'Ocean-grabbing' as serious a threat as 'land-grabbing' – UN food expert

NEW YORK (30 October 2012) – The United Nations Special Rapporteur on the right to food, Olivier De Schutter, warned today of the threat of ‘ocean-grabbing’ to food security, and urged world governments and international bodies to halt the depletion of fish stocks, and take urgent steps to protect, sustain, and share the benefits of fisheries and marine environments.

“‘Ocean-grabbing’ – in the shape of shady access agreements that harm small-scale fishers, unreported catch, incursions into protected waters, and the diversion of resources away from local populations - can be as serious a threat as ‘land-grabbing,’” Mr. De Schutter said as he unveiled a new report on fisheries and the right to food.

“Without rapid action to claw back waters from unsustainable practices, fisheries will no longer be able to play a critical role in securing the right to food of millions,” the expert said, noting that “with agricultural systems under increasing pressure, many people are now looking to rivers, lakes and oceans to provide an increasing share of our dietary protein.”

Estimates on the scale of illegal catch range from 10-28 million tons (mt), while some 7.3mt – 10 per cent of global catch – is discarded every year. “It is clear that as fish are becoming less abundant, fishing vessels are tempted to evade rules and conservation strategies,” the Special Rapporteur said.

Many of the world’s waters are fished by distance fleets, Mr. De Schutter noted, calling for the License and Access Agreements (LAAs) governing their activities to be urgently revised. He called for LAAs to include stronger oversight mechanisms to tackle illegal and unreported catch; take full account of the role of fisheries and small-scale fishers in meeting local food needs; strengthen labour rights on fishing vessels; and be concluded only on the basis of human rights impact assessments, to be prepared with the assistance of flag states.

The UN expert called on governments to rethink the models of fisheries that they support, highlighting that small-scale fishers actually catch more fish per gallon of fuel than industrial fleets, and discard fewer fish. “Industrial fishing in far-flung waters may seem like the economic option, but only because fleets are able to pocket major subsidies while externalizing the costs of over-fishing and resource degradation. Future generations will pay the price when the oceans run dry,” he said.
The key challenge, Mr. De Schutter indicated, is to ensure coexistence between industrial fishing and the rights of small-scale fishers and coastal communities - for whom even occasional fishing can constitute an essential safety net in times of crisis. He therefore made the following five recommendations:

1. Create exclusive artisanal fishing zones for small-scale fishers and clamp down on incursions by industrial fleets;

2. Support small-scale fishers' cooperatives and help them rise up the value chain;

3. Put co-management schemes in place to manage fishing resources locally;

4. Refrain from undertaking large-scale development projects, e.g. sand extraction, that adversely affect the livelihoods of small-scale fishers; and

5. Make fisheries and small-scale fishers an integral part of national right to food strategies.

The independent expert drew attention to positive examples, such as the decision to grant community-based user rights to small-scale fishers on the largest freshwater lake in South East Asia (Tonle Sap, Cambodia), and the decision to ban industrial tuna fishing in favour of local 'pole and line' fishers in the Maldives.

“It is possible, and necessary, to turn these resources away from over-exploitation, and towards the benefit of local communities,” the Special Rapporteur stressed.

(*) Read the report: 'Fisheries and the Right to Food':

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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:
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