UN Right to Food Rapporteur plans spring mission to Canada

By Colleen Kimmett January 13, 2012 03:00 pm

The United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food is planning a mission to Canada this spring -- the first such mission to a developed country.

Olivier De Schutter was appointed to the position in 2008 and is tasked with promoting the right to adequate food and freedom from hunger, examining ways to overcome barriers to these rights, and recommending steps to help achieve the UN's Millennium Development Goal of halving global hunger by 2015.

Previous missions have included Nicaragua, Brazil, China and most recently Madagascar. The Canadian mission is planned for May, although the exact dates and itinerary are not yet confirmed, according to the team's communications assistant, Nick Jacobs.

De Schutter has criticized the WTO's "trade-centric approach" to food security and cautioned against simply boosting food production as a reaction to world hunger. In a June, 2011 op-ed in the Guardian, he wrote that "hunger is neither the result of demographic problems nor just the result of a mismatch between supply and demand. It is primarily the result of political factors that condemn small farmers, the main victims of hunger, to poverty."

In response to a request from the office of the rapporteur, Food Secure Canada compiled a "joint civil society" submission that lays out five broad priority issues for Canada: poverty and the right to food; indigenous peoples and the right to food; the industrial food system and the right to food; governance and the right to food, and Canada and the right to food internationally. These priorities were established based on submissions for more than 40 groups across the country (including the Aboriginal People's Congress, Food Matters Manitoba, the People's Food Policy (National), the Arctic Institute of Community-Based Research and the Squamish Foodies, according to the submission document.

The submission also noted three topics where there was a divergence of opinion -- food banks, raw milk and supply management. "Some submissions suggested that food banks be immediately closed down due to the potential for masking issues of hunger and poverty, and others underlined the very necessary role they play in meeting day to day urgent food needs," the document reads. Likewise, "some submissions made a strong case for legalizing raw milk... while other within the dairy sector are opposed to the legalizations of raw milk stating health concerns." On the issue of supply management, the submission notes that while it elicited general support in principle, there is disagreement over the form it should take. "Some support the existing supply management models, while others feel the system often works to the disadvantage of smaller producers."

Colleen Kimmett reports for The Tyee

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