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Davos: “Human Rights-Proofing” Globalization -- UN right to food expert

GENEVA – The UN expert on the right to food, Olivier De Schutter, on Thursday urged ministers gathering in Davos this week for the World Economic Forum to acknowledge the relationship between globalization and human rights, saying that “globalization should serve human rights and sustainable development, rather than being a process blind to its impacts on the individuals affected.”

“Human rights norms must give new direction to globalization as strategies are being sought to re-launch and expand the global economy,” urged De Schutter.

Referring to the theme of this year’s meeting in Davos, “The Great Transformation,” De Schutter said that the real great transformation must go beyond rectifying the imbalances in developed world debt to GDP ratios.

“We must finally pay attention to the wider imbalances that are the symptoms of unfettered globalization. All around the world people have fallen foul of economic processes that consign whole regions to abandonment or degradation and trap whole population groups in perpetual poverty,” he said.

“Bilateral trade and investment agreements are the gateway through which globalization passes on its way to redefining the economic landscape of a country. These agreements often set in motion a process of restructuring that shakes up the existing foundations of an economy.” These bilateral deals are rapidly increasing, and as many as 6,000 investment agreements are currently in place.

Governments of sovereign States must submit any deal on the table to a ‘human rights-proofing,’ in the form of a human rights impact assessment, in order to discharge their obligations to their citizens,” the independent expert stressed.

“A Human Rights Impact Assessment (HRIA) is not merely a question of gauging environmental sustainability or the impact of a deal on progress towards specific development goals. It is about protecting the inalienable rights of each and every person in the face of changing economic conditions,” De Schutter said.
“States are duty-bound to respect human rights, such as the right to food, and to regulate private actors to ensure that they do not infringe upon such rights. States must, therefore, not allow themselves to be locked into deals that impair their ability to comply with their human rights commitments; nor should they force such deals on other States, whatever concessions the other party appears ready to make, for the sake of securing access to export markets or attracting investors.”

States must ensure that human rights are genuinely protected in the remit of trade and investment agreements, setting out conditions to ensure the integrity and transparency of the agreements, and to ensure that they take into account the situation of the most vulnerable segments of the population. They also must identify how to deal with trade-offs, when certain groups gain from the agreement, while others lose out.

To support such efforts, the Special Rapporteur on the right to food will present to the UN Human Rights Council, at its session in March 2012, a set of guiding principles for conducting human rights impact assessments of trade and investment agreements.

Carrying out a human rights impact assessment, for instance, should serve to support the assessment by the European Parliament of the Free Trade Agreement that is currently being finalized in negotiations between the Government of India and the European Commission. Some estimates suggest that the tariff liberalization encouraged by the draft agreement in the dairy and poultry sectors could threaten the livelihoods of 14 million very poor households in India, half of them landless, who depend on milk production, and that marginal farmers supplementing their livelihoods by keeping backyard poultry could also be severely affected by the rise in imports of fresh poultry meat from the EU. Small street vendors -- 10 million people in total -- could be affected by the liberalization of investment in the retail sector, also as a result of the agreement under preparation.

“Such social consequences of trade and investment liberalization have direct impacts on the right to food,” De Schutter noted. “The methodology I will propose in the guiding principles is a way to ensure that governments do not disregard their human rights obligations in negotiating such agreements.”

END

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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