Food security hostage to trade in WTO negotiations: UN right to food expert

GENEVA – “The world is in the midst of a food crisis which requires a rapid policy response. But the World Trade Organisation (WTO) agenda has failed to adapt, and developing countries are rightly concerned that their hands will be tied by trade rules.” This is the warning from the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Olivier De Schutter, as he issued recommendations to put the human right to adequate food at the top of the WTO agenda, one month before a key summit.

“Food security is the elephant in the room which the WTO must address. Trade did not feed the hungry when food was cheap and abundant, and is even less able to do so now that prices are sky-high. Global food imports shall be worth 1.3 trillion USD in 2011, and the food import bills of the least developed countries have soared by over a third over the last year. The G20 has acknowledged that excessive reliance on food imports has left people in developing countries increasingly vulnerable to price shocks and food shortages,” De Schutter said, adding: “The WTO must now do the same”.

The future of the Doha Round and the global trading system will be under discussion at the December 15-17 WTO ministerial conference in Geneva. “We must avoid face-saving, short-term solutions aimed at hauling Doha over the line”, the independent expert said. “Instead, we should grasp the opportunity to ask what kind of trade rules will allow us to combat food insecurity and realize the human right to food.”

Higher tariffs, temporary import restrictions, state purchase from small-holders, active marketing boards, safety net insurance schemes, and targeted farm subsidies are increasingly acknowledged as vital measures to rehabilitate local food production capacity in developing countries.

But WTO rules leave little space for developing countries to put these measures in place. “Even if certain policies are not disallowed, they are certainly discouraged by the complexity of the rules and the threat of legal action,” De Schutter said. “Current efforts to build humanitarian food reserves in Africa must tip-toe around the WTO rulebook. This is the world turned upside down. WTO rules should revolve around the human right to adequate food, not the other way around.”

“It is a problem of principle: the WTO continues to pursue the outdated goal of increasing trade for its own sake rather than encouraging more trade only insofar as it increases human wellbeing. It therefore treats food security policies
as an unwelcome deviation from this path. Instead we need an environment that encourages bold policies to improve food security.”

“If the Doha Round is to move forward, it must lift any possible constraints on policies aimed at securing the right to food: such measures should include food stock-holding that aims to reduce price volatility and ensure access to adequate food at the local level.”

The Special Rapporteur called for an expert panel to be convened to reconcile food security and trade concerns; for a protocol to be established to monitor the impacts of trade on food prices; and for a general waiver to exempt food security-related measures from the WTO disciplines without penalty.

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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