

**Show Transcript
Deconstructing Dinner
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Title: The Human Right to Food and the Global Food Crisis

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Jon Steinman: And welcome to Deconstructing Dinner, a syndicated weekly one-hour radio show and podcast produced at Kootenay Co-op Radio CJLY in Nelson, British Columbia. I'm Jon Steinman and I'll be with you for the next hour.

On today's broadcast we travel to the United Nations in New York City to listen in on the proceedings of an ongoing series of dialogues on the subject of human rights.

On August 29th, the series presented a panel as part of an event titled, "The Human Right to Food and The Global Food Crisis: Root Causes and Responses."

Of those sitting on the panel who we'll hear from today: Olivier De Schutter – the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Flavio Valente – the Secretary General of FIAN International, Joia Mukharjee – the Medical Director of Partners in Health, Karen Hansen-Kuhn – the Policy Director for ActionAid USA, Sanjay Reddy – an Assistant Professor of Economics at Barnard College at Columbia University.

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JS: This year – 2008, marks the 60th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. On many of our episodes over the past year, we've covered many topics that do indeed deal with human rights and in particular Article 25 – in which it states this - "Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food."

Now one of the concepts that can come out of this idea of a "right to food" is that of food sovereignty – whereby people have the right to determine what foods are available to them. Of course, with issues of food safety, international trade agreements, biofuel mandates and the powerful interests of corporations, food sovereignty or this right to food, is hampered in many ways.

It's this among other reasons, that has led most recently to the latest spike in the global food crisis that is affecting the world's poorest populations. And it's this that led to the dialogue that took place on August 29th, 2008 at the United Nations in New York City. Titled, "The Human Right to Food and The Global Food Crisis," the event was sponsored by the Office of the High

Commissioner for Human Rights, the Department of Public Information, the NGO Committee on Human Rights and the Permanent Missions of Cuba and Malawi.

A panel of experts from around the world were compiled to discuss this latest spike in the global food crisis but to do so through a human rights lens, something that has never really been done in any significant way up until only the past few years.

Sitting on the panel was Olivier De Schutter – the recently appointed Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food. Since March 2008, De Schutter has been reporting to the General Assembly of the United Nations and the Human Rights Council. He is a specialist in human rights and works for the Catholic University of Leuven in Belgium and the College of Europe in Poland. He's currently a Visiting Professor at Columbia University in New York.

Last time we heard from the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, it was Jean Ziegler who lent his voice to our November 2007 series on biofuels. Olivier De Schutter also spoke on this topic during his panel presentation.

Olivier De Schutter: The special session convened by the Human Rights Council on the 22nd of May, the first one ever on the thematic issue, and the first one ever on the social and economic right, the Right to Food. Why?

I believe the Human Rights Council wanted to send two messages. And it is these messages, which we in turn in this panel would like to send.

One is that the risks are not only today in the sharp and brutal increase of prices on international markets for food commodities in 2005, 2008; it is true that a hundred and five million more people will be driven into extreme poverty according to World Bank estimates as a result of this crisis, and that deserves our urgent attention. But it is no less important to monitor from the point of view of human rights the answers given to the current situation. In the name of producing more to cope with population growth, changing diets, demand for agro-fuels, led in particular by blending and mandates, subsidies, tax cuts within the U.S. and the E.U., the threats of climate change which will especially affect production in regions which are already food-insecure. For all these reasons we need to produce more food.

At the same time, producing more food cannot be an end in itself. We should not, in the name of increasing production, turn to ready-made solutions and pay insufficient attention to the social and environmental dimensions of the answers we give to the crisis. Our responses would not be sustainable if they led to further depletion of soils, accelerated desertification, further waste of scarce water resources, and our answers would not be sustainable if they led to favour large scale agricultural exploitations above small rural farmers who constitute today the majority of those who are hungry. The interests of large food processors in dealing with large scale producers who can comply better with certain standards, deliver within prescribed timeframes, particular volumes, are more reliable – these work against small rural farmers, and these are those who need to be helped as a matter of urgency.

We need for this reason, and this is clearly one important message coming from the human rights lens to the crisis, we need today to draw our attention to the governance problems in the food production and distribution chain in order to strengthen farmers organizations, reinforce their bargaining power vis a vis large agribusiness corporations. We need to promote best practices by which providers of inputs to small rural farmers and those buying their produce can reinforce the capacity of small rural farmers to be included in the global food chain. We need to promote the use of the least expensive inputs in formative agriculture which would avoid excessive dependence of small rural farmers on external inputs, and which would better respect the environment.

A second reason why the Human Rights Council convened the special session at the initiative of the Republic of Cuba is that placing the responses to the global food crisis under the human rights framework can help not make any mistakes. It can help at two levels. First of all, at the national level, a human rights framework can contribute to developing more sustainable solutions and solutions which are better targeted towards the needs of those who are hungry and malnourished by mapping food insecurity and vulnerability, by assessing the impact on the right to food of any new measures which are adopted, by imposing specific obligations and timeframes on different branches of government in a framework law implementing the right to food at the domestic level. By improving accountability, by giving recourse mechanisms to victims, allowing persons who are hungry to call upon courts and independent institutions to hold branches of government accountable to their obligations under the right to food; by promoting legislative reform to ensure security of land tenure and access to land through agrarian reform for those who depend on land for their livelihoods; and by protecting better women's rights.

All these prescriptions follow from recognizing the right to food in international law, and from understanding that this is not a purely symbolic reference for advocacy purposes. It has very clear direct operational consequences at the national level. And the Right to Food also has implications at the international level in the way that the international community addresses the global food crisis.

First of all, the human rights approach can force a conversation about establishing an international environment, enabling countries to comply better with their obligations to fulfill the Right to Food. And secondly, it can facilitate the identification of a consensus by defining the parameters within which such a consensus should be based. I shall be presenting to the Human Rights Council a report on the impact of the WTO trade liberalization on the Right to Food at the end of this year.

For the moment, I'm working on the issue of agro-fuels and I shall make very concrete proposals to the Human Rights Council about what human rights require in defining the international consensus on agro-fuels. According to the International Food Policy and Research Institute, between 15 to 43 percent, depending on the crops, of the price rise recently can be attributed to the agro-fuels policies, particularly of the U.S. and the E.U. According to Donald Mitchell from the World Bank, 75 percent of the increase is attributable to these policies because of blending mandates, targets for consumption, tax break subsidies, leading to increase the price of cropland and to encourage speculation.

This is an issue on which we need to work together, countries need to be disciplined in how they promote agro-fuels, and a human rights framework can help identify the parameters of a consensus on this issue. I look forward in the next few weeks and months to continuing my consultations and making my recommendations to the Human Rights Council. I'll continue to monitor the answers given at national and international level to the global food crisis. Thank you.

JS: And this is Deconstructing Dinner. And that was Olivier De Schutter – the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food. De Schutter was speaking as part of a panel at the United Nations in New York on August 29th. The event was titled, “The Human Right to Food and the Global Food Crisis.”

Also sitting on the panel was the Secretary General of FIAN International – Flavio Valente. FIAN or the FoodFirst Information Action Network, is an international human rights organization that for more than 20 years has advocated for the realization of the right to food. FIAN is represented in over 50 countries and has consultative status to the United Nations. Their headquarters are in Heidelberg, Germany and Flavio Valente is based in Rome, Italy.

While the mainstream media has been so in the dark in the past few decades that they continue to believe that the global food crisis is *new*, Valente stressed first and foremost, that this crisis is nothing new at all.

Flavio Valente: The crisis we're facing now is not new. Some of you probably know that in 1996 the FAO held a summit on food, it was called the World Food Summit, that diagnosed at that time that 824 million people in the world were going hungry every day. Most of them living in the rural areas, about 75 percent, and most of them small producers, and some of them in a large proportion women.

The situation has not improved since. The data from the FAO last year show that 850 million people in the world were still going hungry. So instead of reducing the number of people that were hungry in the world as it was proposed by the World Food Summit in 1996, we had an increase.

So the question is – why all of a sudden this crisis is a crisis. Why was it not a crisis when 850 million people were hungry. And that's basically what I'm going to try to explain a little bit what FIAN International believes about that. In our understanding, the present crisis is the result of decades of ill-guided policies, especially the policies that were held under the consensus of Washington. The ones that led to structural adjustment, and to the PRSPs, and imposed, especially on the southern governments the reduction of investment in the agricultural sector, the destruction of agricultural extension, the reduction of social services, and in many places even the elimination of safety nets – and imposed upon the governments, in exchange for the possibility of renegotiating their external debt, that they should deregulate their economies and open up to imports, including imports of food.

This, associated with the trade liberalization that started to happen in 1994 after the Uruguay round, we had a really severe depletion of the small farmers and small agriculture in most

countries in the south, and reducing the capacity of those countries to feed themselves and to guarantee that the people would have their own capacity to access even the local markets due to very cheap imports. This is part of the cheap food – cheap food to feed the urban centres, but cheap food that really led the small farmers to bankruptcy in many places. And this was done while the rich countries in the world maintained their subsidies and dumped food into those countries at very low prices. We have documented cases in Honduras, in Indonesia, in Ghana, in several other countries where the rice production from the U.S. for instance was responsible for the destruction of the small farmers in those countries. It is not only the U.S., the E.U. also did that in several countries in Africa with chicken, with tomatoes, and other things like that.

So, the problem is – how do we do now in this situation. We have a new task force that was created by the UN Secretary General to face that crisis, and we expected that this task force would really identify what the problems were. Unfortunately, the task force and its work has not really dealt with the big problems, and to our surprise it proposes some of the same measures. Inclusively, it says in the document, that one of the most important worries of the task force is that the trade system may be in danger and that the continuation of trade liberalization may be threatened by the food crisis. So the problem is not that we have more people going hungry, but that the trade system may be under. That is what we are worried about; the task force created to face the hunger crisis is not worried about hungry people, it is more worried about the profits of the trade system. And that's why we need to change this situation.

Human Rights Law is a set of international laws created to regulate power. Peoples of the world after the Second World War said that governments should have some mechanisms to regulate their power so that they wouldn't do the same things that were done by some governments during the war and killed millions and millions of people because they decided that some people were different and didn't deserve to live. Handicapped, Jews, black, communists, and all other people that were not in agreement with what was the standard of human being for them. But the Human Rights Law doesn't only regulate the state; it's also made demanding that the governments regulate the private sector so that the private sector does not violate the rights of the people.

Now we need to think about what we can do in the next few months or in the next years. We feel that we need to overcome the crisis by involving people and not excluding them from the discussions. Unfortunately, the task force did not listen to the 850 million, did not listen to the food producers that are under risk of losing their farms, did not listen to the urban population that is rioting, did not involve the Human Rights High Commissioners Office in the discussions. We think that the first step that the UN should do in relation to the food crisis would be to have a real participatory process involving all the stakeholders and all the right-holders to guarantee that the policy of the UN is made effectively on the basis of human rights as it said in the charter. And the governments have signed to that, they have to held accountable to that.

To conclude, I would like to say that this will happen. This is the only way we can really avoid more conflict. People in the world have to have the hope that there are legal mechanisms and civilized mechanisms to solve their problems so that they don't have to resort to violence. If we don't resolve the situation using the governments to regulate, the UN to regulate, and to regulate not only the private sector but also the IFIs – the International Financial Institutions – and the

World Trade Organization, who feel that they are above the law, that's the only way we are going to be able to face the crisis, and we really call upon delegations and missions and civil society to fight for the effective implementation of the human rights based approach to the crisis, because that's the only way we'll solve not only the immediate crisis but eliminate the causes of it, which are more important than an event that is happening and may happen again and again. But we need to tackle the real structural issues. Thank you very much.

JS: And that was Flavio Valente – the Secretary General of FIAN International. Valente is based in Rome, Italy and was speaking as part of a panel on The Human Right to Food and the Global Food Crisis.

The next panelist who we'll hear from is Joia Mukharjee - the Medical Director of Partners in Health. The organization was founded in 1987 to deliver health care to the residents of the mountainous Central Plateau of Haiti. In the 20 years since then, they have expanded into many more sites in the country and have launched initiatives in Peru, Lesotho, Russia, Rwanda, Guatemala and Malawi. The organization is headquartered in Boston, Massachusetts. Here's Joia Mukharjee speaking on August 29th, 2008.

Joia Mukharjee: Thank you Mr. Chairman. It's an honour to be here, and thank you very much for including our organization Partners in Health in this important human rights dialogue. Partners in Health was founded 21 years ago with the principle of providing a preferential option for the poor in healthcare. As such, today 80 percent of our 6,000 employees worldwide are themselves the rural poor, who are but for the job that they have with us subsistence farmers. All of the 10 countries in which we work suffer from hunger and inequality, including the United States, however four of the 10 countries we work in – Haiti, Burundi, Rwanda and Malawi – are on the FAO's list of the top 22 most vulnerable countries in regards to food and security.

At Partners in Health we profit every day enormously by the active participation of the poor. In designing, implementing, and evaluating our programs, and consider such strategy essential as an anchor to a rights-based approach. However, working in countries in which the public sector has been gutted and bankrupted by structural adjustment policies and the Washington Consensus, we have realized that a vigorous public sector that is accountable to the poor and enabled to provided the services needed is the only way to truly fulfill a rights-based framework. Liberalization equals privatization, and the private sector has no real accountability for human rights. Since 2002 and the advent of large scale initiatives for AIDS, TB and malaria, Partners in Health has worked exclusively on promoting, subsidizing, supporting the public sector's ability to provide healthcare in 10 countries around the world. What we have learned from our work with and on the behalf of the most vulnerable are the following four points of intersection between the food crisis, the Right to Food, and rights-based approaches to health.

Number one: pervasive food and nutritional insecurity is the number one health problem of the poor. It is getting worse; we have seen marked decrease in the weight of our adult patients with HIV and tuberculosis, as well as among pregnant women, which increases complications as well as maternal mortality. We have seen an increase in the number of malnourished children from countries as disparate as the United States, to Burundi, to Lesotho.

Number two: food and nutrition are essential to disease prevention and money is needed to this end. Malnutrition, as many of you know, underlies 50 percent of all the 24,000 child deaths daily worldwide, and yet nutrition and food is not considered part of an essential package of child health until the child is actually malnourished. This is not prevention. Malnutrition results in an increased susceptibility of adult disease, particularly tuberculosis which continues to be a major killer of working age adults worldwide; malnutrition hastens death from HIV, and as you know HIV affects more than 30 million people on the globe. These are major killers of adults, they're major destructive forces of economies in the south. Food insecurity has been concretely associated as well with risky coping strategies and ineffectiveness of AIDS prevention. Our organization, as well as others, has studied the linkages between household income and vulnerability to forced sex, as well as transactional sex that increases the risk of HIV.

Number three: food is treatment and this treatment also needs money. Food is needed to treat severely malnourished children and we believe that ready to use therapeutic food is a critical element that should be scaled up as an essential treatment of child malnutrition. This has no funding, this has very little support – and yet it does not require cooking fuel, it does not require a kitchen, it does not even require the supervision of medical establishment and could be done in the home. Food is a critical component of the treatment of consumptive diseases, and should be treated as such. We consider the food supplementation in patients with advanced AIDS and tuberculosis to be a critical component of their treatments, and we are seeing shrinking budgets from the World Food Programme and others to this end.

Number four: the right to food is intimately linked to three other critical social and economic rights. Those being: the right to education, the right to health, and the right to reasonable work for reasonable pay.

What must be done.

Number one: emergency food assistance must be marshaled, massively funded now to prevent death and disease.

Number two: we must support governments of goodwill to develop food sovereignty, whether it is by allowing them to have protective tariffs for food production or laws on the Right to Food, we need to support innovative initiatives to this end.

Number three: we need to remove user fees on education and health which are critical barriers to the participation in these rights, and barriers that have clearly been exacerbated in the current food crisis in our experience.

Number four: we need to bring civil society pressure to bear on donor and recipient countries that are impairing the Right to Food. We need to carefully look at the percentage of food aid dollars that actually get to the ground and get into the mouths of the hungry. The General Accounting Office in the United States estimates that two thirds of U.S. food aid goes to administrative overhead. That is criminal. We need to pressure recipient countries to participate in progressive policies on land reform and agricultural development with participation of the

civil society, particularly the rural poor. We have learned much from the collective action of AIDS treatment to this end.

I will end by telling you that last week I was in Haiti. I was, as I often do, walking with a patient who is one of our employees at Partners in Health, employed as a community health worker – she herself is living with HIV. I know her, I'm her doctor, I'm her colleague. She put her arm around me to greet me, and I said, "My dear, you're looking thin." She said, "It's school enrollment time, Joia." When adults have to forgo their own meals to provide money to enroll their children in school, we know that we have faced the ultimate moral hazard.

I want to thank you for inviting our participation, and I'll be happy to take questions as well.

JS: And this is Deconstructing Dinner – a syndicated weekly one-hour radio show and podcast produced at Kootenay Co-op Radio CJLY in Nelson, British Columbia. I'm Jon Steinman. Today's broadcast is titled, "The Human Right to Food" and is featuring recordings of panelists who spoke at an event held at the United Nations on August 29th, 2008. The event was sponsored by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, the Department of Public Information, the NGO Committee on Human Rights and the Permanent Missions of Cuba and Malawi.

If you miss any of today's broadcast, it will be archived on our website at deconstructingdinner.ca

The last panelist we heard from was Joia Mukharjee – the Medical Director of Boston based Partners in Health. Before we hear from other panelists speaking at the event, we'll take a quick musical break, which will be followed by a segment produced as part of the Every Human Has Rights Campaign – a campaign aimed at reintroducing dialogue on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which this year, is celebrating its 60th anniversary.

Music Clip: Backbiting by Lee Perry, Winston Heywood and the Upsetters

Tell I what we're fighting for – why there must be so much war.
Give I a reason for this fighting – why there must be so much backbiting.

I see you're defending all of your treasures – slaying in front for a pleasure.
I never never thought Monerite should sell – all those consumers bound to it.

No, we're not gonna leave out those sellers (sellers);
They must be on the train with the consumers (consumers).
Still we've got to have lots of liars (liars);
Oh not one must escape this great fire.

Tell I what we're fighting for – why there must be so much war.
Give I a reason for this fighting – why there must be so much backbiting.

We're not gonna leave out those sellers (sellers);

They must be on the train with the consumers (consumers).
Still we've got to have lots of liars (liars);
Oh not one must escape this great fire.
Tell I what we're fighting for – why there must be so much war.
Give I a reason for this fighting ...

Audio from a video for Every Human has Rights Campaign: (various speakers, drumbeat in background)

Male Voice 1: We are human only through the humanity of other human beings.

Male Voice 2: We live in a world where men and women and children are being brutalized in certain countries, with their leaders standing by and not doing enough to help them.

Male Voice 3: When you look at the kind of things that we are still doing; I mean you look at the Darfur and you hear that rape is used as a weapon of war.

Female Voice 1: Today there are millions, some say a total of about 10, 40, 60 million girl infants who have been aborted simply because they're not boys.

Female Voice 2: We have a very divided world, a very fearful world. A world very conflicted, and so, so unequal.

Male Voice 4: Every single human being has rights that are inclusive to who they are. They don't depend on whether you are educated, whether you are clever, they don't depend on any of that. They depend on the fact that you are human.

Female Voice 3: The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted at a time when the world was very fearful. And actually, the General Assembly asked that every individual and every organ of society would bear this declaration constantly in mind.

Male Voice 5: It was idealistic and profound, and I would say almost totally complete; the right to modicum of healthcare, the right to learn how to read and write, the right to human dignity. It's a good reminder to all of us that these rights still exist and that they are being violated daily on a very large scale.

Male Voice 6: It is reminding us first of all of our common humanity. We need it more than ever before.

Male Voice 7: We're calling for the world to rise up and declare that we profess our commitment again to this Declaration of Human Rights.

Female Voice 4: Go into various websites, including everyhumanhasrights.org, and read the pledge, and then become part of a powerful people network that's looking for accountability.

Male Voice 8: And the foundation of it will be literally hundreds of millions, perhaps a billion people on earth who say, “We demand these rights from our leaders.”

Males Voice 9: You are empowering people; you’re saying, “This is something you can claim, it is yours. Join us.”

Male Voice 10: I’m sure if we all wept together, and we all take the attitude of what can we do, how can we organize ourselves to do it – we can make a difference in this world of ours.

Male Voice 11: I believe that in the end it is kindness and generous accommodation that are the catalysts for real change.

Music Clip:

You can blow out the candles, but you can’t blow out the fire.
Once the flame begins to catch, the wind will blow it higher.

JS: That last segment was the audio from a short video produced as part of the Every Human has Rights Campaign. The campaign was launched by The Elders – a group convened by Nelson Mandela in 2007. The Elders are made up of well-known figures Desmond Tutu, Graca Machel, Kofi Annan, Ela Bhatt, Lakhdar Brahimi, Jimmy Carter, Gro Harlem Brundtland, Fernando Enrique Cardoso, Muhammad Yunis, Mary Robinson and Li Zhaoxing.

And just before that was the tune Backbiting by Lee Perry, Winston Heywood and the Upsetters.

As we continue on with recordings from the August 29th United Nations panel on the Human Right to Food and the Global Food Crisis, we now hear from Karen Hansen-Kuhn – the Policy Director for ActionAid USA. ActionAid is an international anti-poverty agency whose aim is to fight poverty worldwide. Formed in 1972, they have helped over 13 million of the world's poorest and most disadvantaged people in 42 countries worldwide. The International headquarters are in Johannesburg South Africa, and the American division based in Washington D.C.

Karen Hansen-Kuhn: ActionAid is currently in 50 countries around the world. We’ve been expanding and we have programs in 6 areas – women’s rights, HIV/AIDS, education, governance, emergencies, and the right to food. What’s central to that description is that we are an international development agency with a rights-based approach. It’s central to everything we do.

I’ve been pleased that I agree with most of the speakers here that the core of the problem with the food crisis is, well, two things. First, that it began years and years ago. It began as a result of structural adjustment programs imposed by the World Bank, IMF, multilateral development agencies, and made permanent in many trade agreements. Support to agriculture was slashed. Credit, technical assistance, really any kind of support you can imagine at the same time as trade was liberalized, leaving farmers defenseless.

In country after country we see these stories where even now as prices go up farmers are unable to respond. In some cases the farmers aren't there anymore – they've moved to the city. In other cases they simply don't have the tools they need to restart production.

This is the direct result of policy choices, structural adjustment programs, and also an orientation that treats agriculture and food production as a backwards sector that people should try to escape from, rather than the core of food security and rural livelihoods. It's really time that we change that orientation, recognize the value of farming and agriculture, and give farmers the tools they need to feed their families and their nations.

ActionAid is involved in an international campaign – we have a campaign called Hunger Free, and we have a 10-point plan to end world hunger. I'm not going to read all 10 points now, but I would like to highlight a few proactive steps that need to be taken.

The first really is to make the Right to Food law. This means putting an end to national laws and changing international policies, as several other speakers have described. We need to also enhance women's status and their right to land. This is partly because we should do this as a matter of right to advance women's rights, but even pragmatically in many countries it is women who are the food producers. In many African nations 60 to 80 percent of the food is produced by women. We need to give them the tools they need to increase that production. And we need to dramatically scale up public support to agriculture, through foreign assistance and other means.

Those are the positive steps. I would say that we in the north, in the U.S. in particular, also need to just get out of their way. We need to erase bad policies that are holding food production back in many countries. We need to change these bad trade deals. Bilateral deals like NAFTA and CAFTA, as well as the WTO. Ending U.S. agricultural subsidies is part of that equation.

But I think even more fundamental, and I would say even more interesting – or as interesting in any case, are developing country proposals to protect agriculture and trade negotiations. Proposals for special products and special safeguard mechanisms, which would allow for variable tariffs when there are import surges, could provide developing countries the tools they need to advance agriculture. Unity around those proposals was the key reason the WTO talks collapsed a few weeks ago. I think they should stay collapsed until there is a fundamental rethinking about the need to give countries the policy space they need to advance agricultural development.

We need to end biofuel subsidies and targets. I think there could be a role for small-scale biofuel production to generate local energy supplies. Perhaps, that's how it looked early on – but the fact that the U.S. and the E.U. have implemented such ambitious targets and such massive subsidies means that the demand has gone insane and it has led prices to increase as much as 75 percent. It's time to scale back those subsidies until we understand better what the consequences are for food production and for the environment.

We also need to address climate change. The intergovernmental panel on climate change has estimated that yields from rainfed agriculture in many African countries could drop by 50 percent in the next 10 years from where they are now. This is a problem that rich countries have

caused primarily. Rich countries need to dramatically cut emissions and scale up adaptation funding to help other countries cope with the impacts of climate change.

Food is more than a commodity – it's a basic human right. And it's time we made the changes to recognize the farmers who are fulfilling that right, and make this a central part of U.S. and other policies. Thank you.

JS: Karen Hansen Kuhn – the Policy Director of ActionAid USA based in Washington D.C. Karen spoke at the United Nations on August 29th in New York City.

Also on the panel was Sanjay Reddy - an Assistant Professor of Economics at Barnard College at Columbia University in New York. Reddy also teaches in the School of International and Public Affairs at Columbia University, where he teaches courses on world poverty and on development economics. Here's Sanjay Reddy.

Sanjay Reddy: Mr. Chairman, thank you very much. Thanks to all of you for being here, and to the organizers for this kind invitation. Let me begin by saying that this is a very complicated issue, and it can be tempting to identify clear answers before one has thought through the issue from a more fundamental point of view – considering what are the appropriate principles or analytical methods that one should apply to it. I should say that I am not one of those who has a clear idea as to what are the first best policies, so I'm not going to give you a list of recommendations – I think that that would be not the right thing for me to do at this moment. What I will do instead is to say something about how I am beginning to think about this issue and how one might begin to think about this issue.

Amartya Sen's book, "Poverty and Famines" remains the single most useful contribution of social scientists to understanding food security issues. I'm sure that many of you are very well familiar with that book, or with the ideas contained in it. As those of you who have read the book or other writings by Amartya Sen on the issue will be aware, the central contribution of the book is to present what is now called the entitlement framework. I prefer to call it a framework rather than a theory – some people refer to it as a theory; I will call it a framework because the core of that framework is actually a tautology – a statement that is necessarily true and therefore it cannot be a theory. A theory consists of testable hypotheses that could be falsified, but this statement is always true. And this statement is as follows: "When someone starves to death it is because they have failed to establish sufficient command over food."

Now, you might ask what use is a tautology of that kind. Well, the reason that it is a useful tautology – which is surprising in itself to philosophers and to others who have from the beginning assumed that all tautologies are useless – is that it draws our attention to a second question. In what way or for what reason did this particular individual who starved to death failed to establish command over food. What were the specific reasons for the entitlement failure that this individual experienced. Entitlements being Amartya Sen's word for the totality of the ways in which a person does establish command over food. And of course Amartya Sen's remarkable answer to that question was that very often – not always, but very often – aggregate food availability is not the primary reason for a large-scale failure of food entitlements or ability to establish command over food. Rather, in many instances it is the collapse of purchasing power

for important groups, important sectors of the population, numerous people who perhaps share certain occupations or have specific kinds of vulnerabilities, which is the primary reason for this failure of entitlements.

Sen distinguished in his book between two kinds of famines – what he called Boom Famines, and what he called Bust Famines. Boom famines are famines that happen in the presence of high aggregate food availability. And Amartya Sen pointed out that the famous Bengal famine of 1943 – which was perhaps his most extensive case study in the book – was actually a case of a boom famine, in which there was a very successful food crop in the year in question, but the food that was produced was directed away, largely because in that particular year the British and the Americans were very busy procuring food for their war effort in the Burma theatre. That procurement more generally gave rise to an increase in incomes for certain groups of people who bid away the available food from the poor.

Of course there are other cases of bust famines, but even those bust famines may be ones in which the distributional effects are quite salient and need to be studied. For instance, the famine in Wello province of Ethiopia in the early 1970s – which Amartya Sen also studied in the book – was a case in which there was a decrease in food production in the province, but one of the reasons for the collapse in food entitlements was that the available food was being bid away by people with higher incomes elsewhere in the country. So food was leaving the province even in the very midst of a famine.

Now if we look at the current world situation from this point of view, and ask the question: to the extent that there is an increase in food and security, is that due to boom reasons or bust reasons – it's fairly clear that it's largely due to boom reasons. The fact that there is a general increase in incomes, especially in certain middle income countries, lower middle income countries, or previously low income countries such as India and China – especially the urban sectors in India and China – as one of the reasons for this, but it's not the only reason.

I tend to think that that particular factor is overstated, because after all there have been large increases in food demand in the United States, Europe, Australia and so on, year on year for decades. So it would be just as accurate to say that the current food crisis is due to the cumulative effect of the increases in food demand in the currently developed countries as to say that it is due to the recent increases in food demand from developing countries.

In any event, that is certainly one dimension of the crisis, as it's now being referred to. And another dimension, of course – the biofuels aspect, which has also been discussed here – also has that feature. That it is the worldwide commodities boom and the increase in energy prices that that has entailed, which has generated a surge for new sources of energy including biofuels which has had the effect of bidding away acreage from food production toward biofuels.

Now, I won't claim to understand all of the causal aspects of the current crisis because they are indeed very complex and as Olivier and others have mentioned, the World Bank, the IMF, and other estimable institutions have done extensive studies seeking to provide attribution to the different causes of the current increase in food insecurity.

I am running out of the time that I was allotted, so let me make one major point before concluding. And this is that the human rights perspective does have value in understanding the appropriate policy responses to food insecurity. As Amartya Sen also pointed out, the framework of mainstream economists does not directly include any concern for food security or indeed for any human right. The conception of optimality that the economists have is one, which is entirely blind to whether or not human rights of any sort are fulfilled. And what economists call a Pareto optimum, which is the wonderful sort of optimum that is achieved in a competitive market economy if certain conditions are satisfied, is one that can be completely consistent with mass starvation.

No economist has ever questioned this, and indeed even Robert Nozick, the pro-market philosopher, was forced to revise his perspective when confronted with this fact; and provided for a special exemption in his theory that in the event that a competitive market economy were to lead to what he called a “catastrophic moral horror,” then property rights could be in that special case violated in order to diminish the extent of the “catastrophic moral horror” of the sort that would happen when a market’s success – rather than a market failure, speaking somewhat ironically – brings about the famine.

JS: And this is Deconstructing Dinner and that was Sanjay Reddy – Assistant Professor of Economics at Barnard College at Columbia University in New York.

Today’s audio was recorded at the United Nations in New York on August 29th as part of a dialogue series on Human Rights. The topic for this particular panel discussion was The Human Right to Food and The Global Food Crisis. A video archive which includes other panelists and audience questions will be linked to from the Deconstructing Dinner website at deconstructingdinner.ca.

Jerry Hush: My name is Jerry Hush. I’m a consultant completing a term with UNICEF as the accountability project manager, and I’m coming out of that having had experience with interagency evaluations having to do with food issues – most notably an interagency evaluation on Codex Alimentarius. I really appreciate all of the panelists interventions, and I must admit I’ve waited five years to hear this kind of discussion in the UN forum. What I’d like to interject in part as a simple description to add to what’s been said, is the role of the right to food with respect to health issues and food safety. What I heard was a discussion of food sovereignty and food security, but I think it’s important that this body and the participants recognize that there is a food safety element that also is at play with respect to the global food crisis. And that has to do with the role of Codex Alimentarius. I’m not quite sure many people are aware of it because it’s very well hidden. It’s an international organization within the UN system that sits between FAO and WHO; it has its own commission, and it sets global food standards for health and trade.

One of the most interesting elements about this organization is that it’s paradoxical. On one level it sets food standards that are designed to be used at a national level to promote health, on the other hand the food standards are used for trade. Given this discussion on the right to food, I think it’s very important that all of the variables at play that have to do with the potential for nutrition and the capacity to produce appropriate food within countries, this has to be recognized.

I will give you just simply one example of the way in which these global food standards have an impact on people's right to food, and that has to do with developing countries capacity – and I mean this in terms of capital capacity – to meet the standards. For example global food standards now require trace and tracking systems – what are often called HACCP – or there are other food standards that are raised, for example the need to have poultry put on ice immediately. What has happened is that for a nation to meet these standards – in other words to enter the commodity market – they have to have the capital to invest to be part of that market. This has severely disrupted food production in countries. Small farmers are not capable of meeting these global standards, which have become national standards, and so even internally you see the loss of food sovereignty, in other words control over lands, because they can't meet the standards. It's very paradoxical and I appreciate the complexity of this issue – but I think it's very important that we recognize that it's not simply a food sovereignty issue, it's not simply a food security issue, but hidden deep in the global governance of this emerging global food system are food safety issues. Thank you.

ending theme

JS: That was this week's edition of Deconstructing Dinner, produced and recorded at Nelson, British Columbia's Kootenay Co-op Radio. I've been your host Jon Steinman. I thank my technical assistant Doug Farquharson.

The theme music for Deconstructing Dinner is courtesy of Nelson-area resident Adham Shaikh.

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