South Africa can move beyond the ‘two economies’ to deliver one inclusive food system, says UN food expert

PRETORIA – “South Africa is a champion of institutionalizing social, economic and cultural rights such as the human right to food, but it has yet to prove it can deliver results for 12 million poor food insecure people, 70 per cent of which live in rural areas,” said Olivier De Schutter, the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food, on the last day of his official mission to South Africa*.

“South Africa became a model by integrating the right to food in its Constitution and by establishing the South African Human Rights Commission. Its Constitutional Court developed a uniquely progressive jurisprudence in the area of economic social and cultural rights. But it is now time to build a food economy that benefits the majority of the population.”

The UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food was speaking at the end of a mission he conducted in South Africa from 7 to 15 July 2011 at the invitation of the Government.

“Using the right to food as the foundation, land, agricultural and agri-food policies as well as social programmes should be made more consistent and mutually supportive: we must create an inclusive food system for South Africa,” he said, summarizing his key message to the authorities. “By inclusiveness, I mean much more than the de-racialization of the food economy,” said Mr. De Schutter, who summarized the four directions of his proposals.

“First, strategies will only be as good as the results they deliver”, said De Schutter. Reviewing many well-intentioned policies that increasingly put food security at the top of the government’s agenda, he noted: “The set of policies is encouraging, but the results still are below expectations.” Mr. De Schutter encouraged the Government to take a new historic step by adopting a framework law for the realization of the right to food. “In other countries I visit, this is the one single initiative that ensures coherence across policies and consistency across time.”

Moreover, the cost of non-compliance with policies and programmes should be increased. “The Government is now preparing a Food Security Bill, currently at the policy level. An independent monitoring system, with indicators of success and clear allocation of responsibilities would enable the current administration to deliver on its promises. And a structured dialogue with trade unions, farmer’s organisations, landless movements and other civil society organizations could ensure better accountability across the system, and thus improve results.”

“Secondly, to be consistent in land reform programmes beneficiaries just cannot be left alone once they receive land. If one small-scale beneficiary wants to move from
subsistence farming to selling some surpluses, he or she needs access to credit, training, and markets. Public resources must be reoriented to that end,” said the Special Rapporteur, who expressed concern that agricultural programmes benefited mostly a small number of established entrepreneurs. “If South Africa is to meet its target of creating 500,000 jobs in the agri-food sector, there is no alternative than to enable a large proportion of the 1.5 million subsistence households to graduate into small-scale farmers.”

Thirdly, the Special Rapporteur called for proactive engagement of the State in designing pro-poor food markets. “South Africa needs to create food systems that work for the poor and not only sell to the poor”. The legacy of apartheid is not only a strongly dualized farming system, but also the exclusion of poor blacks from the value chains. “Local food systems that promote fresh and nutritious food can be set up by a new set of policies. For instance, public procurement schemes can be made to work for rural development by allowing for preferential treatment in favour of small-scale farmers. Similarly, the Extended Public Works Programme could support the initial labour-intensive one-off investments in sustainable agriculture – agroecology – such as rainwater harvesting techniques and land contouring systems which prevent soil erosion,” said the UN food expert, “we must engage in systems-wide learning to identify such synergies.”

Mr. De Schutter also commended the micro-mills programme, which should create marketing opportunities for small-scale farmers organized in cooperatives, reduce concentration in the milling industry and at the same time generate off-farm jobs in rural areas.

The fourth axis of Mr. De Schutter’s proposals concern the improvement of the situation of the 800-900,000 farm workers, whose average incomes are a third of the national average, while the situation of millions of labour tenants and farm dwellers remains insecure. “The lack of capacity of the State, and its resulting inability to confront remaining discrepancies of the apartheid period, is nowhere as visible as in labour inspections, with only 1,000 labour inspectors for the whole territory, for all sectors, which are routinely prevented from entering large farms by landowners. Based upon his international experience, the Special Rapporteur recommended that trade union representatives could, following appropriate training, be certified to conduct inspections on farms, and report to the Department of Labour any refusal by the farmer to have his/her farm inspected from compliance with labour legislation.

Mr. De Schutter finally commended the South African authorities for the impressive social protection programmes they built after the fall of apartheid, yet he regretted the absence of a basic income grant. Currently, able-bodied adults who have not reached retirement age are not protected from extreme poverty. “Yet such basic protection is especially important in fast transforming economy such as South Africa,” the Special Rapporteur added.

The Special Rapporteur benefited from an excellent level of cooperation from the South African authorities. He will present his final report to the Human Rights Council.

(*). Check the full end-of-mission statement by the Special Rapporteur: 

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. For more information on the mandate and work of the Special Rapporteur, visit: [http://www2.ohchr.org/english/issues/food/index.htm](http://www2.ohchr.org/english/issues/food/index.htm) or [www.srfood.org](http://www.srfood.org)

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