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FAO REGIONAL CONFERENCE FOR THE NEAR EAST

Thirty-Seventh Session

Amman - Jordan, 5-8 February 2024 and 4-5 March 2024

Statement by the Independent Chairperson of the FAO Council

Honourable Ministers,
Director-General and
Distinguished Delegates,

1. I am honoured to stand before you at **the 37th Session of FAO Regional Conference for the Near East**. I extend my sincere appreciation to **Jordan and its people** for the commendable organization of this conference.

2. 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 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? At that moment, it becomes too silent. Also, there is too much silence within the UN, including FAO.

3. 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 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?

4. 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 food systems, we need transformative actions. It seems to be a mega and almost impossible task. So, we need to think outside of the box. Excellencies, we should not continue talking about the problem, but fixing the problems and implement the solutions. And 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!

5. 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.

Documents can be consulted at www.fao.org

6. **The facts are clear: in the dynamic Near East region, home to 400 million people, agriculture plays a key role, contributing 14 percent of the GDP and employing 38 percent of the economically active population.**

7. **The challenges are also clear: wars, conflicts, terrorism, water scarcity, malnutrition, rising obesity rates, especially among children and women, trade disruptions, climate change, population growth and urbanization have a tremendous negative impact on food security.**

8. As the World Development Indicator is stating, conflicts and wars in fragile states are one of the drivers of food insecurity in your region. Daily we see the devastating consequences of the wars and crises in Gaza, Yemen and Sudan. As stated by the Secretary-General of the United Nations (UN) and the Director-General of FAO the loss of lives and the human catastrophe unfolding, due to the violence taking place in the Middle East and most particularly in Gaza, is unacceptable. It has to stop. 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.

9. Of course, we have to work with the mandate of FAO. We have no option but to redouble our efforts to transform, and where necessary, rebuild agrifood systems, especially in fragile 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.

10. Water scarcity is one of the most critical problems of the region and is worsening with climate change. Over-abstraction of water is leading to widespread depletion, quality deterioration and saline intrusion.

11. I compliment you with the results of the Regional Water Scarcity Initiative. At the same time, there is a clear need for further strengthening efforts at national level, towards improved water governance, in support of food security.

12. Your region is acknowledging the critical challenges posed by agriculture to the environment and biodiversity and the threat of climate change in the region. Let us not forget that biodiversity is an essential component of agricultural production systems, providing the ecosystem services that enable productive agriculture.

13. I strongly support the adoption of sustainable and climate-smart agriculture practices through appropriate policies, strategies and investments. Special focus should be given to small-scale family farmers, as they are the backbone of rural communities in your region. They produce more than 80 percent of agricultural production on 75 to 85 percent of the agricultural landholdings.

14. One clear role for public investments is piloting innovations for incentives for sustainable land and water management, and environmental conservation. This should be achieved by translating technological innovations into accessible, adapted and affordable digital services that benefit small-scale producers, rural women, small-scale entrepreneurs, and rural communities and villages.

15. For instance, **Regional Priority 3, “Greening Agriculture,”** addresses water scarcity and climate action, a huge challenge of the Near East and North Africa (NENA) region. The aim is to protect natural resources, to combat deforestation, to encourage sustainable practices, and to promote good agricultural practices with a focus on the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration.

16. Despite the crisis in the NENA region, with 80 percent living below the international poverty line, **there are positive shifts.** Hunger is decreasing and initiatives like the recently launched **Arab Forum for Rural Advisory Services** for the development of food value chains, particularly in conflict-affected areas, and for improving agribusiness and related ecosystems are making strides.

17. Further key actions include the establishment of the **Regional Leadership Development Academy** to enhance leadership capabilities for transforming agrifood systems; the establishment of a Strategy and Policy Unit at the Regional Office to provide tailored and strategic support to Members;

the development of a country and subregional food security and nutrition observatory; and the formation of transformative partnerships.

18. **Safeguarding the region's knowledge and innovation is vital through the FAO Strategic Framework 2022–31.** The region's emphasis on healthier food environments and the **One Health approach** is commendable. Initiatives like **the global Champions 12.3 coalition** also address food loss and waste reduction. The **UN 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, 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. Reducing food loss and waste will require strong policy support and an adequate institutional framework to create an enabling environment, as well as awareness. I invite you to join this initiative.

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 startups. The lessons learned from FAO's implementation of programmes in the region underscore the implications for supporting the transformation to MORE efficient, inclusive, resilient and sustainable agrifood systems.

20. Given the tailored-country approach, **decentralization** is deemed necessary for effective action, your feedback on proposed FAO Country Offices network adjustments is crucial. I would like to mention the recommendation of the **Joint Inspection Unit** in the recent review of management and administration in the FAO. The Unit recommends an update, and clearly defined responsibilities, of 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.

Chairperson, Honourable Ministers,

Director-General and

Distinguished Delegates

22. To conclude, this Regional Conference for the Near East has a unique role to play in helping define and implement FAO policies. I firmly believe that the continuing engagement and commitment of your governments will do much to ensure that FAO continues to serve you. I am confident you will be an effective agent in the struggle to free the world from hunger and malnutrition.

23. As you have seen and heard, the Director-General and his team, certainly the staff in the offices in your region, stand ready to deliver on FAO's and our mandate to secure food security, leaving nobody behind, and our collective efforts towards **transforming agrifood systems** in your region.

24. And let's not forget the famous words of Nelson Mandela: "It always seems impossible, until it is done". Let us work with his spirit and with his courage and passion!!