BRUSSELS – Despite a recent improvement that could prove short-lived, world hunger is on the rise since the adoption of the Millennium Development Goals in 2000. The UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food calls for strong improvements to the MDG process itself in a message delivered on the eve of the MDG Review Summit in New York. Just reaffirming the Goals will not do.

“Today, 925 million people go to sleep hungry every night - more than the populations of USA, Canada, and the European Union,” says Olivier De Schutter, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food. “That’s almost 100 million more people than 10 years ago, when the MDGs were adopted. The reasons behind this fiasco are numerous and complex. But the MDG approach itself has been unable to avoid this failure. It can and must be revised.”

According to the UN expert, the 10-year focus on MDGs has crowded out attention to the structural problems of hunger and poverty that don’t make it onto the ‘MDGs menu’. “The MDGs have been useful in mobilizing money and energy”, says De Schutter. “But they attack the symptoms of poverty - underweight children, maternal mortality, HIV prevalence, etc. – while remaining silent on the deeper causes of underdevelopment and hunger. By focusing attention on statistical targets for which data commonly exists, we act like a drunken man who loses his car keys in the dark but looks for them under the lone streetlamp because the light is better there.”

Politics, not statistics

On the eve of the MDG Summit in New York, Olivier De Schutter calls thus the international community, and in particular rich states, to drastically change the current MDG approach by focusing first on the structural obstacles to development like tax havens, debt and trade regime.

“Each year, developing countries miss out on 124 billion USD in lost income from offshore assets held in tax havens. By not closing down such tax havens, rich countries encourage corrupt elites to continue cheating their populations. Poor countries also face a burden of foreign debt – estimated at 500 billion USD – that is simply incompatible with the pursuit of development goals; and they have to struggle in an international trade system which is deeply inequitable and discourages diversification of their economies. These are the real issues to work on if we want to get lasting results. Statistics are not a substitute for politics.”

Human rights, not charity

According to De Schutter, the MDG Summit should be seized as an opportunity to achieve a “revolution” in the understanding of development.
"MDGs, as they are currently conceived, are a top-down, technocratic process that seeks to benefit people without involving them”, explains the expert. “We have to move from this statistical, charity-based approach to adopt a rights-based approach. The 925 million hungry people do not deserve only charity: they have a human right to adequate food which is enshrined in international human rights law, and governments have corresponding duties.”

Instead of vowing to support humanitarian objectives and throwing money to address the symptoms of poverty, the UN expert pushes for the adoption of national laws that define which actions should be taken, by whom, within which precise timeframe, and with which resources.

“Designed in a participatory process with civil societies, this approach would, at last, remove the stigma of charity and empower the people, who become actors rather than passive recipients of aid. Accountability mechanisms should be established, allowing the victims to hold governments responsible for their failure to take action. The recognition of human rights as operational tools in development strategy is the key for lasting progress. Heads of States gathering in New York this week should bear this in mind and act consequently if they want to be serious in the fight against poverty and hunger.”

ENDS

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.

Learn more about the mandate and work of the Special Rapporteur: http://www2.ohchr.org/english/issues/food/index.htm and http://www.srfood.org

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