GENEVA (15 May 2014) – Governments must exploit the full potential of public food purchasing in order to make food systems fairer and more sustainable, the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food, Olivier De Schutter, urged Thursday.

"Governments have few sources of leverage over increasingly globalized food systems – but public procurement is one of them. When sourcing food for schools, hospitals and public administrations, Governments have a rare opportunity to support more nutritious diets and more sustainable food systems in one fell swoop," said the independent expert, as he published his report* on public procurement and the right to food.

Noting that OECD countries spend an average of 12% of GDP on public procurement, and developing countries only slightly less, the UN expert identified five principles for using public procurement to support the realization of the right to food:

1) Source preferentially from small-scale food producers and help them to access tenders;
2) Guarantee living wages and fair prices along the food supply chain;
3) Set specific requirements for adequate food diets;
4) Source locally whenever possible and impose sustainability requirements on suppliers; and
5) Increase participation and accountability in the food system.

"It may cost Governments slightly more to source from a range of smaller-scale, sustainable operators than from major suppliers, but the investment is worth it. It will not only have positive outcomes in terms of health and education, but will also help promote a viable and sustainable small-scale farming sector," noted the UN expert. Data on UK school feeding programs suggests a return of 3-to-1 for additional spending on sustainable and local procurement. Another study estimates that the total benefits of supplying 50 million African school-children with locally produced food could reach around $1.6 billion per year.

The UN expert also welcomed recent progress in developing countries such as Brazil, where price premiums to organic suppliers have been put in place, and 30% of the school feeding budget has been reserved for sourcing from family farms. Meanwhile, municipal and state governments, schools, producers, companies, parents and students have been brought into the design of school meals that now cover nearly 50 million children.

"Reliable demand at fair prices could provide a lifeline to the small-scale farmers in developing countries struggling to compete against transnational food producers, processors, traders and marketers. The full transformative potential of state purchasing must be exploited to drive a genuine transition to pro-poor food and farming models,"

concluded De Schutter.

ENDS

*Read the report: The Power of Procurement: Public Purchasing in the Service of Realizing the Right to Food. This report is the final publication by Olivier De Schutter as UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food. His final official report to the UN Human Rights Council (March 2014) on transforming food systems can be found here: http://www.srfood.org/images/stories/pdf/otherdocuments/20140514_procurement_en.pdf

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 about the mandate and work of the Special Rapporteur: http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Food/Pages/FoodIndex.aspx or www.srfood.org

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