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Statement to the World Summit on Food Security

The Role of the Right to Food in achieving Sustainable Global Food Security

**Message of Dr. Olivier De Schutter
Special Rapporteur on the right to food**

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Rome**



Excellences, Distinguished Delegates,

I would like to commend the diplomats who worked hard during the past few weeks in order to reach a consensus on the Declaration that was finally adopted at this World Summit on Food Security.

Of course, the Declaration is far from perfect. It is weak on issues such as the production and use of agrofuels (para. 30), or speculation by commodity index funds (para. 24), although both of these have important impacts on the volatility of prices, and on the ability of net-food-importing countries to feed themselves. Alluding to the issue of large-scale acquisitions or leases of farmland, it refers to the need to promote responsible international agricultural investment, without recognizing that, without a more coordinated approach, developing countries may not be able to maximize the positive impacts of the arrival of investors, while minimizing potential adverse impacts (para. 40). The Declaration refers to the need for a timely and balanced conclusion of the Doha Development Round of trade negotiations (para. 22), without even acknowledging the fact that export-led agriculture has in the past worked against the interests of smallholders, those that we all now recognize must be supported in their ability to produce. The food economy today is characterized by the global supply chains and the importance of added-value production led by private corporations, who set the prices and link the producers to the consumers, without any sort of control and with often extremely high levels of concentration that represent a serious market failure. The Declaration is entirely silent about how to address this. And it is silent about the right of agricultural workers to a living wage and to the enjoyment of their other fundamental rights, although the 450 million people in this category, due to depressed wages and casualization of labour on large plantations, form an increasingly important vulnerable group.

We are now at a critical juncture, in which the tension between supporting smallscale agriculture and sustainable modes of farming, on the one hand, and pushing for more competition on increasingly globalized food markets dominated by large agribusiness corporations often tempted to depress the wages of agricultural laborers, on the other hand, is more and more visible. The Declaration could have recognized this tension, and identified ways to alleviate it by appropriate policies : instead, because it ignores the problem, it is silent on the solutions.

And yet, I am convinced that this Summit and the Declaration it has adopted may signal a new and promising era of global cooperation in achieving food security. The reason is that, at both national and international levels, it strongly emphasizes the need for accountability. In my view, this is key. Hunger is not a fatality. It is a result of policies that could have been different, and that would not have been allowed to stand if their impacts had been monitored more carefully in the past.

In the 2004 Voluntary Guidelines on the progressive realization of the right to adequate food, the member governments of the FAO unanimously committed to the adoption of nationally owned strategies. The Final Declaration reiterates this commitment (para. 9). Such strategies can have an important impact, by ensuring an adequate mobilization of resources, by improving coordination across different branches of government, by setting timebound objectives to be achieved, and by setting up participatory bodies – such as CONSEA in Brazil, or CONASSAN in Nicaragua – that ensure that the policies will be addressing the real needs of those who are hungry. Such strategies raise accountability. They prohibit governments from remaining passive in the light of widespread, unfulfilled needs.

A number of countries have institutionalized the adoption of such strategies. In Brazil, Guatemala, Nicaragua, or Venezuela, national framework laws have been adopted, based upon the principles of the right to food. In my capacity as Special Rapporteur, I shall in the future collect such good practices on a systematic basis, in order to accelerate collective learning by imitation.

At international level, accountability should be strengthened thanks to the reform of the Committee on World Food Security. As a member of the contact group that worked on that reform, I advocated the establishment of the CFS as a forum that could improve coordination across donors and international agencies, that could encourage collective learning from best practices, and that could enhance accountability of all actors involved, since they would have to relate the actions they take to a

framework adopted by the CFS. Such a global strategic framework, in my view, should offer a shared diagnosis about the problem and about the desirable solutions, and should inform our joint work towards the realization of the right to food. Of course, it cannot be ignored in the implementation of the multilateral trust fund that should provide support to agriculture in low-income countries, and that the World Bank has been asked to develop by the G20 Leaders' Statement at the September 2009 Pittsburgh Summit.

Accountability based on the right to food is not a luxury, or an add-on to the two tracks that have hitherto characterized our actions to achieve food security – 1° direct action to immediately tackle hunger for the most vulnerable and 2° medium- and long-term development programmes to eliminate the root causes of hunger and poverty. Support schemes to farmers that leave out the most marginalized, those living far from communication routes and who work the least fertile soil, may succeed in raising production, but they will fail to reduce hunger. Social programmes that benefit the best connected, or those who are sufficiently well equipped to overcome the bureaucratic hurdles, but that do not reach the poorest households or the illiterate, will equally fail. Grounding these efforts on the right to food means that this will not be allowed : by improving accountability, we ensure that such programmes will be both more legitimate and more effective in achieving their objectives.

The past approaches have failed, in no small part because of the absence of accountability and follow-up on solemn commitments made summit after summit. We now have a historic opportunity to fix the system of global governance, in order to ensure that this trend is reversed. If we fail to seize this moment, we will be judged harshly by those who will succeed us : the generation which will inherit the world we are shaping will simply not understand. For us, this will be a source of embarrassment and shame ; for the very poor, it will mean even more wasted lives and avoidable deaths of children who asked nothing but to live. None of us want this to happen. In order to reach success; we must consequently embrace this new vision based upon sustainable small-scale farming; local and regional markets; and policies based upon the principles of coordination, participation and accountability. We must start the year 2010 not only with a functioning CFS but also with a genuine agenda to address the gaps in international governance. The real work starts now.

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Olivier De Schutter was appointed the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food in March 2008 by the United Nations Human Rights Council. He is independent from any government or organization, and he reports to the Human Rights Council and to the UN General Assembly. For more on the work of the Special Rapporteur on the right to food, visit www.srfood.org or www2.ohchr.org/english/issues/food/index.htm.