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Statement by the Independent Chairperson of the FAO Council

*Chairperson,
Honorable Ministers,
Director-General and
Distinguished Delegates*

1. I am honoured to address you at the 38th Session of the FAO Regional Conference for Latin America and the Caribbean. I extend my sincere appreciation to the Government of Guyana and people of Guyana for the commendable organization of this conference and warm welcome.
2. Before delving into pressing matters of your region, let us offer condolences to the families affected by wars and conflicts, also in your region, in Haiti. Violent conflict is also a primary driver of forced displacement, another factor contributing to heightened food insecurity. These factors, combined with growing inequities, keep challenging the capacity of agrifood systems to deliver nutritious, safe and affordable diets for all in your region. Let us face another uncomfortable truth: with the money the world is spending on wars and weapons, we could solve the food insecurity worldwide!
3. Of course, we have to work within the mandate of FAO. We have no option but to redouble our efforts to transform and, where necessary, rebuild agrifood systems, especially in states confronted with wars or conflicts. For now, we need to do everything to support the people who are suffering, by giving them humanitarian support needed. But we also have to look to the post-conflict phase. We need to prepare to support them in rebuilding their agriculture, agrilogistics, agrifood systems, trade and markets.
4. In the spirit of “One FAO, one family”, it is crucial to acknowledge the reality that the world is not on track to achieve global food security, and to meet the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. In fact, the world is failing in this mission. We must face the uncomfortable truth. We know our challenges with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals; we have set our goals and targets, and we know the solutions, or at least we think we know. But what about the “how”? How are we going to do it? At that moment, it becomes too silent. Also, there is too much silence within the United Nations, including FAO.
5. How is it possible that 27 years after the first World Food Summit in 1996 in Rome, where we were discussing 800 million people in hunger, we still have 800 million people suffering in hunger, in 2023? And the number is growing again. How is it possible that every year we are losing one third

Documents can be consulted at www.fao.org

of our produced food, with a worth of USD 1 trillion, and 3 billion people do not have access to safe, affordable and nutritious food? We have to turn the page. We have to turn the page to action. We have enough strategies and policies; we have to make the action happen now.

6. The magnitude of challenges facing the achievement of food security is calling on all of us to scale up and coordinate our actions with the objective of eliminating hunger, food insecurity and malnutrition in the world. If we want to achieve sustainable agrifood systems, we need transformative actions. It seems to be a mega and almost impossible task. So, we need to think outside the box. Excellencies, we should not continue talking about the problems, but fixing the problems and implement the solutions. We all know it can only be done if we deliver at the country level. And we can learn from many success stories in your region. We need you more than ever!

7. Transitioning towards sustainability may require a new mindset that prioritizes long-term objectives and addresses trade-offs through massive investment in domains with high transformative potential, such as the four “triggers for transformation” proposed in *The future of food and agriculture – Drivers and triggers for transformation* report: institutions and governance; consumer awareness; income and wealth distribution; and innovative technologies and approaches.

8. Our beloved FAO is uniquely positioned to drive change and support concrete actions at the country level. Collaboration with essential partners, such as the private sector and youth, is paramount.

9. The facts in your region are clear: in 2022, the gross domestic product (GDP) of the region expanded at a rate of 2.7 percent on average, marking a decrease of 3.8 percent points compared to the previous year. I compliment you on the progress made. At the same time, we see clear differences in your region.

10. Special attention and support should be given to the Caribbean in your region. Although making progress, still, progress is hampered. Food insecurity saw a slight decrease in 2022, yet subregional differences persist in the Caribbean. The CELAC Plan for Food and Nutrition Security and the Eradication of Hunger 2025 has contributed to measurable reductions in hunger, but challenges remain, including malnutrition, water stress, climate-related disasters and war-driven fertilizer price impacts.

11. Your region deals with the world’s highest healthy diet cost, standing at USD 4.08 per person per day. Urgent action is needed to reinforce policies and programmes on nutrition-sensitive social protection and agriculture. That’s why strengthening nutrition-sensitive social protection programmes in both rural and urban areas is so important. Priority should furthermore be given to creating food environments that reduce the consumption of highly processed food, increase the consumption of nutritious food and contribute to more affordable healthy diets.

12. It goes without saying that implementing integrated One Health approaches for improved agricultural and human health, including better managing antimicrobial resistance, is key in your transformation. Urgent action is also needed for improved water governance and sustainable agrifood systems. This is especially alarming in Caribbean countries, prompting FAO initiatives, such as supporting Blue Transformation in the Caribbean, sustainable practices in the Dry Corridor of Mesoamerica and sustainable livestock management in South America. I compliment you on the results of these initiatives, at the same time there is a clear need for further strengthening of efforts at national level towards improved water governance in support of food security.

13. Reducing food losses and waste is crucial for transforming agrifood systems in the region for increased efficiency, sustainability, resilience and inclusiveness, significantly contributing to food security and nutrition, economic development, and to mitigating the climate footprint of food production and consumption, and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. The World Food Systems Summit identified this as one of the main priorities. The global Champions 12.3 coalition, in close cooperation with the World Bank and FAO, has taken the initiative to make this happen at country level. Based on country diagnostics about how much food is lost and wasted, where in the food supply chain losses happen and the reasons why they occur, business cases will be developed for investments to tackle the problems. Of course, the private sector plays a crucial role in this initiative. I invite you to join this initiative.

14. I would like to compliment you on how your region is dealing with critical challenges posed by agriculture to the environment and biodiversity, and the threat of climate change in the region. I strongly support the adoption of sustainable and climate-smart agriculture practices through appropriate policies, strategies and investments. Climate change is exacerbating the degradation of ecosystems, due to deforestation, the fragilization of the coral reef, and the loss of soil fertility due to prevailing monoculture, erosion and untaxed environmental costs, raising serious concerns. Volatile economic growth, lack of public investment and weak wealth redistribution reinforce worrying poverty and inequality trends, and the divergence between lower-middle-income and high-income countries.

15. One of FAO's Regional Priorities is the commitment to Sustainable Management of Natural Resources and Climate Change Adaptation, focusing on emergency response, livelihood restoration and rural resilience. Digital innovation, supported by the Hand-in-Hand Initiative, is key to reaching all corners of rural societies, ensuring inclusivity and sustainability, and in strengthening agricultural value chains and promoting resilience.

16. Your region is a major contributor to global agriculture. With expected growth in the coming decade, predominantly export-led, input-use efficiency, and the success of its climate change mitigation and adaptation strategies will be critical to maintain and grow competitiveness. The region's robust export orientation also makes it vulnerable to increasing volatility, tighter financial conditions and weaker global import demand.

17. Together, we can embrace technology, bridge gaps and create lasting solutions for a prosperous future. Let us draw inspiration from FAO's collective successes, acknowledging that every community and innovation contribute to building a resilient foundation. Our commitment to this cause reflects a shared vision for thriving agricultural systems in harmony with nature, incorporating data-driven initiatives for ecosystem conservation and restoration. FAO's efforts in the region prioritize the acknowledgment of the crucial roles played by Indigenous Peoples and the support provided to rural youth for inclusive and sustainable development.

18. Your region should acknowledge the pivotal contributions of women in the food value chain; they constitute the fundamental fabric of a sustainable and inclusive food system. In addition, it is fundamental to recognize the unique vulnerabilities shared by the Small Island Developing States. Reduction of inequalities and poverty and the promotion of resilience aim to reduce inequalities and poverty by enhancing the resilience of agrifood systems.

19. Partners, especially the private sector and civil society, are uniquely positioned to co-lead transformative change. May I make a special appeal to you to support youth through programmes and financial aid, for example, for start-ups.

20. Given the tailored-country approach, decentralization is deemed necessary for effective action, with your feedback on proposed FAO Country Office Network adjustments being crucial. An update, and clearly defined responsibilities, are needed in regional and national offices to ensure that they are fit for purpose and can respond to the expectations of Members, donors and financial institutions.

21. A special acknowledgment is extended to the dedicated FAO staff in your region, particularly at national level, working under challenging circumstances of the direct contact with the suffering of many people. Their efforts are commendable.

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22. As we conclude this Regional Conference, let us remember that you, in the region, have a unique role in making a global difference. The engagement and commitment of your governments will shape the future of FAO's service to humanity. Together, we can be effective agents in the struggle to free the world from hunger and malnutrition.

23. In the words of Nelson Mandela, “It always seems impossible until it is done”. Let us carry forward his spirit, courage and passion, as we work towards a future where the impossible is indeed achieved.

Thank you.