NEWS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

3 October 2011

“Vulnerable land users must be protected by international guidelines” - UN expert urges Rome summit

GENEVA – “Land rights are the first building block on the road to achieving food security, and without international consensus on how land should be governed, the interests of vulnerable land users will continue to be swept aside.”

This was the warning from Olivier De Schutter, the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food, only days before final negotiations on land governance open in Rome. “The threat of ‘land grabbing’ has reminded us how vital access to land is for 500 million food-insecure households around the world,” he said.

A set of far-reaching guidelines on land tenure could be adopted at the next plenary session of the UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS), to convene in Rome from 17 to 21 October, should Governments overcome differences in the last round of pre-summit negotiations. “I urge all parties to achieve a consensus on the Voluntary Guidelines for the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests without compromising on fundamental human rights standards,” said De Schutter.

“Commercial pressures on land are rapidly growing. Biofuels, large-scale infrastructures projects, carbon-credit mechanisms, and speculation lead to rapid changes in land rights, creating new threats for vulnerable land users. Climate change and population growth will exacerbate tensions within countries and between them,” he explained.

“We need to establish general guidelines on land governance before we adopt rules on land investment,” according to the Special Rapporteur. “Harmful investments to the detriment of local populations – so-called land grabbing - can only be warded off if we first secure the underlying rights of farmers, herders and fisherfolk.” The Special Rapporteur backed the CFS’ decision last year to defer examination of the land investment rules – the so-called Principles on Responsible Agricultural Investment – until agreement could be struck on the broader issues related to the governance of land, fisheries and forests.

These general guidelines must strengthen security of tenure for small-scale food producers: smallholder farmers, but also nomadic herders, and fisherfolk, all of whom are gravely threatened by the current commercial pressures on land. The guidelines also acknowledge the importance of more equitable access to land. De Schutter, however, emphasized that “redistributing land is not enough; it should be accompanied by broader efforts to support the beneficiaries, or it will fail.”

In encouraging responsible investment in land, the Special Rapporteur called on States to be wary of the dangers of speculation over land and concentration of ownership when land rights are transferred to investors offering to ‘develop’ farmland. “We must escape the mental cage that sees large-scale investments as the only way to ‘develop’ agriculture and to ensure stability of supply for buyers,” said De Schutter, who will present next month a report to the UN General
Assembly in New York on contract farming and other business models, which can improve access to markets for small-scale farmers in a more inclusive way.

The Special Rapporteur considers that the Voluntary Guidelines could provide much needed guidance to States about how conflicts over land use should be addressed. In May 2011, he issued a detailed set of proposals to ensure that these land guidelines are consistent with internationally accepted human rights standards, including the right to food, which have concrete implications for land issues.

While some of these proposals have been integrated in the text, a number of delegations in the negotiation process have expressed reservations about specific references to existing human rights standards.

“States have nothing to fear. There is much to gain in adopting guidelines that will improve the ability of Governments to defuse land-related conflicts, in times of growing tensions over access to natural resources,” added De Schutter. “The guidelines will also strengthen the bargaining position of States when negotiating with private investors. This could help avoid the current ‘race to the bottom’ in which countries compete in order to attract investors, dismantling any existing protection land users enjoy.”

“In contrast,” the Special Rapporteur noted, “the costs of failure would be high. Without international consensus, other instruments will seek to fill the gap, such as those that are already being developed unilaterally by investment funds: a scenario that is far from being in the interests of vulnerable land users.”

“While the Guidelines themselves will be voluntary, the reporting on their implementation should be binding,” said the UN expert. “If countries do not face international monitoring and are not encouraged to report to their national civil societies about the progress achieved, much of the added value of the Voluntary Guidelines on the responsible governance of tenure of land, fisheries and forests will be lost.”

“Now is the right time and the CFS is the right forum,” the Special Rapporteur recalled, calling it “a unique forum in which governments and international organizations work together with civil society organizations and the private sector to identify ways to combat global hunger and malnutrition. Now is its opportunity to show it can shape consensus.”

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 or www.srfood.org


Media contacts:
- Olivier De Schutter: Tel. +32 488 48 20 04 / olivier.deschutter@uclouvain.be
- Ulrik Halsteen or Yoonie Kim (OHCHR): Tel: +41 79 752 04 85 / srfood@ohchr.org

UN Human Rights, follow us on social media:
http://www.facebook.com/unitednationshumanrights
https://twitter.com/unrightswire