Cameroon: Stricter taxes for companies drawing on natural resources to better tackle hunger – UN Special Rapporteur

YAOUNDÉ / GENEVA (23 July 2012) – “In Cameroon, food security indicators are on red alert despite measures taken in response to the 2008 food crisis and the increasing revenues drawn from the extensive use of its natural resources,” Olivier De Schutter, UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food, stated today at the closing press conference of his official mission to Cameroon,* which began on 16 July.

“Political will is not lacking in Cameroon. But it is doubtful whether the strategy in place for access to food is really tailored to the needs of poor populations,” he said.

“Cameroon is experiencing what I call the “urgency trap,” which makes it short-term oriented: faced with angry citizens, who came out to protest against the 2008 food price spikes, a strategy based on rapid solutions was put in place. Cameroon did more of what it was already doing: import duties were further reduced on staple crops and mega-plantations were developed, without this contributing to rural development or to alleviating poverty among small farmers and herders,” Mr. De Schutter added.

Why does the UN expert consider this strategy in need of re-examination? “In Cameroon, 33 per cent of children are suffering from chronic malnutrition. The majority of them come from families of smallholders, herders and fishers. And yet national efforts are primarily focused on developing large-scale plantations. Such plantations create jobs primarily for migrant workers who are willing to accept lower working conditions, and significantly fewer jobs than small-scale agriculture would yield if it were duly supported,” he said.

Meanwhile, national schemes aimed at supporting small farmers are taking too long to bear fruit. “The difficulty in measuring progress does not mean that it is non-existent, but it is very difficult to see any impact for smallholders.”

Redistribution of proceeds

The Special Rapporteur welcomed the mechanism for redistributing the proceeds of forest industries to local populations, with efforts underway to ramp up its development impact.
“This is a concrete, if imperfect, example of the obligation of countries to utilize the ‘maximum available resources’ in order to move towards the full realization of human rights, including the right to food, he said.” Mr. De Schutter nonetheless called for marginalized populations, including indigenous groups and women, to be meaningfully involved in decision-making, and for systems of accountability and remedies to be put in place to make the use of these revenues more transparent.

“Without improved accountability, it cannot be ensured that the revenues shall be used for the benefit of the populations concerned as required by the right to development,” he said.

Mr. De Schutter also called for the Government of Cameroon to consider a stricter tax regime for the companies, primarily foreign-owned, who draw on natural resources and often avoid and evade tax in order to maximize profits taken out of the country.

“This strategy would allow a genuine social protection policy to be progressively funded, at a cost of roughly 5 per cent of GNP and with significant multiplier effects. This goal is within Cameroon’s reach. It should be its priority from now on,” he said.

In the North, 81 per cent of rural households are food-insecure

The Special Rapporteur further called upon the Government, donors and international organizations to move away from improvised solutions to the food crisis afflicting the three Sudano-Sahelian provinces that he visited in the North.

“The recurrence of extreme weather patterns is now the norm in the 21st century. Humanitarian responses must be strengthened, but it is unacceptable not to do more to help the region’s vulnerable populations – smallholders and herdsmen – to develop structural solutions for resisting climate shocks,” Mr. De Schutter asserted.

In the Great North region, 81 per cent of rural households live in food insecurity. Crises, including those linked to climate conditions, occur every two to four years.

“Solutions exist. Nitrogen-fixing trees tailored to regional conditions can allow forage production for livestock; techniques such as mini-dams and stone barriers can maximize rainwater harvesting in the dry season,” Mr. De Schutter said, adding that a regional strategy to support these agroecological measures could make the North much more resistant to shocks. “But for this to happen, the authorities and donors must decide to act.”


ENDS

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

UN Human Rights, Country Page – Cameroon: http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Countries/AfricaRegion/Pages/CMIndex.aspx

For further information and media requests, please contact:
**In Geneva:** Ulrik Halsteen or Yoonie Kim (+41 22 917 93 23 / +41 22 917 96 43 / srfood@ohchr.org)

**In Yaoundé (during the visit):** Timothy Franklin Kiven Fonyuy (Tel: +237 22 21 24 74 / Cell: +237 77 35 25 34 / tfonyuy@ohchr.org)

UN Human Rights, follow us on social media:
Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/unitednationshumanrights
Twitter: http://twitter.com/UNrightswire
Google+ gplus.to/unitednationshumanrights
YouTube: http://www.youtube.com/UNOHCHR

Check the Universal Human Rights Index: http://uhri.ohchr.org/en