Key chance for G20 to tackle negative impacts of biofuels and speculation on human rights

GENEVA – “The G20 made an important statement of intent by placing food security at the top of its agenda. But agreeing a food security action plan without addressing biofuels and speculation would be like running a bath without putting in the plug. All of the good ideas simply drain away,” warned Olivier De Schutter, UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food.

“Each one of the nearly one billion hungry persons is denied basic human rights,” said the independent expert, urging G20 leaders to live up to their pledges when they meet this week at the closing summit of the French G20 presidency in Cannes (3-4 November).

“Continuing famine in the Horn of Africa, low harvest warnings in Western Africa and flood-related crop losses in South-East Asia make it more urgent than ever that we tackle food price volatility and growing hunger. The ‘action plan’ agreed by G20 agriculture ministers in June is too weak. Time is running out for world leaders, who must go beyond rhetoric and deliver real change. The hungry cannot wait. Unless decisive action is taken now, vulnerable populations will grow hungrier, food markets will be increasingly unstable, and the world will remain completely unprepared for the challenge of feeding nine billion people by 2050.”

The Special Rapporteur identified several areas where leaders must take a bolder stance, to ensure respect for human rights.

“The G20 must put an end to public biofuel mandates and fiscal subsidies, which are a major factor in rising food prices and an important driver of the rush towards farmland in developing countries,” De Schutter said. “Leaders are yet to prove that they heard the joint recommendations of international organizations five months ago, which urged G20 governments to stop subsidising biofuels.” It is not enough to name-check the issue – the G20 must put the human right to food before the vested interests of some of its industries,” he added.

The Action Plan also risks falling short on financial regulation, the independent expert warned. “Food commodity markets must not be a refuge when other financial markets have dried up. Speculation on these markets is rife, and instead of allowing producers and buyers to hedge against risk, it has increased risk and led to price changes unconnected to the underlying fundamentals.”
He explained that position limits, while welcome, will not suffice. “Price bubbles are triggered not only when a handful of individuals take excessive positions, but also, and perhaps especially, when large numbers of speculators adopt the same herding behaviour by following the same signals.”

De Schutter also called for a stronger stance on food reserves. “The G20 promotes stronger food reserves for emergencies such as the Horn of Africa crisis. But restricted pilot projects are clearly insufficient.”

“We must be more ambitious, and use food stocks as a tool for stabilizing the market. If we buy from small-scale farmers when supply is plentiful, and release these stocks when markets are tight, we can prevent the volatile price swings and supply shocks which create humanitarian crises in the first place.”

ENDS


Olivier De Schutter was appointed the Special Rapporteur on the right to food in May 2008 by the UN 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

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