Press Release

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Climate change, a ticking time bomb for global food security

GENEVA (16 December, 2009) – The UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food, Olivier De Schutter, warned Wednesday that only climate policies that are deeply rooted in a human rights regime can guarantee that the impacts upon the most vulnerable will be minimized. “Climate change is a ticking time bomb for global food security,” said De Schutter as the Copenhagen conference on climate change approaches its end.

“We know that the impacts of climate change will be felt disproportionately by some of the poorest countries and the most vulnerable within those countries. And we know that small scale farmers and indigenous peoples, as well as those who depend on land for their livelihoods, will suffer most,” stressed the UN expert, while calling on States “to exploit the untapped potential of sustainable agriculture in order to combat hunger and climate change at the same time.”

De Schutter noted that the Copenhagen conference takes place during two important dates for human rights (Human Rights Day on December 10th and the 44th anniversary of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights on December 16th), reiterating the warning message* sent last week by a group of UN human rights experts, including himself, that “a weak outcome of the climate change negotiations threatens to infringe upon human rights.”

There is clear “added value” to an approach grounded in human rights, he said. “By basing our mitigation and adaptation policies on a human rights framework, taking into account, in particular, the right to adequate food, we can ensure that these policies will be designed and implemented in ways that prioritize the needs of the most vulnerable groups, and that climate change will not further contribute to inequality and poverty.”

“This is not a theoretical debate. There are real cases of violations of the right to food linked to climate policies.” The UN Special Rapporteur revealed that he has received information about projects – such as those related to the Clean Development Mechanism – that have had negative impacts on the right to food. Local populations have sometimes been displaced to clear land for tree-planting projects intended to offset emissions from power plants in western countries. Investments in agrofuels have had the same impacts in some cases.

The Special Rapporteur insisted that strengthening the right to food and mitigating climate change can be mutually supportive. “Countries should exploit the synergies between combating climate change and fighting against hunger. It is now demonstrated that innovative agroecological modes of production, such as agroforestry and low external input agriculture, have improved food production and incomes of small farmers; and they have a positive impact on climate through reduced use of fossil fuels and carbon stocking in the case of agroforestry”.

*The warning message was sent by a group of UN human rights experts, including Olivier De Schutter, on December 9, 2009.
The UN expert said these systems needed to be scaled up, including through mitigation strategies. “If one looks at efficiency only, it’s much easier to incentivize carbon capture and storage mechanisms in 500 coal-fired power plants. But from a human rights perspective, it’s at least as important to channel the limited mitigation funds to several million vulnerable smallholder farmers.” With appropriate incentives, explained De Schutter, “they could build systems that are productive, that stock carbon and that are resilient to climate disruptions at the same time.”

De Schutter bolsters his message with a new report from the Human Rights Institute of Columbia University in New York which he commissioned. The report, published by the Heinrich Böll Foundation (Germany), highlights how the climate change and human rights regimes have failed to coordinate their efforts, despite the common objective of preserving human welfare for present and future generations. It recommends that the right to food should be built into the climate change framework.

(*) Joint Statement of the Special Procedure Mandate Holders of the Human Rights Council on the UN Climate Change Conference (Copenhagen, 7-18 December 2009):

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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).

Learn more about the Special Rapporteur’s mandate and work, please visit:
http://www2.ohchr.org/english/issues/food/index.htm

Watch the video message of the Special Rapporteur and read the report “Climate Change and The Right to Food. A Comprehensive Study” on: www.srfood.org

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