U.N. Chastises Mexico's Support for Agribusiness

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MEXICO CITY, Mar 9 (IPS) - The United Nations criticised Mexico's food policy, a month and a half after President Felipe Calderón launched to great fanfare an alliance of agribusiness for sustainable development, which was welcomed by giant food corporations.

At a meeting of the U.N. Human Rights Council in Geneva, the U.N. special rapporteur on the right to food, Olivier De Schutter, spoke out against the financial aid that Mexico will give to large producers at the expense of small farmers. He also criticised trials of genetically modified crops in this country.

He was presenting his annual report for 2011 on Tuesday Mar. 6 at U.N. headquarters in Geneva, including the results of his visit to Mexico last June.

The special rapporteur's observations echoed the criticism voiced by NGOs and contrasted with the applause with which executives of the world’s leading food corporations received the announcement of the creation of the Mexican Agribusiness Partnership for Sustainable Development at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland in late January.

"The objectives of the agriculture policy don't look at the small producers as competitive and as a solution for the growing dependency on food imports," De Schutter said in a videoconference from Geneva.

In his "Mission to Mexico" report, the Belgian academic described this country's public expenditure on agriculture as "highly regressive" because "most agricultural programmes fail to target the poor."

Mexico’s public agricultural budget for 2011 amounted to some 5.8 billion dollars, nearly double the total in the year 2000.

In his report on his official visit to Mexico last year, De Schutter warned that this Latin American country is suffering from a food and environmental crisis.

An estimated 52 million of Mexico’s 112 people live in poverty, and 25 percent of the population does not have enough to eat, according to the government’s National Council for the Evaluation of Social Development Policy (CONEVAL).

In addition, the centre and north of the country are suffering from drought, which is having a heavy impact on agriculture, livestock, and the incomes of thousands of farm workers.

"The situation has gotten worse," said Felipe Torres, head of the Frente Democrático Campesino (Democratic Peasant Front) in the northern state of Chihuahua, one of the areas hit by a lack of rainfall. "The programmes are focused on providing resources to those who have the most, while small farmers receive nothing."

"The agroecology sector needs support, especially small farmers in the most vulnerable areas," the activist told IPS.

A constitutional reform approved in October specifies that the right to food is a human right. But it has not been respected, say organisations fighting for food sovereignty, which are calling for measures like the creation of food stocks and the approval of an emergency law.
The Mexican government has defended its agricultural policy, pointing to the funds that go towards its numerous social programmes.

CONEVAL enumerated 273 national programmes, some of which overlap and are not entirely transparent.

“We have would liked to see a mention of the reports of violations of the right to food and of economic, social and cultural rights,” Alicia Carriquiriborde, representative of the Mexican branch of the international Food First Information and Action Network (FIAN), told IPS.

During De Schutter’s mission to Mexico, the organisation presented him with at least five cases of infrastructure projects, like the construction of dams, which are threatening the right to food.

The group also pointed out that regulations have not been adopted in order to implement the constitutional reform, which has not yet gone into effect.

After the constitutional reform was approved, a Parliamentary Front Against Hunger was created, at the behest of the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO).

The Front plans to produce a food emergency bill this month, which is unlikely to pass this year, however, since work in Congress has virtually come to a standstill ahead of the legislative and presidential elections in July. The new legislature begins to meet in September.

“We are not moving in the right direction,” Reginaldo Rivera, a lawmaker of the opposition Institutional Revolutionary Party who belongs to the Parliamentary Front, told IPS. “The measures taken have been too little, too late. What is needed is an over-arching initiative that encompasses all of the programmes.”

De Schutter, who was named special rapporteur in 2008, suggested a new moratorium on trials of GM crops, an expansion of social programmes in rural areas, the evaluation of large-scale projects, and a refocusing of public agricultural expenditure towards the poor.

“We know from studies from 2001 that GM maize can fly to native maize areas and that the contamination is difficult to avoid. It might or might not lead to the gradual disappearance of native varieties. My main concern is the huge concentration of biotech companies, such as Monsanto,” he said.

Since the previous one-decade moratorium on GM crops expired in 2009, the government has received 110 applications for experimental cultivation of transgenic maize and 11 for pilot programmes, and has granted permits for trials of GM soy and wheat, while transgenic cotton has been planted commercially since 2009.

“It is our responsibility to produce healthy food, and we can’t leave it in the hands of transnational companies, while importing food,” Torres said.

De Schutter said Mexico needs an open debate among the authorities, civil society and academics on GM crops, based on sound scientific evidence.

In November 2001, the contamination of native maize with GM genes was reported in the southern state of Oaxaca by a study carried out by biologists David Quist and Ignacio Chapela at the University of California in Berkeley, which was published in the prestigious British journal Nature.

Mexico has not ratified the Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which has not yet gone into force.

The protocol, open for signature since 2009, creates a mechanism for individuals, groups or communities to file complaints about violations of their economic, social or cultural rights before the U.N. Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

Mexico "has not ratified it because of the interests of the transnational corporations and of public policies that have not been fulfilled," Carriquiriborde complained. (END/2012)