Mexico requires a new strategy to overcome “food poverty” and obesity, says UN food expert

MEXICO CITY (21 June 2011) - "Although 7 out of 10 Mexican adults are overweight or obese, costing the country 0.5 per cent of its GDP, the agricultural and trade policies are still not aligned towards the need to support access to balanced diets," Olivier De Schutter said* on the last day of his official mission to Mexico. “The right to food will soon be recognized in the Constitution, an important achievement that I applaud. The next step is to adopt a national strategy for the realization of the right to food which can address the twin challenges of obesity and food poverty by improving consistency across the different policy areas that affect this right.”

The UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food was speaking at the end of a mission he conducted in Mexico from 13 to 20 June 2011 at the invitation of the Government. His mission led him to explore the consequences of the recent adoption of the right to food in the Mexican Constitution that shall enter into force following ratification by a majority of the 31 States of the Mexican federation. Mr. De Schutter noted that it was now time for Mexico to move towards the next stages of the implementation of the right to food by adopting a framework law on this issue and a national strategy moving towards the full realization of the right to food. "Mexico is in a paradoxical situation," he noted. "It still has 19.5 million people (18.2 % of the population) who are food insecure, an overwhelming majority of them in the rural areas, with a disproportionate number of indigenous peoples among them. But at the same time, Mexico is one of the countries most severely affected by overweight and obesity, second only to the United States. A state of emergency should be declared."

Noting how the adoption of a right to food national strategy could overcome this paradox, he underlined that both undernutrition and overnutrition are the result of several factors, including monocropping and export-led agriculture at the expense of healthy and diverse diets, policies skewed towards the interests of rich farmers rather than smallholders, and marketing of energy-rich foods by companies. In his view, Mexico should adopt a strategy that should tackle rural poverty and inadequate diets together. "Agricultural policies and social policies aiding consumers should be made mutually supportive and support local food systems that could present most benefits for consumer and small-scale farmers alike. For instance, existing food aid programmes should source more of their food supplies from small-scale, local producers to increase their incomes and to ensure the provision of fresh foods to consumers. And a better regulation of marketing practices of food companies is unavoidable."

The Special Rapporteur commends Mexico for the efforts to fight extreme poverty, such as Oportunidades, which covers 5.85 million households and the public food supply company DICONSA. According to the UN expert, “the targeting of these programmes is remarkable, with impressive coverage in the poorest States.”
Reviewing the causes of food poverty and malnutrition in the country, the Special Rapporteur on the right to food referred to the wide range of testimonies he received from communities affected by large-scale development projects, such as dams and mining projects. He stressed that under international law, "displacement may only occur exceptionally, and for overriding reasons of public interest." "In addition," he noted, "these communities seem not to have been adequately consulted, and the compensation offered for the loss of their lands and livelihoods have sometimes been insufficient. The Mexican judiciary is equipped to protect these communities' rights," he added, "but the competent authorities should seriously re-examine the procedures they follow in designing resettlement schemes." Referring in particular to the village of Temacapulín and other localities in the State of Jalisco threatened by the building of the El Zapotillo dam, he noted that the resettlement schemes offered were not always appropriate.

The UN expert also called on the Mexican authorities to reintroduce the moratorium on field trials of genetically modified (GM) maize, and to prevent the introduction of transgenic maize in the country. "The introduction of GM maize in Mexico will pose a serious threat to agrobiodiversity, a crucial asset in the face of future threats and unpredictable changes brought about by climate change. In the long term, the continuous improvement of landraces by farmers' practices of saving, re-sowing and exchanging seeds best suited to specific environments is crucial to effective protection against the unpredictable," he said. He underlined that the introduction and spread of GM maize in Mexico would not benefit most farmers since it would lead them to gradually depend on seeds protected by intellectual property rights that may make farming prohibitively expensive.

Instead, De Schutter called for a new agrarian reform, following those of 1917 and 1992. "This third agrarian reform should focus on smallholders and aim at scaling up agroecological techniques," he said. "It should start by developing pro-poor agricultural policies: the current policies favour the richest states, the richest municipalities and the richest producers," he noted, "an unacceptable bias in a country in which 80 per cent of farmers have less than 5 hectares.. The latest data indicate that the poorest 10 per cent of producers received only 0.1 per cent of the agricultural programme Ingreso Objectivo, while the richest 10 per cent received 80 per cent. In contrast, De Schutter noted, a programme such as ProÁrbol - based on the participation of local communities and rewarding smallholders for ecological services - should serve as a model for the next generation of agricultural policies.

The Special Rapporteur benefited from an unprecedented level of cooperation from the Mexican authorities, including meetings with the Office of the Presidency as well as with ten ministries, and with members of the Federal Congress and States’ Congresses. He will present his final report to the Human Rights Council.

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.

(*) Read the full statement:

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