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FAO REGIONAL CONFERENCE FOR Asia and the Pacific

Thirty-sixth Session

Dhaka, Bangladesh

Statement by the Independent Chair of the FAO Council

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

1. It is a privilege for me to participate in this 36th Session of the FAO Regional Conference for Asia and the Pacific. This being my first “in-person” address to a Regional Conference since being elected as the Independent Chairperson of the FAO Council by the FAO Conference in June last year, I would like to take this opportunity to reiterate my gratitude for that mark of confidence. I have taken up this position with enthusiasm, and I am committed to guiding the Council towards more effective deliberations, engaging with Members and Management on the key issues, finding mutual understanding and moving together in a spirit of reciprocal trust. Please allow me to convey my appreciation to the Government and people of Bangladesh for the excellent organisation of the 36th Session of the FAO Regional Conference for Asia and the Pacific region.

2. While countries recover from the severe impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change continues to pose “an existential threat to humanity” (World Economic Forum, 2021). Let us not forget that hunger is the second or perhaps the first biggest challenge we are facing today. Our world is changing quickly around us. People go for holidays into space. Innovations spring up daily like seedlings in spring, but this expansion is not without consequence. Despite this progress, more than 800 million people live in hunger, 3 billion do not have access to safe, affordable and nutritious food and 2 billion suffer from nutrition-related diseases. The dots do not connect; one-third of food produced globally is wasted, while children are still hungry.

3. Your region is hosting over half of the world’s population and covers about 30 percent of the global landmass. Eighty percent of your people are living below the international poverty line. Over 40 percent of the people in your region cannot afford healthy diets. Your region’s natural resources are challenged by climate change and water scarcity, so your challenges are enormous. Nevertheless, your region is also blessed with ingenuity, resilience, technological innovation and financial potency. It has inherited thousands of years of traditional and ingenious agrifood systems and know-how. With these combined innovations and technologies, your region has the tremendous capability of developing a variety of solutions. Digitalization holds the promise of accelerated development of rural areas. The

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emergence of a fourth Industrial Revolution that combines physical and biological systems with the digital world may also affect where and how we grow and deliver our food.

4. We can produce more food than ever, but biodiversity and the amount of arable land are decreasing. We all know the beauty of your tropical forests and biodiversity. The Pacific Islands are the primary centres of biodiversity. This subregion, where land makes up less than two percent of the total area, includes some of the richest and most diverse terrestrial and marine ecosystems on the planet. However, the increasing pace of transition from traditional to more intensive agricultural production systems is threatening this rich biodiversity heritage in the Pacific Island Countries and Territories (PICTs), including the indigenous and local knowledge on which its survival depends. There is a clear need for a more systemic and coordinated approach among key sectors and stakeholders for the sustainable management of forests and biodiversity for food and agriculture in the Pacific region. I compliment you with the already existing initiatives in this regard. We can learn from these and bring them to scale.

5. The importance of your efforts to address the serious problem of your region is falling behind in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030, especially with the negative impacts of COVID-19 and its disastrous consequences: the health crisis, unemployment, food supply disruptions, food demand shocks arising from the pandemic lockdowns, reduced mobility, restrictions on international travel, and internal and cross border migration. COVID-19 has plunged the whole world into the biggest crisis in recent history. Notwithstanding all our technologies and innovations, viruses can derail our supply chains, severely risk our food security and leave communities vulnerable.

6. To speak plainly, the shortcomings of our global agrifood system have been laid bare. We need transformative change, and we need it now. Transformative change via transformative actions. There are no excuses anymore for not acting. Sustainable agrifood systems are and should be part of the solutions. About 21-37 percent of total greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions are attributable to agrifood systems. By transforming agrifood systems, we can turn over this global challenge.

7. This 36th Session of the FAO Regional Conference for Asia and the Pacific will discuss how FAO activities have addressed previously agreed regional priorities during 2020-21 and contributed to the FAO Strategic Framework 2022-31 and the SDGs. It will also examine how new ways of working modalities and programmes introduced in 2020-21 have impacted the Asia and the Pacific region, moving towards more inclusive, efficient and effective agrifood systems transformation. The lessons learned from FAO's implementation of programmes in the region will emphasize the implications for supporting transformation to more efficient, inclusive, resilient and sustainable agrifood systems for better production, better nutrition, a better environment and a better life, leaving no one behind.

8. FAO is needed now more than ever before to achieve its most noble mandate and our joint efforts should continue to be directed towards transforming agrifood systems in the region. All stakeholders have to take their respective responsibilities and work together towards the achievement of FAO's goals, as well as the SDGs and Agenda 2030.

9. It is unequivocal that to achieve the SDGs by 2030, agrifood systems must benefit from urgent action to address rapidly increasing diet-related health concerns, damage to ecosystems and the threat of climate change. Most of your countries are increasingly conscious of the need to create healthier food environments for healthier diets and empower consumers in this respect. Mainstreaming of nutrition across sectoral policies is essential in this respect.

10. A critical policy area for your region is the One Health approach. I compliment your region with the ongoing initiatives. Implementing evidence-based, successful risk management approaches in your region should receive the broadest global support.

11. Of course, your blue growth potential should be fully utilized. Focus should be on transforming fisheries and aquaculture to sustainable management through development of capacity and using innovations where feasible.

12. Allow me to recall the strong momentum created by the UN Food Systems Summit 2021. It created momentum for accelerating efforts to achieve the SDGs by 2030 and the commitment of Members and all stakeholders to transform agrifood systems to ensure economic, social and

environmental sustainability. The leading role of FAO was also highlighted during this event. In this regard, FAO will be hosting the Coordination Hub, staffed by the Rome-based Agencies (RBAs) and other Agencies, to provide the coordination for the follow-up actions, as well as to potentially leverage key partnerships in the wider ecosystem of support.

13. The coordinated action of the Coordination Hub will be directed to accelerate the progress toward achieving the SDGs, including via the development and implementation of national pathways and coalitions of action, through the provision of technical assistance at the country level, and science- and evidence-based support to policymaking.

14. I would like to compliment your region for the emphasis given to addressing the degradation of its natural resources, as well as an understanding that radical changes are needed in the interaction between agriculture and the environment, moving from agriculture as a cause of degradation towards a situation where agriculture becomes a central part of the solution towards a more sustainable future.

15. For the challenges facing the region, the role of innovation and technology as accelerators is pivotal in supporting the shift to more sustainable agrifood systems. Scaling up these initiatives is indeed a priority. Certainly, innovation can boost this. Indeed, the development of the FAO Strategies on Science and Innovation and Climate Change is directed to respond to an urgent need in the region for action against climate change, and for science and innovation to accelerate agricultural productivity and sustainability. That is also why your input in the development of the FAO Strategy for Science and Innovation is so important.

16. All the above-mentioned efforts should continue, and I also encourage the region to support the implementation of such FAO corporate initiatives as the Hand-in-Hand Initiative, 1 000 Digital Villages, as well as achievements in the Small Island Developing States (SIDS) Solutions Forum and the Aquaculture Platform, as they aim to reduce the vulnerabilities of the rural poor through improved food system capacities using FAO's data tools.

17. Of course, the proof of the pudding is in the eating i.e. relying on the means of implementation. In this regard, your emphasis on the role of the private sector, in particular the food industries, is crucial in making the region's agrifood systems more sustainable, more resilient, more inclusive and more efficient, and to provide better nutrition for all.

18. Last but not least, acknowledging the crucial role women and youth are playing for your future is of utmost importance as a first step, but everything depends on how you will make this concrete.

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19. To conclude, this Regional Conference for Asia and the Pacific has a unique role to play in helping define FAO policies, and I firmly believe that the continuing engagement and commitment of the governments in this region will do much to ensure that FAO continues to serve you well and to be an effective agent in the struggle to free the world of hunger and malnutrition.

20. It is thus with eager anticipation that I await the outcome of your deliberations. I thank you for your kind attention and wish you every success in your work.