UN food expert urges "Green Marshall Plan" from Cancun

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A UN human rights expert on Monday called on the climate change conference in Mexico to launch a "Green Marshall Plan" for agriculture to counter the impact of global warming on hunger and poverty.

"Negotiations starting today in Cancun are crucial to guarantee the right to food for hundreds of millions of people," the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Olivier De Schuetter, said.

"Cancun should lead the way towards a ?Green Marshall Plan? for agriculture," he added, warning of the "disastrous" impact of climate change on food.

De Schuetter underlined that farming was both a victim of sustained shifts in global weather patterns as well as a major source of carbon emissions at its most intensive, industrial scale.

Scientists in the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change have estimated that yields from rain-fed agriculture could be cut by up to half between 2000 and 2020, while arid and semi-arid areas could grow by 60 million to 90 million hectares.

That could put 600 million more people at risk of hunger, the UN expert said.

"These projections are terrible, but current attempts to boost food production with chemical fertilizers and the development of heavily mechanised large-scale plantations are putting agriculture on the wrong track," De Schuetter warned.

Agriculture was directly responsible for 14 per cent of man-made greenhouse gas emissions, rising to one third with carbon dioxide produced by deforestation to make way for large scale crops or pastures, he added.

De Schuetter suggested a "Green Marshall Plan" should help shift the focus from industrial scale farming to low carbon food production geared to the needs of rural communities and smallholders.