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Biofuels and the Right to Food: Time for the US to get its head out of the sand

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Olivier De Schutter, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, speaks today (Nov. 27) at 3:00 pm EDT at Tufts University. The distinguished lecture will be webcast live. Click for [webcast information](#) and for more [information on the event](#), which is open to the public.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency recently decided to keep the nation's head buried deep in the sand when it comes to biofuels policy, [refusing to waive](#) the U.S. ethanol mandate in order to ease price pressures in corn and soybeans following the severe U.S. drought. Europe, the other major market feeding its cars at the expense of the world's people, lifted its collective head from the depths long enough last month to [reduce from 10% to 5%](#) the mandated share of transportation fuel that can come from food sources. No such acknowledgment of reality here, where 40% of our corn crop goes to make ethanol.

The right to food, now recognized worldwide, demands action. So too does Olivier De Schutter, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food. "It is imprudent to support, let alone to mandate, extra agrofuel production when food prices are high and volatile," he [wrote last month](#). Indeed, De Schutter has established himself as one of the world's most passionate and effective advocates for decisive action on biofuels and a wide and impressive range of other issues he has taken on under his UN mandate.

The right to food emerged from efforts to define voluntary guidelines on the issue following the UN's 1996 World Food Summit. The approach uses a human rights framework to assess the realization of full access to adequate food for everyone. The food price spikes of 2007-8 put the issue at the center of international policy-making. De Schutter was appointed to his position in 2008 and immediately argued for a more far-reaching response to the food crisis.

His small office has produced an astonishing array of influential reports, briefing notes, and policy interventions, while carrying out national assessments on the realization of the right to food. (Stay tuned: the United States will get such an assessment in the coming year.) He has taken the office well beyond safety-net policies and into some of the most important and contentious policy issues facing the international community.

His office has called for greater attention to [agro-ecology](#), aggressive restrictions on [commodity speculation](#), regulation of growing [agribusiness concentration in the agri-food value chain](#), urgent attention [to climate change and bioenergy](#), restrictions on [land grabs](#), improved [seed policies to support biodiversity](#), and changes to [multilateral trade rules](#). Among many others. (Seriously, I know him and I don't know how he and his small staff do it.)

It is difficult to overestimate the importance of the Special Rapporteur's influential voice in current policy debates. One of the important messages he brings is to remind policy-makers that hunger is above all about access, not supply. Increased production without addressing livelihoods, income, inequality and discrimination, worker's rights, and what Amartya Sen calls "entitlements" will make no difference to the incidence of hunger.

As he [wrote in his acceptance](#) of a second three-year mandate last year, "Today, too many [governments] continue to see hunger as a problem of supply and demand, when it is primarily a problem of a lack of access to productive resources such as land and water, of unscrupulous employers and traders, of an increasingly concentrated input providers' sector, and of insufficient safety nets to support the poor. Too much attention has been paid to addressing the mismatch between supply and demand ... while comparatively too little attention has been paid both to the imbalances of power in the food systems and to the failure to support the ability of small-scale farmers to feed themselves, their families, and their communities."

As [my own work shows](#), the global community has yet to address the key drivers of recent food prices, which have spiked three times in the last five years. Those include:

- Biofuels, which are still expanding, driving up [import costs for developing countries](#);
- financial speculation on commodities markets, which are still largely unregulated;
- climate change, which continues unchecked with little action on either mitigation or adaptation for developing country producers;
- inadequate public food reserves, which are still widely dismissed as inefficient by global powers;
- insufficient investment in and protection of domestic food producers in developing countries (see my [report on Mexican maize farmers](#)), which are still battered by imports and undermined by market failures and misplaced donor priorities.

The United States government still has its head in the sand when it comes to biofuels, and most of these other urgent issues. The Special Rapporteur in [his upcoming speech at Tufts University](#) calls the right to food "a weapon against global hunger." Hopefully it is a weapon that can awaken U.S. leaders from their self-imposed blindness to the impacts of their actions on the global right to food. But then it's hard to see much of anything when your head is in the sand.