From hand-outs to rights – breaking the cycle of perpetual food insecurity in Malawi

LILONGWE (22 July 2013) – “Recent high-profiled food security policies have failed to rid Malawi of chronic food insecurity and malnutrition,” said Olivier De Schutter, the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food, as he concluded his eleven-day mission to the Republic of Malawi.

More than 50% of the country remains mired in poverty, with one quarter of ‘ultra poor’ Malawians earning less than the estimated costs of a diet providing minimum recommended calorie intake, and about half of all children suffering from acute or severe malnutrition.

“Malawi is often held up as an example of how hunger can be tackled by subsidizing inputs for farmers. However, considerable challenges remain. Opportunities can be missed when too little is done to empower the poor and break cycles of dependency – on chemical fertilizer, on low-paying plantation work, and on tobacco.”

“Malawians need a durable agricultural resource base and living wages – and currently they are getting neither,” the UN expert stated, adding: “It is particularly important to redress the balance at a time when Malawi is about to absorb a new wave of agricultural investment under the G8’s New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition.”

Through its Farm Input Subsidy Programme (FISP) more than a million beneficiaries have gained access to discounted fertilizers and seeds, allowing the country to raise yields. Yet, again this year, the country will need to import maize for humanitarian food aid to Malawian farmers who are unable to feed themselves.

There is a need to reassess whether FISP is the most effective use of available resources to protect the right to adequate food for all Malawians. FISP – dependent on costly fertilizer imports – takes up more than 50% of Malawi’s agricultural budget and crowds out other priorities such as extension services and social protection.

“It is time for Malawi to move beyond the fertilizer-led “green revolution” and invest in the Brown and Blue Revolutions needed to rebuild soil fertility and water retention,” the Special Rapporteur urged. He noted that the integration of legumes in cropping systems and agroforestry systems in Malawi are yielding more food than fertilizer-driven systems while rapidly restoring soil fertility. They are the foundations of sustainable food security. He emphasized the need to move away from the maize economy, and to link agricultural development to
nutritional needs, an indispensable condition for lasting victories over malnutrition.

The Special Rapporteur also identified wage and taxation policies as a major driver of poverty and hunger.

The Malawian minimum wage, currently fixed at around US$ 1.12 per day, is one of the lowest in the world, and 300,000 tenant families on tobacco plantations – where 78,000 child labourers are employed – are only paid depending on the quantity and quality of tobacco sold to landlords. “The policy of providing abundant, cheap and non-unionized labour to plantation owners must be consigned to the past,” De Schutter stated.

Meanwhile Malawi has lost over 10 percent of GDP to illicit outflows over the period 1980-2009, with mining companies exempted from customs duty, excise duty, VAT on mining machinery, plant and equipment. The UN expert warned: “Malawi’s poor pay twice for the red carpet treatment given to multinational investors – in the suppression of their wages, and in the services deprived them by corporate tax exemptions.”

He outlined a series of steps must be taken to redress the balance: Malawi must enforce a living wage, reserve open public tenders to companies paying it, allow workers to bargain collectively in all sectors, sign up to the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI), and work coherently across Government to negotiate fair taxation arrangements for investors.

The UN expert concluded: “The country urgently needs a national food security strategy, underpinned by a Right to Food Framework Law, to hold policies to account when they do not yield benefits for the most food insecure and to ensure a coherent approach across sectors. By improving participation and accountability in the design and implementation of food security policies, Malawi can ensure that public investment will truly reach the poorest within the population.”

De Schutter welcomed the wide support and inclusive discussions around a Draft Food Security Bill that could help to ground food entitlements in law. Noting that a trust fund could be established under the draft bill, De Schutter recommended seizing the opportunity of the investments attracted by the New Alliance, as well as the expected boom in the extractive industry, to fund urgently needed social policies and a new deal for agriculture. “It is essential that the country does not pursue investment for investment’s sake, but uses it as an opportunity to engage corporations in a genuine commitment to help improve the situation of Malawi’s poor and food insecure.”

(*) Check the full statement: [URL]

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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://www2.ohchr.org/english/issues/food/index.htm or http://www.srfood.org
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