



United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights



“The global food crisis is not over. Our obligations go beyond fixing the financial system,” says UN Special Rapporteur

(GENEVA – NEW YORK) The United Nations Special Rapporteur on the right to food, Mr. Olivier De Schutter, calls decision-makers gathering in New York for the UN Conference on World Financial and Economic Crisis not to forget the global food prices crisis. This crisis is continuing in many countries. It is connected not only with the financial and economic crises, but also with the climatic/environmental crisis.

“Are we waiting new food riots in order to take swift action?” is the basic call of Mr. De Schutter, who started his UN mandate last year amidst the peak of the food prices increases. Since May 2008, the Human Rights Council has repeatedly asked him to report on the global food crisis, as the right to adequate food is part of the international human right law. Today, he asks decision-makers to seize the momentum.

The food crisis is indeed far from over. The FAO has confirmed that the total number of food insecure people is now above one billion people. Food prices on local markets remain higher in May 2009 than in May 2008 in more than forty developing countries, despite the price decrease on international markets, as shown in a recent FAO study. Moreover, the global food crisis has not unfolded in isolation from the financial and economic crisis. Remittance flows, for example, have been declining since late 2008, as a result of migrant workers losing their jobs. The consequences are increased food insecurity for the communities these remittances support.

“Just like the collapse of large banks, widespread hunger entails systemic risks. Less wholesome and less nutritious diets create an economic liability for the future development”, said Mr. De Schutter. “If the coping strategies adopted by vulnerable households cause reductions in the quantity and/or quality of diets at critical stages of child growth or during pregnancy, this may have long-lasting consequences on physical and mental growth”. Some of the poorest families have also been led to distress sales, including sales of productive assets such as land or tools, thereby making recovery less likely.

In this context, the Special Rapporteur recommends a greater attention on the right to food framework. “The right to food is not the right to be fed after an emergency. It is the right to access the means to produce food or the means to an income that enables the purchase of adequate food” said Mr. De Schutter. “The right to food can act as a compass to guide possible responses at the national and international levels” said Mr. De Schutter, who spent the first year of his mandate translating the implications of the right to food into concrete recommendations for areas such as trade or large-scale transnational land investments. It is a tool to ensure that policies are geared towards alleviating hunger and malnutrition and towards building the resilience of the most vulnerable groups against risks, shocks and policy changes. “This is totally different from the outdated and misplaced strategy of a plain increase in food production”, said Mr. De Schutter.

Mr. De Schutter recommends five directions in order to prevent more hunger and to progressively realize the right to food :

1. **Fighting against volatility on international agricultural markets.** The Special Rapporteur warns again the risk of new periods of extreme volatility on international agricultural markets such as the one that sparked food riots in dozens of countries in 2008. “There is a clear need for improving the management of grain stocks at global level, including coordination of global grain stocks to limit the attractiveness of speculation” said Mr De Schutter, who also recommends combating speculation on the futures markets of agricultural commodities; and supports the establishment of an emergency reserve allowing the World Food Programme to meet humanitarian needs at pre-crisis prices.

2. **Encouraging States to build social protection schemes thanks to a global reinsurance mechanism.** A significant number of countries reacted to the global food crisis by establishing or strengthening safety net programmes. Yet volatility on international agricultural markets may affect the willingness of poor countries to engage into such programs because they could fear not being able to commit to such schemes when food prices increase. The Special Rapporteur announced he supports a global reinsurance mechanism for countries that engage in such schemes: "It would create an incentive for countries to put in place robust social protection programmes for the benefit of their population".
3. **Channel resources towards the scaling up of sustainable agriculture systems rather than simply increasing food production.** According to Mr. De Schutter, the food crisis has had one positive impact: the renewed interest in agriculture. "Yet not all agricultural production models are the same. States, donors and international organizations should channel their support to sustainable farming approaches that benefit the most vulnerable groups and that are resilient to climate change and to the exhaustion of hydrocarbons", said the Special Rapporteur. "Agroecological farming approaches such as agroforestry or low-external input agriculture have demonstrated their high potential, especially in the difficult environments where vulnerable groups live".
4. **Protecting agricultural workers rights.** The international community has vastly, according to Mr. De Schutter, underestimated the importance of protecting the entitlements of the 700 million agricultural workers, which also are particularly vulnerable as their wages do not rise with higher food prices, and who are often not protected by social protection schemes as they are often hired on a seasonal basis in a largely informal sector. "Accelerating the work towards a better implementation of the relevant ILO conventions in the rural areas, in order to guarantee that those working on farms can be guaranteed a living wage, adequate health and safety conditions of employment, could be one of the best leverage to ensure that those working on the agricultural sector are ensured access to adequate food".
5. **Reforming the governance of the global food and agricultural system.** The Special Rapporteur highlighted the urgency to improve the global governance. His suggestions for a renewed Committee on World Food Security are currently being discussed in Rome. "I'm confident more and more countries are ready to engage to time-bound targets in hunger alleviation as well as to a monitoring mechanism, if such a mechanism can at the same time lead to guidelines for improved international coordination" said Mr. De Schutter.

Mr. De Schutter expects decision-makers to put the food issue back on the international agenda at the highest level. "We've seen too many summits whose only achievements have been a slight increase in food aid commitments or in commitments to reinvest in agriculture. We face a momentum. Our responsibility is to achieve structural improvements" said Mr. De Schutter. "Solutions exist. We can shape food systems that are productive, that create jobs and that are resilient to climate change".

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. He teaches International Human Rights Law at the Catholic University of Louvain (Belgium).

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