WTO defending an outdated vision of food security - UN food expert responds to Pascal Lamy

GENEVA – “Globalization creates big winners and big losers. But where food systems are concerned, losing out means sinking into poverty and hunger. A vision of food security that deepens the divide between food-surplus and food-deficit regions, between exporters and importers, and between winners and losers, simply cannot be accepted.

“The impact of trade rules can no longer be seen at the level of States alone. It must be sensitive to what really determines food security: who produces for whom, at what price, under which conditions, and with what economic, social and environmental repercussions. The right to food is not a commodity, and we must stop treating it that way.

“I share with WTO Director-General Pascal Lamy the view that, as he puts it, ‘food security is an essential policy objective for governments.’ And I welcome Mr. Lamy’s invitation to present the findings of my briefing note to WTO members. However, we must ensure that the debate starts from the correct premise. This premise must acknowledge the dangers for poor countries in relying excessively on trade. We must also assess the compatibility of WTO disciplines and the Doha agenda with the food security agenda. Without such a fundamental reassessment, we will remain wedded to food systems where the most efficient producers with the biggest economies of scale are relied upon to feed food-deficit regions, and where the divide only gets bigger.

“This may look like food security on paper, but it is an approach that has failed spectacularly. The reality on the ground is that vulnerable populations are consigned to endemic hunger and poverty.

“The food bills of the Least Developed Countries (LDCs) increased five- or six-fold between 1992 and 2008. Imports now account for around 25 per cent of their current food consumption. These countries are caught in a vicious cycle. The more they are told to rely on trade, the less they invest in domestic agriculture. And the less they support their own farmers, the more they have to rely on trade.

“In the current climate, this means relying on imports of grain at historically volatile prices. This year alone, the food bills of LDCs soared by one third.
“These price shocks are felt by poor urban and rural consumers alike. Unfortunately, the open markets demanded by Mr. Lamy do not function as perfectly as he would like to think. Food moves where purchasing power is highest, not where needs are most urgent.

“By promoting this trade-centric approach, we miss the simplest of win-wins. If we were to support developing world small-holders, who are often the poorest groups, we could enable them to move out of poverty, and enable local food production to meet local needs. In this context, trade would complement local production, not justify its abandonment. The urban poor would have access to fresh and nutritious foods, and the gap between the farmgate price and the retail price would narrow. This however requires policy space to limit price volatility at domestic level: it is this policy space that the WTO rules are reducing.

“The policies currently shaped by the international trade regime are not supportive of these small-scale farmers. Instead, we impose a lose-lose upon them. They do not benefit from the opportunities that access to international markets represents for some. But it is they who are the victims of the pressure on land, water and natural resources on which they depend, for which they increasingly have to compete with the agro-export sector.

“In the long term, poor net-food-importing countries will not be helped by being fed. They will be helped by being able to feed themselves. This is the consensus of the post-global food price crisis world that even the G20 has recognized. It is disappointing that the WTO continues to fight the battles of the past.”

END

To read the full briefing note entitled The World Trade Organization and the Post-Global Food Crisis Agenda: Putting Food Security First in the International Food System, see:
http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Food/20111116_briefing_note_05_en.PDF or

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.

The Special Rapporteur will present the “Guiding Principles on Human Rights Impact Assessments of Trade and Investment Agreements” to the 19th session of the Human Rights Council (27 February to 23 March 2012):
http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/19session/

For more information on the mandate and work of the Special Rapporteur, visit:
http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Food/Pages/FoodIndex.aspx or http://www.srfood.org
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