UN official sparks debate over Canadian food security

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UN special rapporteur for food Olivier De Schutter said he was in Canada to launch a conversation over a national food strategy, and he certainly started a debate.

Discussion centred on whether Canadians have trouble affording to feed themselves, with the government arguing De Schutter was wasting his time and advocates for the poor urging politicians to arrange for wide-ranging meetings to create a national food strategy.

De Schutter warned Wednesday that inequality is getting worse, with many Canadians having problems getting the healthy food they require.

The 11-day visit to Canada involved looking at whether poor people in Canada have adequate diets and at social policies to support people with low incomes, he said. De Schutter said his role is to help countries identify blind spots in public policies that would be easier to ignore — and that he didn't see why he should mince his words.

"We have a large number of Canadians who are unacceptably too poor to feed themselves decently," he said.

"We have in this country more than 800,000 households who are considered food insecure.... This situation is of great concern to me."

Canada has a standard of living that is envied throughout the world, he said. But inequality is increasing and the top 10 per cent of the country is 10 times more affluent than the bottom 10 per cent. Taxes and benefits reduce inequality much less than in most OECD countries.

Canada fails to adapt its social assistance benefits and minimum wage to the rising costs of basic necessities, including food and housing, he added. Food banks are not a solution but a symptom of failing social safety nets.

'Discredit to the United Nations'

The Conservative government struck early, with Immigration Minister Jason Kenney suggesting De Schutter is wasting his organization's money by visiting a developed country.

"Canada sends billion of dollars of food aid to developing countries around the world where people are starving," Kenney said.

"It would be our hope that the contributions we make to the United Nations are used to help starving people in developing countries, not to give lectures to wealthy and developed countries like Canada. And I think this is a discredit to the United Nations."

De Schutter says most of his missions are in developing countries, but he estimates Canada has two to three million people who can't afford the diets they need to lead healthy lives. He says one million First Nations people and 55,000 Inuit are "the desperate situation" in which they find themselves.
"The right to food is about politics. It’s not about technicalities. It’s a matter of principle and it’s a matter of political will. I think these comments are symptomatic of the very problem that it is my duty to address," he said.

**Consumers educate themselves about food**

NDP MPs urged support for farmers and policies that ensure the working poor can feed themselves in the wake of De Schutter's report.

"This government says if you have a job, you won’t be poor. That's not true," New Democrat MP Malcolm Allen said Wednesday.

At the same time, consumers are trying to re-educate themselves about where their food comes from, because much of it isn't grown locally, he said. Many farmers have to work off-farm to earn a living or export all their product to other countries to survive.

Hunger and consumer groups also called for a national strategy in Canada to deal with the quality, availability and price of food.

Representatives from Food Secure Canada, the National Farmers Union, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami and the Centre for Science in the Public Interest, called for a plan to connect farms with communities and to deal with a problem that sees families struggling to feed themselves.

Paul Slomp, youth spokesman for the National Farmers Union, said they agree that Canada’s food system is in dire need of attention. In the last 20 years, he said, the number of farmers under the age of 35 has decreased from 77,000 to a little more than 24,000.

"Parents who are farming are telling their kids it’s not worth the stress and it’s not worth the debt," he said.

"Canada needs to make sure that farmers have a viable income in growing food for Canadians."

The groups, representing a variety of interests and each with different demands, all called for a national food strategy.

"On a sort of common sense basis, we live in Canada. Kids should not be going to school hungry," said Diane Bronson, executive director of Food Secure Canada.