Cancun Climate Summit: UN food expert calls for a “Green Marshall Plan for Agriculture”

NEW YORK / GENEVA – “Without a substantial change in policies, greenhouse gas emissions from agriculture could rise by 40 percent by 2030”, the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food, Olivier De Schutter, warned, urging negotiators at the Cancun Climate Summit to “consider climate and agricultural policies together to effectively address climate change and its disastrous impact on the right to food.” In his view, “Cancun should lead the way towards a ‘Green Marshall Plan’ for agriculture.”

“Negotiations starting today in Cancun are crucial to guarantee the right to food for hundreds of millions of people,” De Schutter said. “Ambitious action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and support climate change adaptation is vital. Similarly ambitious action, however, is needed to ensure sustainable food production systems that improve the livelihoods of poor communities— the first victims of climate change.”

The impact of climate change on agricultural production in developing countries and on the volatility of markets is now well documented. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has estimated that in Southern Africa, yields from rain-fed 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. At that time, 600 million additional people could be at risk of hunger as a direct result of climate change.

“These projections are terrible, but current attempts to boost food production with chemical fertilizers and the development of heavily mechanized large-scale plantations are putting agriculture on the wrong track,” the UN expert warned.

“Agriculture is already directly responsible for 14 percent of man-made greenhouse gas emissions – and up to one third if we include the carbon dioxide produced by deforestation for the expansion of cultivation or pastures,” he said. “And this figure will rise in the next few years. Keeping blindly on the track of industrial agriculture is clearly unsustainable and also detrimental to the right to food of millions of small-holder farmers and other vulnerable communities. What we really need is a ‘Green Marshall Plan’ for agriculture to encourage global transition to low-carbon ways of producing food, focused on the needs of vulnerable rural communities and small-holder farmers.”

According to De Schutter, low-carbon and resource-preserving methods of agriculture, also known as agro-ecological approaches, offers an alternative pathway that can both mitigate climate change by limiting the greenhouse gas emissions and improve the livelihoods of poor rural communities by reducing their dependence on expensive fossil fuel-based inputs for agriculture while increasing levels of production.

“Through ambitious programmes and policies, a ‘Green Marshall Plan’ for agriculture would scale up agro-ecological approaches towards more sustainable modes of agriculture which are sensitive to
the needs of vulnerable communities,” the UN expert explained. “It will require sustained efforts over several decades, but there is no time to lose,” he urged. “We must start now to set agriculture on a pathway that is both environmentally and socially sustainable. A ‘Green Marshall Plan’ for agriculture is critical, and indeed an obligation, if we are serious in our fight against climate change and hunger.”

The next Report of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, to be presented to the UN Human Rights Council at its sixteenth session in March 2011, explores ways to implement such a plan focusing on the untapped potential of agro-ecology.

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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.

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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Note to editors:

- 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.