GENEVA (23 May 2012) – Two United Nations experts on food and indigenous peoples today urged South-East Asian states not to sideline the human rights of communities across the region who derive their livelihoods, traditions and ways of life directly from their natural environments.

“Governments must not be seduced by the promises of developers when assessing large-scale land acquisitions for export-led crops and agrofuel production,” said the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food, Olivier De Schutter, and the UN Special Rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples, James Anaya, highlighting acute cases of competing land interests in South-East Asia, where agrofuel developments are rapidly expanding.

“Development is not always the outcome, however many jobs and export dollars a project promises to yield,” the independent experts stressed. “New economic opportunities, and new, more intensive uses of land, must not be at the expense of the human rights of local populations.”

“Governments must step up their vigilance in regard to large-scale land acquisitions to ensure that the fundamental rights of these communities are not violated, be they small-farmers, fishers, hunters, foragers or craftsmen,” they said.

Moves to convert 1-2 million hectares of rainforest and small-scale farming plots to an export-led crop and agrofuel plantation in the Meruake region of Indonesia could affect the food security of 50,000 people. Some 3,000 hectares of so-called ‘idle’ land has been converted to sugar cane for agrofuel production in the Isabela region of the Philippines, with a further 8,000 hectares due to be added, meaning a major land transformation and uncertain impacts for the municipality’s 45,000 inhabitants.

“Large-scale monocrop developments mean a wholesale shift in land use and land access,” warned the Special Rapporteur on the right to food, noting that the benefits of these projects accrue principally to multinational firms who export agrofuels or food crops to international markets.

“All too often, this is to the detriment of existing land users. If the environment they depend upon is repurposed, degraded and placed off limits, their ability to produce or to procure food – and thus their right to food – will be severely threatened,” De Schutter
said.

“These are mostly indigenous families whose traditional livelihoods are rooted in their local environment,” Anaya warned. “Communities are often ancestrally tied to the areas in question and may not possess official deeds to the land, making their tenure highly vulnerable in the face of land conversion deals.”

“Converting bio-diverse forest land to intensive monocropping can entail wide environmental impacts, from the loss of forest-dwelling game species in Meruake, to reduced resistance to flooding and landslides in Isabela,” the Special Rapporteurs noted. “We must also be sensitive to the impacts of sudden influxes of workers on local food access, traditions and ways of life.”

The UN experts expressed concerns about an apparent lack of adequate consultation and transparency in both land acquisition processes. In neither case are indigenous communities believed to have been sufficiently informed and consulted about the land acquisitions and their repercussions on local life.

They also noted that major question marks hang over the land lease and compensation arrangements through which land is changing hands in Isabela, while in Meruake police intimidation and the signing away of land rights under coercion have been alleged.

Both experts urged the South-East Asian Governments “to align – as a matter of urgency – their biofuels and investment policies with the need to respect land users’ rights as detailed the voluntary guidelines on land tenure*, as adopted by States this month in Rome within the Committee on World Food Security.”


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. Learn more: http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Food/Pages/FoodIndex.aspx or www.srfood.org

S. James Anaya was appointed as Special Rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples in March 2008 by the UN Human Rights Council. He is a Regents Professor and the James J. Lenoir Professor of Human Rights Law and Policy at the University of Arizona (United States). Learn more, log on to: http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/IPeoples/SRIndigenousPeoples/Pages/SRIPeoplesIndex.aspx or http://unsr.jamesanaya.org/

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