Canada: national food strategy can eradicate hunger amidst plenty – UN rights expert

OTTAWA / GENEVA (16 May 2012) – “Canada has long been seen as a land of plenty. Yet today one in ten families with a child under six is unable to meet their daily food needs. These rates of food insecurity are unacceptable, and it is time for Canada to adopt a national right to food strategy,” said Olivier De Schutter, the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food, on the last day of his official visit to the country.*

“What I've seen in Canada is a system that presents barriers for the poor to access nutritious diets and that tolerates increased inequalities between rich and poor, and Aboriginal non-Aboriginal peoples. Canada is much admired for its achievements in the area of human rights, which it has championed for many years. But hunger and access to adequate diets, too, are human rights issues -- and here much remains to be done.”

The UN human rights expert was nonetheless confident that the country could move towards establishing food systems that deliver adequate and affordable diets for all, and called upon the Canadian government to convene a national food conference that would clarify the allocation of responsibilities between the federal level, the provinces and territories. “All political parties have expressed support for the establishment of a national food policy, and the engagement of citizens through food policy councils across the country is truly impressive. But in order to address them, Canada must first recognize the reality of the challenges it faces,” he stated.

Three areas of concern were highlighted that should be addressed in a national food strategy. First, a large number of Canadians are too poor to afford adequate diets. “800,000 households are food insecure in Canada. This is a country that is rich, but that fails to adapt the levels of social assistance benefits and its minimum wage to the rising costs of basic necessities, including food and housing. Food banks that depend on charity are not a solution: they are a symptom of failing social safety nets that the Government must address.”

Second, more than one in four Canadian adults are obese, and almost two thirds of the population is overweight or obese, costing at least 5 billion Canadian dollars annually in health care costs and in lost productivity. “This is also a result of poverty: adequate diets have become too expensive for poor Canadians, and it is precisely these people who have to pay the most when they live in food deserts and depend on convenience stores that charge higher prices than the main retailers.”
Third, the situation of Aboriginal peoples raises specific concerns. Referring to the situation of fly-in communities in Manitoba and reserves in Alberta that he visited during the mission, De Schutter called for a reform of the Nutrition North Canada program that subsidizes retailers to serve remote communities. He also called for a structural approach to tackling the socio-economic and cultural barriers to opportunities for those living on reserves that result in their not enjoying fully their right to adequate food. He also regretted that neither the federal Government nor the provinces consider that they have a responsibility to support off-reserve Aboriginal peoples in overcoming the structural discrimination they face.

Mr. De Schutter was encouraged by a number of local and provincial initiatives that seek to rebuild local food systems, and to ensure adequate incomes to farmers while at the same time ensuring consumers’ access to fresh and nutritious foods. He noted, however, that these initiatives were not sufficiently supported at federal level, and that they were currently under threat. “School breakfast and lunch programs still depend on local initiatives in the absence of a national policy in this regard,” he said.

The Special Rapporteur will present his final report to a forthcoming session of the Human Rights Council in 2013.

(*) Check the full end-of-mission statement by the Special Rapporteur: XXXXX

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Olivier De Schutter was appointed the Special Rapporteur on the right to food in May 2008 by the United Nations Human Rights Council. He is independent from any government or organization. Learn more, log on to: http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Food/Pages/FoodIndex.aspx or www.srfood.org

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