"Right to food gains ground, but there's still much to be done", says UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food

GENEVA - Two years after taking office as UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food, Olivier De Schutter presents a review of the progress made by a range of countries in implementing the human right to food at the national level. This review is published at a time when UN agencies prepare themselves to update the ‘Comprehensive Framework of Action’ which was adopted in July 2008 as an immediate reaction to the global food price crisis*

The review highlights recent examples of institutional initiatives that are decisive in the realization of the right to food. “There has been very significant progress in a number of countries. The right to food is now alive in 24 national constitutions. It has been given concrete meaning through national framework laws, courts, and participatory bodies. It has an influence on some land or fishing policies, on coordination among ministries, and the use of public resources. These are key steps for lasting progress, and they are totally different from the classic recipe of increasing food production”, says Mr. De Schutter.

“Boosting food production should not be confused with realizing the human right to food”, warns the UN expert. “If the international community is willing to reinvest in agriculture, the real question today is not ‘how much’, but ‘how’. We tend to forget that in the fight against hunger, processes and institutions are as vital as new seeds; legal frameworks as necessary as agricultural investments; and participatory institutions as impactful in the long term as bags of fertilizers.”

The review highlights a number of examples:

> In South Africa, traditional fishermen went to court after they lost their fishing rights due to new governmental fisheries policies, and in 2007 the Minister and the fishermen agreed to a court order in the South African Equality Court in terms of which the Minister and the fishermen must develop a new policy and legislative framework that will accommodate and recognise the socio-economic rights and the right to equitable marine resources of traditional fishermen.

> In Brazil, continuous progress is being done since the launch of the Zero Hunger strategy in 2003. Since 2009, a minimum of 30 per cent of the food purchased under the school-feeding programme should come, by law, from small family farms and indigenous communities, and for the fiscal year 2009, more then 313 million € was budgeted for purchases from family farms including assentamentos, indigenous communities and quilombolas. This strategy has also helped to achieve significant reductions in child mortality, which dropped 73% since 2002. The strategy is supported by the adoption of the 2006 Law establishing a National Food and Nutritional Security System (SISAN), which reestablished the National Food and Nutritional Security Council (CONSEA), thus ensuring a strong participation of civil society in the formulation of recommendations to the government.

> In India, following a case filed in 2001 before the Supreme Court, mid-day meal schemes have almost universal coverage, now benefiting more than 118 million Indian children who attend primary school : in this and in other respects, the supervision by courts of social programmes have helped improve their effectiveness and accountability.
“These institutional developments are crucial in the fight against hunger, since they transform victims who are to be helped into rights-holders to whom governments are accountable”, says Mr. De Schutter. “However, much progress still needs to be made. Interesting practices have now been identified, and they should be pursued and scaled up, including via international cooperation. In this review, I make 7 recommendations to strengthen these developments. The ball is now in the court of decision-makers.”

* Note: The UN High Level Task Force for the Global Food Crisis is organizing a consultation to update the Comprehensive Framework of Action on May 17 - 18 in Dublin.

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Read “Countries tackling hunger with a right to food approach. Significant progress in implementing the right to food at national scale in Africa, Latin America and South Asia”, Briefing note by the Special Rapporteur on the right to food”,: http://www.srfood.org/.


For more on the work of the Special Rapporteur, visit www2.ohchr.org/english/issues/food/index.htm.

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Olivier De Schutter was appointed the Special Rapporteur on the right to food in May 2008 by the United Nations Human Rights Council. He is independent from any government or organization.