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# FAO REGIONAL CONFERENCE FOR EUROPE

## Thirty-fourth Session

Rome, Italy, 14–17 May 2024

### Statement by the Independent Chairperson of the FAO Council

*Chairperson,*

*Honourable Ministers,*

*Director-General,*

*Distinguished Delegates*

1. I am deeply honoured to address you at the **34th Session of FAO Regional Conference for Europe**. As we gather here today, it is imperative that we address the pressing issues facing **the European and Central Asia region**.

We hold a profound responsibility in shaping the future of our agrifood systems within the context of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set forth by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Agenda 2030).

The FAO and its Members stand at the forefront of this transformative journey, recognizing the imperative to foster resilient, sustainable and inclusive agrifood systems that nourish our planet and its people.

2. Before we delve into pressing matters of your region, I would like to offer condolences to families affected by the **war in Ukraine**. This prolonged conflict not only causes immense human suffering but also contributes to heightened food insecurity, exacerbating the challenges faced by agrifood systems globally.

I would like to stress the need to allow for the full resumption of Ukrainian agricultural production and its unimpeded export from Ukraine, including via the Black Sea.

Let us face an uncomfortable truth. With the money the world is spending on wars and weapons this year, we could solve 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 the humanitarian support needed.

Documents can be consulted at [www.fao.org](http://www.fao.org)

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 unity embodied by “**One FAO, one family**”, we must acknowledge the reality that the world is not on track to achieve global food security or meet the **Sustainable Development Goals by 2030**.

We must face the uncomfortable truth.

We know our challenges, with Agenda 2030 and its SDGs; 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?

There is often a deafening silence when it comes to implementation, including within FAO.

**“There comes a time when silence is betrayal”, Martin Luther King, Jr.**

We must break this silence and translate our knowledge into action.

5. It is staggering to consider that, 27 years after the first **World Food Summit, during which we discussed how to support 800 million people, we still have 800 million people suffering from hunger in 2023, with the number growing annually**.

The magnitude of these challenges calls for transformative actions at all levels.

We must focus on implementing solutions.

This requires a shift in mindset and a willingness to think outside the box.

6. **Let us not overlook the challenges closer to home.**

**Your region, like many others, has faced profound shocks, from the COVID-19 pandemic to the conflict in Ukraine, underscoring the urgent need for agrifood systems that can withstand such disruptions while ensuring food security and stability.**

**Although your region is one of the most economically developed**, it also grapples with multifaceted challenges in combating malnutrition, improving food security and revitalizing agrifood systems, particularly in rural areas.

Many rural individuals, the vast majority of whom live on small family farms, depend on income from agricultural and informal activities.

Smallholders often lack access to knowledge and farm advisory services, and risk management mechanisms.

Groups at risk of being left behind include rural women and youth.

Young women face incremental challenges with access to financial risk-reducing mechanisms.

Younger men may view migration as a viable option to escape the cycle of poverty and vulnerability.

7. Ensuring food security and addressing all forms of **malnutrition** remain, along with enhancing access **to safe, nutritious food and healthy diets for all, leaving no one behind**.

Formulating effective policies, promoting **digital innovation** and facilitating **sustainable rural transformation**, with a focus on **empowering smallholders and youth**, stand as cornerstones for transformative change.

8. The aim is to bolster **resilience to climate change**, enhance access to technology and markets, and **create opportunities for rural livelihoods**, particularly for **women and youth**. Promoting **food systems transformation**, including **nutrition-sensitive value chains and healthy diets**, is paramount.

By fostering collaboration across sectors and stakeholders, you should seek to ensure that agrifood systems promote health, sustainability and equity.

Promoting sustainable **natural resources governance, preserving biodiversity and building resilience to climate change and disasters** are critical imperatives.

Through strategic interventions, we aim to mitigate environmental degradation, enhance climate resilience and promote **sustainable land management practices**.

9. To address these challenges, which are not mere aspirations, actionable commitments must be taken. To accelerate progress, FAO has to expedite harnessing **technology, innovation and data**, alongside cross-cutting themes of **gender, youth and inclusion**.

Innovation and digitalization can play a pivotal role in steering agrifood systems towards more

climate-resilient and low-emission pathways.

They have much to contribute to enhancing resource efficiency, monitoring their use, and climate change, improving climate resilience and enhancing or protecting carbon sinks and carbon sequestration in agrifood systems, while contributing to supporting the decrease of emissions. Moreover, FAO's corporate strategies and initiatives should be more instrumental in driving impact at country level, from utilizing science and innovation to promoting digitalization and sustainable agricultural practices.

10. Indeed, there is no denying that much more needs to be done to address critical **gaps in legal and policy frameworks**, ensure the **availability of reliable data, and combat poverty, particularly among those with low incomes**.

Firstly, bridging the gaps in legal and policy frameworks is paramount to create an enabling environment for sustainable development.

We must strive to enact and enforce laws and regulations that support equitable access to resources, promote sustainable agricultural practices and protect the rights of smallholders and vulnerable communities.

This includes bolstering land tenure rights, strengthening food safety standards and enhancing regulations to mitigate environmental degradation.

11. Reliable data serves as the cornerstone for evidence-based decision-making and effective policy formulation.

We must invest in robust data collection mechanisms, enhance data quality and accessibility, and promote transparency and accountability in data management.

By ensuring the availability of accurate and up-to-date data, we can better understand the dynamics of food security, nutrition and poverty, and tailor our interventions accordingly.

Addressing poverty, particularly among those with low incomes, is essential to achieving inclusive and sustainable development. We must adopt a multi-dimensional approach that tackles the root causes of poverty, including limited access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities. This entails implementing targeted poverty alleviation programmes, expanding social safety nets and promoting inclusive economic growth that creates decent jobs and improves livelihoods for all.

12. **One of the easy-to-grab solutions is food losses.**

**It can** lead to increased efficiency, sustainability, resilience and inclusiveness.

This effort significantly contributes to food security and nutrition, economic development and the mitigation of the climate footprint of food production and consumption.

**The World Food Systems Summit** has identified food loss and waste (FLW) reduction as one of its main priorities.

**The global Champions 12.3 coalition**, in collaboration with the World Bank and FAO, has initiated actions at country level. By conducting country diagnostics to determine the extent and causes of food loss and waste throughout the food supply chain, business cases will be developed for targeted investments to address these challenges.

The idea is to develop a concrete private sector investment scheme in five to seven countries.

I invite you to join these efforts.

13. **More public and private investments are crucial; the funding gap is enormous.**

Governments should improve the enabling environment for private sector rural and agricultural finance.

To address the financial gap and enhance investments of International Financial Institutions, private sector and blended financing partnership present an important strategy to scale up funding.

**We have to be more creative in getting more investments from the private sector, de-risk investments, facilitate impact investment and promote blended finance.**

14. May I make a special appeal to you to **support youth** through programmes and **financial support**, for example for start-ups.

Supporting the empowerment and employment of youth in rural areas remains an important priority for FAO in the region.

It should be supported by building evidence and providing a platform through the **Regional Rural Youth Forum for Europe and Central Asia** for informed policy design.

15. Given the need for a tailored-country approach, adjustments to the FAO Country Office Network are crucial.

We need a modern and efficient network with clearly defined responsibilities for both regional and national offices.

It is imperative that FAO's country network has to be fit for purpose and capable of meeting the expectations of its Members.

Therefore, I strongly endorse your suggestion that this process should involve transparent consultations with Members.

16. May I ask you for a special acknowledgment for the dedicated FAO staff in your region, particularly at national level, working under challenging circumstances of direct contact with the suffering of many people. Their efforts are commendable.

*Chairperson,*

*Honourable Ministers,*

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17. In conclusion, let us reaffirm our collective commitment to building agrifood systems that are not only efficient and resilient, but also inclusive and sustainable.

Together, we can chart a course towards a future where no one goes hungry, where our planet thrives, and where every individual enjoys a better life.

Addressing these critical gaps requires concerted efforts and collaboration across sectors and stakeholders.

By prioritizing legal and policy reforms, investing in data infrastructure and tackling poverty head-on, we can build more resilient and inclusive agrifood systems that leave no one behind.

18. The Regional Conference for Europe plays a pivotal role in global change-making. The dedication and commitment of your governments will shape FAO's trajectory in serving humanity.

Together, we can effectively combat hunger and malnutrition worldwide. **As Nelson Mandela wisely said, "It always seems impossible until it is done."**

Let us embrace his spirit, courage and passion, as we strive towards achieving the seemingly impossible.

*Thank you.*