UN expert calls for farming changes

OCTOBER 16, 2010

GENEVA, Oct 16, 2010 (AFP) - The United Nations top official on the right to food called for wholesale changes in farming methods to safeguard the environment and ensure everyone has enough to eat.

Olivier De Schutter, the UN special rapporteur on the right to food, said in a statement to mark World Food Day that there is currently "little to rejoice about," and "worse may still be ahead."

"Current agricultural developments are ... threatening the ability for our children's children to feed themselves," he said. "A fundamental shift is urgently required if we want to celebrate World Food Day next year."

De Schutter said the emphasis on chemical fertilisers and a greater mechanisation of production was "far distant from the professed commitment to fight climate change and to support small-scale, family agriculture."

In addition, "giving priority to approaches that increase reliance on fossil fuels is agriculture committing suicide," he said.

"Agriculture is already directly responsible for 14 percent of man-made greenhouse gas emissions — and up to one third if we include the carbon dioxide produced by deforestation for the expansion of cultivation or pastures.

"As a result of climate change, the yields in certain regions of sub-Saharan Africa are expected to fall by 50 percent by 2020 in comparison to 2000 levels. And growing frequency and intensity of floods and droughts contribute to volatility in agricultural markets."

De Schutter said that pursuing the current approach would be "a recipe for disaster."

Instead there should be a global promotion of low-carbon farming, he said, adding that "agriculture must become central to mitigating the effects of climate change rather than a large part of the problem."

"Low-technology, sustainable techniques may be better suited to the needs of the cash-strapped farmers working in the most difficult environments," De Schutter said.

"They represent a huge, still largely untapped potential to meet the needs and to increase the incomes of the poorest farmers."

Climate change and agricultural development must be thought of together, instead of being dealt with in isolation from one another, De Schutter urged.

"To do so, we need to resist the short-termism of markets and elections. Development of longer-term strategies through inclusive and participatory processes could and should clearly identify measures needed, a clear time line, and allocation of responsibilities for action."

"What today seems revolutionary will be achievable if it is part of a long-term, democratically developed plan, one that will allow us to develop carbon-neutral agriculture and to pursue everyone's enjoyment of the right to food through sustainable food production systems."

The 30th celebration of World Food Day on Saturday has the slogan: "United against hunger."

The main issues in focus are rapidly increasing demand for food commodities and changing climates that affect abilities to produce food.