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Statement of the Director-General

Mr. Chairperson,

Honourable Ministers, Vice-Ministers

Excellencies

Distinguished Delegates,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

When thinking on what I should focus my speech today, I had originally felt that I should give you a detailed account of what we have achieved together since 2012 when I took over as Director General.

But instead of blowing my own trumpet and presenting you with lots of figures, let me just quote from the recent evaluation of FAO that was conducted by the Multilateral Organization Performance Assessment Network (MOPAN), which is run by some of the most important UN donor countries.

I quote: “FAO has strengthened its performance in terms of an enhanced strategic focus; stronger operational management and stronger commitment to partnerships. Internally, this shift has been accompanied by profound changes in the way FAO organizes its work. Implementing those reforms while operating with a zero-growth core budget has required significant adaptation. Externally, the new focus has reinforced FAO’s commitment to decentralization and to working in partnerships. The evidence from these assessments suggests that today FAO is highly valued among its partners.” End quote.

If we accept this assessment as a brief summary of the achievements made over the last years, it allows me to use today’s speech to share with you a few reflections on what I have learned during my time as Director-General.

Looking back over these seven and a half years, I think that three moves played a largely unsung but critical role in increasing FAO’s efficiency and effectiveness.

These moves were made towards inducing changes of attitude among country representatives and our staff.

The first move that I will highlight was to bring our governing bodies away from the habit of adopting adversarial roles between developed and developing countries.

I am proud to say that we did it. We restored mutual trust within a divided Membership.

In 2015, for example, countries were able to agree during Council for the first time ever on the level of the budget before submitting it to the Conference.

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Since then, almost all decisions have been taken by consensus in FAO. I regard this as one of the hallmarks of our times.

But despite consensus and improved dialogue, we have still failed to match our growing ambitions with a needed rise in our regular budget resources.

Since I took office, I have had to manage this Organization under the restrictive concept of zero nominal growth in our assessed contributions.

This has meant less and less money in real terms every biennium, while countries have consistently asked FAO to do more and more.

To be very honest, I would have liked to see those who represent Member Nations make a stronger case to their governments for investing more in FAO to enable this Organization to better address the huge challenges that we have to face.

Since 2012, we have managed to find more than USD 150 million in savings particularly by cutting bureaucracy and by adopting improved management practices.

But this has a limit. As the Independent Chairperson of the Council used to say, all elastic bands have their own limit, and we have had to rely increasingly on voluntary contributions to run the Organization.

As I said in our last Session of FAO Council, we are in a situation in which two-thirds of our financial resources depend on the goodwill of donors, not on assessed contributions of our Members.

On the one hand, this is a sign of donor confidence in FAO. On the other hand, it is also a source of risk.

Voluntary contributions are highly volatile and subject to many variables that are beyond our control. We never know when they will come and what the amounts will be.

It also runs the risk that FAO's programmes could be increasingly driven by the priorities set by our main donors rather than by its whole Membership. This reality needs to be addressed in the near future.

The second change of attitude in FAO that I wanted to highlight today has been to move the Secretariat towards partnerships with other actors and institutions.

In the past, FAO tended to work behind closed doors and we have opened FAO to many new partners.

Since 2013, when Members approved our policy proposal for partnerships, we have signed more than 200 agreements with the private sector, civil society, academia and research institutions.

Their engagement in our activities is boosting FAO work.

We have also deepened our collaboration with other UN agencies, particularly within the 2030 Agenda.

A good example is that our flagship publication *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World* (SOFI), which is now jointly produced by five UN Agencies: FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO.

And perhaps most importantly, the UN Rome-based Agencies (RBAs) have moved away from a relationship that was all too often rivalrous to one in which we cooperate according to our comparative advantages.

This is particularly noticeable in the field, where our country offices collaborate intensely to overcome the scarcity of resources. We hope that in the coming years we can do more together here in Rome.

The third move towards the changing attitude in FAO has been to make better use of the knowledge and experience within the Organization by nurturing a growth in interdisciplinary work.

Many issues in agricultural and rural development, nutrition and food systems, natural resource management or in environmental fields have multidisciplinary dimensions. And hence they are best addressed by teams rather than specialists working in isolation.

This is why we set up our five Strategic Programme Teams to better coordinate our work towards each of our five Strategic Objectives.

We have also adopted four cross-cutting themes as part of our Strategic Framework: governance, gender, climate change and nutrition.

These changes have done much to improve planning of programmes and projects, as well as to encourage staff to team up across departmental and divisional boundaries, allowing the Organization to work in a more horizontal way.

I must confess, however, that this third move towards cross-disciplinary collaboration has been slower than I had hoped.

But I expect it to gather momentum in the near future as more examples of success are emerging.

We need to continue our efforts to break the silos that remain inside FAO and which block our way of work.

I am also convinced that the emphasis that we have given to greater decentralization is enhancing our performance as a global Organization.

From the onset, I have been saying that FAO must be a knowledge Organization with its feet on the ground.

Decentralization has been fundamental to better understanding and addressing the needs of our Member Countries, particularly developing ones.

We have also implemented the geographic mobility programme, which I hope will soon become part of this Organization's culture.

Periodic rotation of staff between Rome and field offices will do much to ensure that our headquarters units are in touch with reality.

And we have given our offices in the field more decision-making authority.

Today, most of our voluntary contributions are raised and managed at field level, at country level, in close contact with national authorities.

This has also helped to increase our focus on South-South and Triangular Cooperation, that I am sure will have our particular attention in the years to come.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Probably the most positive thing that I have learned in my two terms as FAO Director-General is that innovative policies can very quickly gain wide acceptance, and I was surprised by how low an investment they required.

Two examples of such policy shifts can illustrate this.

First, is the acceptance by most governments that increasing food production does not necessarily reduce hunger.

And consequently, targeted social protection programmes are essential components of successful hunger reduction programmes.

In the coming years, I hope that governments will also widely accept that we urgently need to produce healthy food instead of only increasing food production, and in order to produce healthy food, we need healthy oceans, healthy soils, healthy seeds and sustainable production practices.

Today, the food challenges facing humanity are not only production and accessibility. It is also about the quality of food we produce. People are eating badly, particularly with regard to the high consumption of ultra-processed food and artificial products.

My vision is that food safety standards cannot be only about preventing people from getting food poisoning or sick from food-borne illnesses. Food safety must also be about preventing people from suffering from all forms of malnutrition. We need to promote more healthy diets.

So, for a food to be considered safe for consumption, it must also be healthy. We urgently need to start to discuss rules on this issue at national and international level.

The second policy shift that has gained rapid acceptance by governments is that building resilience to shocks makes a great deal of sense in regions and communities that are exposed to protracted emergency situations.

Investing in prevention is much more effective and cheaper than acting after a disaster strikes.

We have learned that to save lives, we also need to save their livelihoods. This has become the motto of our partnership with other development and humanitarian agencies and especially with our two sister Organizations here in Rome.

Let me add that we have also learned that changes in technology can be easily adopted by farmers when they have self-evident advantages.

One of the most remarkable cases is the speed with which the practice of zero tillage is being adopted by both developed and developing countries today.

We are encouraging farmers to grow crops without ploughing or hoeing so as to reduce soil degradation, moisture loss and energy use. Now some 180 million hectares of cropland are being treated in this way.

These experiences have convinced me that FAO can be very effective in stimulating the widespread adoption of new policies and technologies that are essential to reaching the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

I also think that we have helped to change perceptions about who feeds the world, and how more food will need to be produced if we could reduce the waste and loss in existing food systems.

I hope that we have succeeded in debunking the view that only industrial-scale farming, with a heavy dependence on energy-intensive technologies, can guarantee long-term world food security.

It is increasingly accepted that the agricultural model promoted through the Green Revolution has reached its limits, and that there is also a place for family farming in the world. A relevant place.

In the last 60 years, resource-intensive farming systems have increased food production at a high cost to the environment, generating deforestation, water scarcity, soil depletion and high levels of greenhouse gas emissions.

We need to promote a paradigm shift. The future of food and agriculture is not input-intensive, but knowledge and technology-intensive.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As a final observation, let me say that we need to be more aggressive in promoting and making use of FAO's comparative advantages as a multilateral agency.

I am deeply worried that the emergence of inward-looking nationalist policies is starting to undermine support for multilateral institutions, during a period when the need for concerted action between countries is greater than ever.

Many of the issues relating to feeding the world and managing natural resources sustainably have transnational and global dimensions that cannot be tackled by countries working alone.

The Port States Measures Agreement (PSMA) provides an excellent example of the effectiveness of FAO in fostering such collaboration among countries.

As you know, the PSMA is the first-ever binding international instrument that specifically addresses illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing.

Today, almost 100 countries are committed to PMSA implementation. This is a fantastic achievement, if we consider that the agreement entered into force just three years ago in 2016.

I am convinced that we must do more to harness FAO's potential to provide public goods in the areas of our mandate.

The processes of globalisation are immensely powerful. If we allow them to move faster than the growth of regulatory capacities, the risks of local and global conflicts are bound to grow.

As I take leave of FAO, my greatest hope is that it will continue to shine as a beacon for multilateralism, open to dialogue and partnerships, and deeply committed to creating a better future for all people and for our planet.

That will also be an institution based on democratic principles as we have seen in yesterday's elections.

Mr President, allow me to congratulate you, for the exceptional day we had yesterday.

It proves that together, we can achieve FAO's mission of a world free from hunger and all forms of malnutrition, and also to promote a more sustainable agricultural development.

Thank you for your attention