“Agroecology outperforms large-scale industrial farming for global food security,” says UN food expert

BRUSSELS – “Governments and international agencies urgently need to boost ecological farming techniques to increase food production and save the climate”, said UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Olivier De Schutter, while presenting the findings at an international meeting on agroecology held in Brussels on 21 and 22 June.

Along with 25 of the world’s most renowned experts on agroecology, the UN expert urged the international community to re-think current agricultural policies and build on the potential of agroecology.

“One year ago, Heads of States at the G20 gathering in Italy committed to mobilizing $22 billion over a period of three years to improve global food security. This was welcome news, but the most pressing issue regarding reinvestment in agriculture is not how much, but how”, said Olivier De Schutter.

“Today, most efforts are made towards large-scale investments in land – including many instances of land grabbing – and towards a ‘Green Revolution’ model to boost food production: improved seeds, chemical fertilisers and machines,” the Special Rapporteur remarked. “But scant attention has been paid to agroecological methods that have been shown to improve food production and farmers’ incomes, while at the same time protecting the soil, water, and climate.”

The widest study ever conducted on agroecological approaches (Jules Pretty, Essex University, UK) covered 286 projects in 57 developing countries, representing a total surface of 37 million hectares: the average crop yield gain was 79%. Concrete examples of ‘agroecological success stories’ abound in Africa.

In Tanzania, the Western provinces of Shinyanga and Tabora used to be known as the ‘Desert of Tanzania’. However, the use of agroforestry techniques and participatory processes allowed some 350,000 hectares of land to be rehabilitated in two decades. Profits per household rose by as much as USD 500 a year. Similar techniques are used in Malawi, where some 100,000 smallholders in 2005 benefited to some degree from the use of fertilizer trees.

“With more than a billion hungry people on the planet, and the climate disruptions ahead of us, we must rapidly scale up these sustainable techniques”, said De Schutter. “Even if it makes the task more complex, we have to find a way of addressing global hunger, climate change, and the depletion of natural resources, all at the same time. Anything short of this would be an exercise in futility.”
The experts gathering in Brussels identified the policies that could develop agroecological approaches to the scale needed to feed the world in 2050. They based their work on the experiences of countries that have pro-agroecology policies – such as Cuba or Brazil – as well as on the successful experiences from international research centres such as the World Agroforestry Center in Nairobi, and on the programmes of La Via Campesina, the transnational peasant movement, which runs agroecology training programmes.

“We can scale up these sustainable models of agriculture, and ensure that they work for the benefit of the poorest farmers. What is needed now is political will to move from successful pilot projects to nation-wide policies”, said the UN Special Rapporteur. In conclusion, he announced that he would ask the Committee on World Food Security – what should become in time the ‘Security Council’ for food security – to work during its October session on the policy levers to scale up agroecology. “This is the best option we have today. We can’t afford not to use it”.

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Note to editors:

- The international seminar “The contribution of agroecological approaches to meet 2050 global food needs” was held in Brussels on 21 and 22 June. Convened under the auspices of the mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Prof. Olivier De Schutter, it brought together agroecology experts, decision makers at national and international levels, and representatives of farmer organizations.

- Agroecological farming approaches include agroforestry (interplanting trees and crops on the same parcel), biological control (controlling pests and diseases with natural predators), water harvesting methods, intercropping, green manure cover crops, mixed crop and livestock management, and many other practices. One feature uniting all of the above advances is the low use of external inputs.

- According to a UNEP report, the agricultural sector could be largely carbon neutral by 2030 and produce enough food for a population estimated to grow to nine billion by 2050, if systems proven to reduce emissions from agriculture were widely adopted today. Dennis Garrity, the Director of the World Agroforestry Centre in Nairobi assessed in July 2009 that a global implementation of agroforestry methods could also result in 50 billion tons of carbon dioxide being removed from the atmosphere - about a third of the world's total carbon reduction target.

- Modern agriculture is a huge contributor to greenhouse gas emissions, accounting for 14% of total annual emissions, with change in land-use (including deforestation for agricultural expansion) contributing another 19%. Of the direct agricultural emissions, fertilizers account for 38%, and livestock for 31%. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has estimated that in Southern Africa, yields from rainfed agriculture could be reduced by up to 50 percent between 2000 and 2020, and that arid and semi-arid areas could increase by 60-90 million hectares before 2080.
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.

For more information on the mandate and work of the Special Rapporteur, visit:

http://www2.ohchr.org/english/issues/food/index.htm

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