context that the right to food framework could assist in guiding governments towards making the right choices. This framework requires that we prioritize the needs of the most vulnerable; that we define our benchmarks not only by the levels of production achieved, but also by the impacts on the right to food of different ways of producing food; and that we make decisions about agriculture and food based on participatory mechanisms.

2. Complementary guidance: IAASTD and the human right to food

The right to adequate food is a human right stated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It is further made explicit by the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which guarantees the right to food as part of the right to an adequate standard of living and guarantees a fundamental right to be free from hunger. The UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has provided an authoritative interpretation of the right to food, in its General Comment No. 12 (1999). In 2004, the 187 Member States of the General Council of the FAO adopted the Voluntary Guidelines to support the progressive realization of the right to adequate food in the context of national food security, which provide clear guidance on the implementation of the right to food at a national level.⁷ Dozens of countries mention the right to food in their constitutions, and many have adopted framework laws that protect the right to food in their domestic legal systems.

The IAASTD conclusions are not explicitly framed in the right to food framework. But they are deeply aligned with at least two of its key elements: they focus on the situation of the most vulnerable; and they insist on the usefulness of active participation of those affected by agricultural policies in the design and implementation of those policies.

- The focus on small-holders, but also on all vulnerable groups, is included in many parts of the final conclusions of the IAASTD. Vulnerable groups include those with insecure land tenure, landless laborers, women, displaced and Indigenous people, minorities, persons with disabilities and the rural and urban poor. The IAASTD conclusions recognize that people have benefited unevenly from past progresses (Key Finding 2). The conclusions clearly recognize that trade liberalization, for instance, has negative impacts on the most vulnerable: “the small-scale farm sector in the poorest developing countries is a net loser under most trade liberalization scenarios that address this question” (Key Finding 17). The report consequently identifies these groups, and small-scale farmers in particular, as the key target groups to successful 21st century food systems. Following the IAASTD, those who benefited less should now receive priority: “In terms of development and sustainability goals, these policies and

⁷ More information on the right to food framework can be found on the website of the Special Rapporteur www.srfood.org as well as on the site of the FAO Right to Food Unit <http://www.fao.org/righttofood/>

institutional changes should be directed primarily at those who have been served least by previous AKST approaches, i.e., resource-poor farmers, women and ethnic minorities.”⁸ These conclusions are aligned with the human rights approach, which recommends focusing on improving access to food of vulnerable groups instead of aiming solely at increased production.

- IAASTD explicitly recommends involving small-scale farmers in the processes that affect them. Options for policy action advised by the IAASTD include broader stakeholder participation in decision making; increased participation for women and other marginalized groups in agricultural knowledge and technology production processes; and strengthening participatory research, such as farmer-researcher groups or participatory plant breeding (Key Findings 12, 15, and Exec. Summary). The participation of individuals and groups whose right to food is at stake is a key element of human rights approaches. It is explicitly stated in the FAO Voluntary Guidelines for the progressive realization of the right to food.

Other key aspects of the right to food framework are also complementary to the IAASTD options for action. In particular, the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has insisted on the need for States to work towards ‘the adoption of a national strategy to ensure food and nutrition security for all, based on human rights principles that define the objectives, and the formulation of policies and corresponding benchmarks’. National strategies comprise the establishment of appropriate institutional mechanisms particularly in order to (i) map vulnerability and identify emerging threats to the right to adequate food, by adequate monitoring systems; (ii) improve coordination between the different relevant ministries and between the national and sub-national levels of government; (iii) improve accountability, with a clear allocation of responsibilities, and the setting of precise time-frames; and (iv) ensure the adequate participation, particularly, of the most food-insecure segments of the population.

In recent years, a growing number of African States have adopted national strategies to realize the right to food, including South Africa, Uganda and Mozambique. These countries have moved from recognizing that policies should be put in place in order to achieve food security, to recognizing that each individual – man, woman or child – has a human right to adequate food, and that this entails corresponding obligations on both governments and private actors. Yet, too many countries still lack the benefits of a rights-based food security approach.⁹

The adoption of such national strategies could be an effective way to implement IAASTD policy options. The preparation and implementation of such strategies provide a space where small-holder farmers, landless, agricultural workers, urban poor and rural communities within each State could debate the IAASTD policy options, and decide through participatory mechanisms which agricultural policies they should pursue. There is no better way to move the IAASTD conclusions from theory, or from policy prescription, to practical action and institutional reform. It is in that sense that the right to food framework is complementary to the IAASTD. Just like the IAASTD illustrates the panoply of options which could be explored to reform agriculture in a way which better corresponds to the needs of the hungry and the poor, the right to food framework provides both benchmarks to measure these options against each other and a way to move towards the implementation phase.

3. Conclusions for CSD-17: the next steps towards the implementation of IAASTD conclusions and the progressive realization of the right to food

The Commission on Sustainable Development has a unique opportunity to lead the international community towards implementing the IAASTD conclusions, while at the same time carrying further the right to food.

At the High-Level Meeting on Food Security for All convened in Madrid on 26-27 January 2009, the UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon clearly expressed the emerging consensus that the right to food

⁸ Executive Summary of the Synthesis report, p 4.

⁹ See the FAO Right to Food Unit <http://www.fao.org/righttofood/>

should guide reactions of the international community to the global food crisis, and serve ‘as a basis for analysis, action and accountability’. I am equally convinced that the right to food framework can constitute an important tool governments can rely on in order to meet the considerable challenge we are currently facing. The right to food should be seen as serving these efforts both by improving accountability of governments – thus ensuring that their policies remain constantly guided by the need to alleviate hunger and malnutrition – and by building the resilience of the most vulnerable, whether against policy changes or internal or external shocks. The environment may change, and policies may have to be revised accordingly. But the right to food must be upheld at all times, and it is this that should guide our reactions to an increasingly volatile context.

At the national level, States would dramatically gain from taking both the IAASTD and the FAO Voluntary Guidelines on the progressive realization of the right to food as two complementary reference frameworks in designing their national strategies for the progressive realization of the right to food, as explained above. Moreover, the decisions adopted by national governments should be actively debated within national parliaments and through the participation of farmer organizations, vulnerable groups and other stakeholders. This should take place not only in developing countries, but also in developed countries, to tackle the interconnectedness of our food systems.

At the global level, there is a need to create a space where States could exchange on national strategies for the realization of the right to food and the IAASTD conclusions, and where progress could be monitored. The next high-level conference on World Food Security, provisionally scheduled to take place before the end of the year in Rome, provides us with an opportunity to do this. By learning from both successes and failures in this regard, we could make true progress towards improving the lives of the poor.

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Professor Olivier De Schutter

Professor De Schutter was appointed by the UN Human Rights Council as Special Rapporteur on the right to food, a mandate which he inaugurated on May 1st, 2008. His mandate is to monitor and report on the right to food to the UN General Assembly and Human Rights Council. A specialist in human rights, Olivier De Schutter teaches at the University of Louvain (Belgium) and the College of Europe (Natolin Campus, Poland). He is a Visiting Professor at Columbia University and a Member of the Global Law School Faculty of New York University. He was also previously Secretary General of the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH).

Areas of work in the mandate of the Special Rapporteur

The Special Rapporteur works on a large number of areas which have an impact on the enjoyment of the right to food: international trade and the role of agribusiness; food aid and development cooperation; the rights of land users and access to land; access to inputs for agriculture and intellectual property rights; legislative frameworks implementing the right to food; and the impact of climate change on the right to food.

More information can be found on the website of the Special Rapporteur:

www.srfood.org