BRUSSELS, 2 May 2011. Today, Olivier De Schutter officially begins a new term as United Nations Special Rapporteur on the right to food. The UN Human Rights Council renewed his mandate for the next 3 years. What conclusions does he draw about his first term? And what will be his priorities in the next 3 years? The following statement answers these questions.

"Three years ago, when I took up the mandate of United Nations Special Rapporteur on the right to food, the commodities markets were in turmoil. The FAO price index was reaching record levels and people were taking to the streets in almost forty countries. Governments were panicking, many imposing export bans on food commodities in order to reassure their populations. Within a matter of months, 140 million more people fell below the internationally defined poverty line. And for the first time in history, the one billion mark of hungry people on Earth was exceeded. Three years later, as I begin my second term as UN Special Rapporteur, are things any different?

Of course, the shock of the 2007-2008 food price crisis pushed decision-makers to act, and a lot has been achieved since then. Agriculture has been officially placed on the top of the political agenda. Financial pledges have been made. The Committee of World Food Security has been reformed, leading to a better global governance of food security. In addition, governments and international agencies increasingly acknowledge that implementing the right to adequate food is key to sustainable solutions to global hunger.

But despite these changes, the 2007-2008 scenario is playing out again. Last summer, prices on international markets soared again, and the increase continued for eight months. According to the World Bank, global food prices are now 36% above their 2010 levels and remain extremely volatile, close to their 2008 peak. Poor consumers are severely hurt. Due to their political marginalization and their lack of bargaining power, most small-scale farmers are not benefiting from the current price spike. And the wages of agricultural workers are not rising suddenly because the prices of commodities increase.

We can stop this cycle of food crises, that mechanically lead to increases of inequality and poverty. Of course, prices of food commodities shall in the future be more volatile and higher, in particular as a result of climate disruptions, of increased competition for land and water, and of speculation on both the physical and the financial markets. But
whether these shocks will lead to increased levels of hunger and malnutrition will depend on the choices made by governments.

**In January 2011, I presented the G20 leaders with eight priorities to be followed in order to avoid the resurgence of shocks.** But beyond the implementation of these recommendations, governments will have to make a radical change of perspective. Today, too many of them continue to see hunger as a problem of supply and demand, when it is primarily a problem of a lack of access to productive resources such as land and water, of unscrupulous employers and traders, of an increasingly concentrated input providers sector, and of insufficient safety nets to support the poor. Too much attention has been paid to addressing the mismatch between supply and demand on the international markets -- as if global hunger were the result of physical scarcity at the aggregate level --, while comparatively too little attention has been paid both to the imbalances of power in the food systems and to the failure to support the ability of small-scale farmers to feed themselves, their families, and their communities.

**This way of addressing hunger and rural development led us to an impasse.** Governments have sought to increase food production to ensure the provision of low-priced food to the growing number of urban poor. And they have seen importing subsidised foods dumped on the international markets as a desirable option, despite its impacts on local food producers and the heightened vulnerability this creates for net-food-importing countries due to increasingly volatile prices. This narrow focus on ensuring food availability, understandable though as it is, also encouraged the development of large-scale, industrial modes of production that perhaps fit the requirements of the dominant low-cost food economy, but which result in considerable social and environmental externalities that are not accounted for in the price of food. This is the impasse that we now face.

Over the past three years, I have explored various ways through which we could break this impasse. My key concern has been about how to make a transition: how to move from a system that ruins small-scale farmers in order to feed the cities, to a system in which better incomes for rural households slow down rural-to-urban migration, improve the bargaining power for urban workers, and create multiplier effects on the local economy even beyond agriculture? How to move from ways of producing food that create inequality, poverty and environmental degradation in rural areas, to sustainable agricultural systems, that can at the same time increase incomes of food producers and be more resilient to climate change? National strategies for the realization of the right to food are of particular relevance here because they are a tool to manage the conflict between short-term fixes and long-term visions: they ensure that policy decisions shall not be myopic and discount the future costs of present decisions, and that we shall not be held hostage to the short-term.

**I shall continue working towards these ends: using the right to food as a compass to guide choices, that should move us towards food systems that are more resilient and more sustainable.** But I shall also integrate new themes and concerns in my work, like the evolution of diets and non-communicable diseases, and the contribution of women's rights and empowerment to food security -- a vital and often underestimated part of the answer. I will organize consultations on issues such as the future of fishing and the impact of the rising demand for agroenergy on the right to food. I will convene expert
meetings in Latin America an in Africa on the legal and institutional frameworks that protect the right to food. And I will remain deeply involved in the work of the Committee of World Food Security, which will address crucial issues in 2011 such as investments in land and volatility of prices.

But none of this will make a lasting difference unless the governments follow up on their pledges to support food security, and unless broad-based social movements and human rights defenders all over the world continue to demand change. They must make their expectations known, and monitor the choices made in their name They must speak out against corruption and mismanagement. They must resist the current tendency to deprive peasants from the land and water on which they depend from their livelihoods. The right to food movement is composite, and it speaks different languages -- but it is emerging as a major voice in public debates about the direction in which our food systems should move. And it is a privilege to be able to continue to serve it.”

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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: [www.srfood.org](http://www.srfood.org) or [http://www2.ohchr.org/english/issues/food/index.htm](http://www2.ohchr.org/english/issues/food/index.htm)

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