PRESS RELEASE

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“Pressure on farmland is increasing at an unprecedented rate”, warns new UN report

New York, 21 October 2010 – Each year, up to 30 million hectares of farmland are lost due to environmental degradation, conversion to industrial use or urbanization. Exacerbated by the expansion of agrofuels and the speculation on farmland, this trend has dramatic consequences for hundreds of millions of farmers, fishermen and indigenous people, says a new report by UN independent expert.

“Today, 500 million small-scale farmers suffer from hunger partly because their right to land is under attack”, says Olivier De Schutter, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, author of the report presented today before the UN General Assembly. “As rural populations grow and competition with large industrial units increases, the plots cultivated by smallholders are shrinking year after year. Farmers are often relegated to soils that are arid, hilly or without irrigation. This poses a direct threat to the right to food of rural populations.”

In India, for instance, the average landholding size fell from 2.6 hectares in 1960 to 1.4 hectares in 2000 and continues to decline. In Eastern and Southern Africa, the amount of cultivated land per capita declined by half over the past generation.

An explosive cocktail

The report "Access to Land and the Right to Food" shows that the combination of environmental degradation, urbanization and large-scale land acquisitions by foreign investors form an explosive cocktail and that the pressure on land suitable for agriculture is increasing at an unprecedented rate.

“Worldwide, 5 to 10 million hectares of agricultural land are being lost annually due to severe degradation and another 19.5 million are lost for industrial uses and urbanization”, says De Schutter. “But the pressure on land resulting from these factors has been boosted in recent years by policies favouring large-scale industrial plantations. Each year, investors express an interest in the acquisition of over 40 million hectares of farmland, often for the production of agrofuels, a major driver behind the recent wave of large-scale acquisitions of land. According to the World Bank, more than one third of large-scale land acquisitions are intended to produce agrofuels.”

Measures adopted with a view to climate change mitigation or environmental conservation have also increased the pressure on agricultural land, says the report. The planting of forests in order to benefit from the “clean development mechanism” has sometimes led to evictions, against which the local populations concerned are insufficiently protected.

Time for a new agrarian reform

“All these developments have a huge impact on smallholders, indigenous peoples, herders and fisherfolk who depend on access to land and water for their livelihoods”, says De Schutter. “States should therefore confer legal security of tenure upon those persons, households and
communities. However, evidence shows that individual land titling and the creation of a market for land rights may not be the most appropriate means to achieve this protection.”

According to the UN expert, the titling process may confirm the unequal distribution of land, resulting in practice in a “counter-agrarian reform”. Furthermore, land sales tend to favour not those who can make the most efficient use of land, but those who have access to capital and whose ability to purchase land is greatest.

“Rather than focusing on strengthening the rights of landowners, States should encourage communal ownership systems, strengthen customary land tenure systems and reinforce tenancy laws to improve the protection of land-users”, says De Schutter.

Still, in the presence of sometimes highly unequal distribution of land in rural areas, strengthening security of tenure may not be sufficient and land redistribution may be required. The UN expert’s report demonstrates that a more equitable distribution of land is desirable on both efficiency and equity grounds, with a particularly strong potential for economic growth, empowerment of women and reduction of rural poverty.

“Unfortunately, the sense of urgency regarding land redistribution has decreased, because of the conviction of many policy-makers that technology-driven productivity improvements might be a less contentious alternative to agrarian reform”, concludes De Schutter. “And this is a tragic mistake: given the threats posed today by large-scale land acquisitions, the best way to ensure the right to land and the right to food is precisely to democratize and to secure access to land for the benefit of smallholders. Many today are asking how large-scale land acquisitions can be disciplined. This report asks instead how agrarian reform can be promoted as an alternative to the global enclosure that we are currently witnessing. The conclusion is clear: access to land must be recognized as a critical human rights issue.”

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.

To read the report of the Special Rapporteur on “Access to land and the right to food” (A/65/281), visit: http://www2.ohchr.org/english/issues/food/annual.htm

For further information and media requests, please contact:

> In New York – Olivier De Schutter (Tel: +32 488 482004 / email: srfood@ohchr.org) or Yoonie Kim (Tel: +41 79 201 01 19 / email: ykim@ohchr.org)

> In Geneva – Ulrik Halsteen (Tel: +41 22 917 93 23 / email: uhalsteen@ohchr.org)

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