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FAO REGIONAL CONFERENCE FOR THE NEAR EAST

Thirty-fourth Session

Rome, Italy, 7-11 May 2018

Statement by the Director General

Excellency Mr. Ghazi Zaieter, Minister for Agriculture of Lebanon, and Chairperson of this Regional Conference for Near East and North Africa;

Mr. Khalid Mehboob, Independent Chairperson of the FAO Council;

Mr. Mario Arvelo, Chairperson of the Committee on World Food Security;

Excellencies,
Distinguished Delegates;
FAO Colleagues;
Ladies and gentlemen

It is an honour to address you at the thirty-fourth Session of the Regional Conference for the Near East and North Africa.

Let me start by expressing my gratitude to the Chairperson, Mr. Ghazi Zaieter, and to the Government of Lebanon for their support for transferring the organization of this meeting here to FAO Headquarters.

This Conference is very important to further align FAO's work to the needs of the region in light of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

FAO's highest priority is to support countries to achieve the Sustainable Development Goal number 2 on ending hunger and all forms of malnutrition, and also promoting sustainable agriculture development.

Unfortunately, as you already know, hunger increased in the world in 2016, after more than 10 years of decline.

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And preliminary data indicate that there has also been a further increase in the prevalence of undernourishment in the world in 2017.

So in the last two years, we have had a rise in the number of people facing hunger in the world. Conflicts are one of the main reasons of the deterioration of global food security, especially in some specific regions including the Near East and North Africa.

Up until 2013, the so-called NENA region was enjoying a period of overall decreasing in undernourishment.

But since 2013, the food insecurity in the region has increased 15%, especially due to some countries facing situation of prolonged conflict.

In fact, the level of undernourishment in countries facing conflict in the NENA region is about 28% of their population. This is six times larger than in non-conflict countries in the region.

The situation is even worse when the consequences of conflict are combined with the impacts of climate change on the already limited natural resources available in the region to produce food. To bring the numbers on hunger down again, it is crucial to build the resilience of food systems, especially in relation to rural communities.

Some of these people are the poorest of the poor, and they are also the most affected by conflicts and climate change.

The implementation and reinforcement of social protection systems are fundamental in this regard. Even in conflict situations, there is much we can do to keep local food systems functioning, and bring hope to affected populations.

FAO advocates that to save lives, we have to save their livelihoods. Otherwise, poor rural communities may have no other option than forcibly migrating.

In 2016, there were almost 66 million forcibly displaced people in the world. Nearly 25 million of them originated from just five countries facing conflict in the Near East and North Africa region.

I will explore more on these topics during the side-event on Zero Hunger that will take place today during lunch time. I invite all of you to participate.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Let me also highlight that hunger must not be our only concern. The SDG 2 calls for the eradication of all forms of malnutrition.

Today we are facing a global epidemic of overweight and obesity.

The numbers are growing in most developing and developed countries alike. In 2016, more than 1.9 billion adults in the world were overweight. Of these, over 650 million were obese.

The overconsumption of processed foods that are high in salt and sugar is the major driver behind this increase in overweight and obesity.

Countries need to tackle this situation by stimulating healthy diets. National public policies are fundamental. Nutrition is a public issue, a State responsibility. Consumers must be aware of the benefits and detriments of what they are eating.

This involves nutrition education, awareness raising, as well as regulations on labelling and also advertisements.

Excellencies,

Water scarcity is another fundamental challenge facing the Near East and North Africa region. As you know very well, fresh water availability in the region is only 10 percent of the world average.

This situation is not expected to improve as climate change impacts accelerate, and rapid urbanization and population growth continue.

FAO launched in 2013 the Regional Water Scarcity Initiative.

The Initiative has been working well as platform for collaboration and exchange of knowledge.

We have seen cooperation from Iran to Morocco, from Egypt to Jordan and Tunisia, just to name a few examples.

Eight countries in the region are in the process of building strong water accounting systems. This is the first step for transformative strategic planning of scarce water resources.

I am pleased that the League of Arab States has endorsed the Water Scarcity Regional Initiative. This will harness even more the potential of South-South Cooperation.

With your support, early next year I intend to convene a Ministerial Dialogue on Water Scarcity in the region. So we can take stock together of the achievements, learn from your experience and discuss the best way forward.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As I mentioned before, climate change is one of the major global obstacles in achieving sustainable development.

It is of utmost importance to promote the adaptation of food systems.

Our regional office in Cairo is ready to hear your interests in this regard and support you to put forward sustainable food systems that offer health and nutritious food, and also preserve the environment.

We also want to hear from you on how FAO can best help your countries to mobilize international financial support to deal with climate change.

The Green Climate Fund (GCF) is one of the most important mechanisms now available to finance developing countries.

FAO is working closely with a wide range of countries around the world that have formally requested the Organization's assistance.

In the NENA region, FAO has been supporting many countries, such as Sudan, Mauritania, Algeria, Syria, Iran and Iraq in order to prepare projects to the fund.

So there is lot of work going under way, and FAO will continue to support all of them that wish to have access to the Green Climate Fund.

The impacts of climate change are also accelerating the spread of transboundary animal and pest disease.

In addition to some endemic problems, such as the desert locust, the Red Palm Weevil, Foot-and-Mouth disease, the NENA region is confronted with new challenges.

These include, for instance, the *Xylella fastidiosa*, a bacterium that affects olive trees. Unfortunately, pests and diseases are likely to continue to spread.

To address this situation, FAO is working to promote strong coordination, preparedness, early warning, prevention, surveillance and response capacities.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Before concluding, let me highlight that FAO has continued to reinforce the technical capacity of the Decentralized Offices in the NENA region.

The number of professional staff has increased by 12 percent over the last biennium.

The main areas that has been strengthened include food security and nutrition, agro-industry and value chains, animal health and production, and natural resources management.

Offices in countries affected by conflicts have been considerably strengthened, including in Syria and Yemen.

The agreement for the Subregional Office for the Gulf Cooperation Council States and Yemen has been renewed, and the process of filling the positions is underway.

I wish to thank the Government of the United Arab Emirates for its generosity and commitment in this regard.

The agreement for the Subregional Office for Mashreq Countries has been signed, and the process for its implementation is ongoing. I also thank Government of Lebanon for its support.

As a result of collective efforts, resource mobilization in the NENA region reached USD 283 million dollars in 2016-2017. This represents an increase of almost 100% compared to the previous biennium.

Let me conclude by saying that there are still many challenges ahead. But with steadfast commitment, countries can deliver on the Sustainable Development Goals.

For that, it is very important to have your feedback in relation to the regional initiatives, and also to the priorities for the years to come.

FAO will continue to support the region to deliver the ambition of inclusive growth and shared prosperity for all.

No one can be left behind in our common quest for sustainable development.

Thank you for your attention