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Global financial crisis, volatile food prices, make agricultural focus urgent, UN human rights food expert tells UN Commission on Sustainable Development

NEW YORK / GENEVA -- The United Nations Special Rapporteur on the right to food, Mr. Olivier De Schutter, has outlined some of the crucial choices that must be made to design more sustainable food systems in a world facing climate change and declining natural resources. In a submission to the Commission on Sustainable Development, Mr. De Schutter said that only by considering food as a human right, and looking at agricultural development through that perspective, could the correct choices be made.

Mr. De Schutter, who took up his functions as Special Rapporteur in 2008 when the world was experiencing dramatic food price increases, said it was urgent that governments make the connection between sustainable development and a rights-based approach to food. “In responding to the global food crisis, it is easy to move from the symptom – prices which have suddenly peaked – to a possible cure – produce more, and remove as soon as possible all supply-side constraints,” he said. But if we think of food as a human right “we must ask a very different set of questions.” Will the measures we adopt to boost production benefit those who are food insecure? Or will they simply mean a return to low prices and only further discourage small-scale farmers and marginalize them further?

“The right to food framework can assist in guiding governments towards making the right choices” by prioritizing the needs of the most vulnerable, he said. It could also improve government accountability, by “ensuring 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 right to adequate food is a human right stated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and widely ratified human rights treaties. It is recognized in the constitutions of at least 20 countries. “The rights-based approach clearly ought to be an essential component of a sustainable development approach to the issues of hunger and malnutrition,” the Special Rapporteur said.

“Increasing agricultural production must go hand in hand with increasing the incomes of the poorest, particularly small-scale farmers, and switching to modes of production which do not contribute to climate change,” he told the Commission. “CSD has a unique contribution to make to the current discussions about the future of agricultural development” and in addressing the issues of access to food.

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“Increased investments in agriculture, particularly in Africa, are necessary, yet this must be thought out seriously. The experience gained from the crisis showed that the key question is not merely that of increasing budgets allocated to agriculture but rather, that of choosing from different models of agricultural development which may have different impacts and benefit various groups differently”, the expert explained. In addition, “efforts by agronomists will be pointless if the right institutions, regulations and accountability mechanisms are not established and implemented. We must build an enabling environment which should be more about “how to help the world feed itself” than about “how to feed the world”. This is where sustainable development and the rights-based approach complement each other. The CSD session of May 2009 should be a milestone in the decline in the number of the hungry”, he said.

The Special Rapporteur invited the Commission to “identify smallholders’ access to land as key to sustainable agriculture, and to reiterate the essential role of agrarian reform (redistribution of land) in the progressive realization of the right to food. I believe there is a need for the adoption of international guidelines on large-scale offshore acquisitions of land, an initiative that the Commission may wish to support”, he said.

For the full text of the Special Rapporteur’s written submission to the Commission please refer to: http://www.un.org/esa/dsd/resources/res_docucsd_17_oth.shtml

Olivier De Schutter was appointed the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food in 2008 by the United Nations Human Rights Council. He is independent from any government or organization and serves in his individual capacity. Mr. De Schutter is currently Professor of International Human Rights Law at the Catholic University of Louvain. He can be reached at srfood@ohchr.org

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For further information, see: www2.ohchr.org/english/issues/food/index.htm

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