“Unfinished progress” – UN expert examines food systems in emerging countries

GENEVA (12 March 2012) – “The food systems of emerging countries are at a major crossroads. Millions of people have been lifted out of poverty, yet whole communities have been left behind,” warned Olivier De Schutter, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the right to food, after presenting his reports* on China, Mexico and South Africa to the Human Rights Council.

“As many as 19 million Mexicans and 12 million South Africans remain food insecure, and China’s rural dwellers are up to six times poorer than urban populations,” the expert said, calling on emerging countries to act now to lay the foundations for fair and sustainable food systems by implementing the following actions:

Mr. De Schutter urged emerging economies to **protect the rights of land users**, especially minority and vulnerable groups, and to **establish in law the right to food**, so it can be rapidly translated into national strategies and institutions. He also advised **supporting smallholder agriculture** in the face of mega-development projects, and **stopping soil and water degradation** through a massive shift to agroecological practices. Likewise, the UN expert suggested the adoption of a **strategy to tackle rising obesity**.

“Several emerging countries have been pioneers in putting the right to food into law,” the Special Rapporteur said. Mexico recently amended its constitution to recognize the right to food and South Africa included the right in its post-apartheid constitution in 1996. “Legal recognition of the right to food and multi-year strategies that hold authorities accountable are the only way to ensure policy coherence over time and thus lasting success,” Mr. De Schutter noted. He also highlighted the effectiveness of multi-year national framework laws on the right to food, pointing to the example of Brazil, which he visited in 2009.

Regarding food security challenges and the policies adopted by emerging countries to tackle them, the UN expert noted that “China has achieved 95 per cent grain self-sufficiency by encouraging individual households to produce, while allowing village-level organizations to provide certain collective services.”

“South Africa is shifting from merely redistributing land to more comprehensive rural development policies,” he added, “and Mexico’s ambitious Oportunidades programme is providing targeted cash transfers and nutritional support to more than 50 per cent of people in the poorest regions.”
However, Mr. De Schutter warned progress has been dangerously uneven, and has sometimes entailed negative impacts for vulnerable groups of land users, as well as wholesale environmental degradation.

Large-scale developments such as dams and mining projects have displaced many marginal farmers in Mexico, often without adequate consultation, according to testimonies heard by the Special Rapporteur. In China, local-level authorities often have allowed land-grabbing at the expense of poor rural households. And between 50 and 80 per cent of the 2.25 million nomads on the Tibetan plateau may be relocated into settlements close to rural cities, overhauling the food and farming practices of this vulnerable community as part of a programme to abandon nomadic life and modernize agriculture.

“Emerging countries face the huge task of feeding fast-growing populations whose increasing wealth is exerting new pressures on scant resources. They must secure and strengthen their food production bases as a matter of urgency; and they will only do so by working with farmers and their organizations, rather than against them,” he urged.

(*) Check the reports:

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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.

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