Malawi must reassess its agricultural policies to break cycle of poverty – UN expert

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A United Nations independent expert today stressed that Malawi must reassess its national food security strategy to ensure that policies designed to combat poverty and malnutrition truly reach the most vulnerable in the population. “Recent high-profiled food security policies have failed to rid Malawi of chronic food insecurity and malnutrition,” said Olivier De Schutter, the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food. “The country urgently needs a national food security strategy, underpinned by a Right to Food Framework Law, to hold policies to account when they do not yield benefits for the most food insecure and to ensure a coherent approach across sectors,” he said at the end of an 11-day visit to the country. More than 50 per cent of the country remains mired in poverty, with one quarter of ‘ultra poor’ Malawians earning less than the estimated costs of a diet providing minimum recommended calorie intake, and about half of all children suffering from acute or severe malnutrition. While Malawi is often viewed as an example of how hunger can be tackled by subsidizing inputs for farmers, long-term progress can be missed when too little is done to empower the poor, Mr. De Schutter said. Through its Farm Input Subsidy Programme (FISP), more than one million beneficiaries have gained access to discounted fertilizers and seeds. However, this year the country will need to import maize for humanitarian food aid to Malawian farmers who are unable to feed themselves. Mr. De Schutter argued that the country must reassess whether FISP – which takes up more than half of Malawi’s agricultural budget – is the most effective use of available resources to protect the right to adequate food for all Malawians. “It is time for Malawi to move beyond the fertilizer-led ‘green revolution’ and invest in the brown and blue revolutions needed to rebuild soil fertility and water retention,” Mr. De Schutter urged. “Malawians need a durable agricultural resource base and living wages – and currently they are getting neither.”

The Malawian minimum wage, currently fixed at around $1.12 per day, is one of the lowest in the world, and 300,000 tenant families on tobacco plantations – where 78,000 child labourers are employed – are only paid depending on the quantity and quality of tobacco sold to landlords. Meanwhile, Malawi has lost over 10 per cent of its gross domestic product (GDP) to illicit outflows over the past three decades, with mining companies exempted from customs duty, excise duty, value added tax (VAT) on mining machinery, plant and equipment.

“The policy of providing abundant, cheap and non-unionized labour to plantation owners must be consigned to the past,” Mr. De Schutter stated, adding that “Malawi’s poor pay twice for the red carpet treatment given to multinational investors – in the suppression of their wages, and in the services deprived them by corporate tax exemptions.”

Among the steps to be taken by the Government to redress the balance are enforcing a living wage, allowing workers to bargain collectively in all sectors, and negotiating fair taxation arrangements for investors.

“By improving participation and accountability in the design and implementation of food security policies, Malawi can ensure that public investment will truly reach the poorest within the population,” Mr. De Schutter said.
"It is essential that the country does not pursue investment for investment's sake, but uses it as an opportunity to engage corporations in a genuine commitment to help improve the situation of Malawi's poor and food insecure," he concluded.

Independent experts, or special rapporteurs, are appointed by the Geneva-based UN Human Rights Council to examine and report back on a country situation or a specific human rights theme. The positions are honorary and the experts are not UN staff, nor are they paid for their work.