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Statement by the Spokesperson of the Civil Society Organizations (CSO)

Ambassadors, distinguished delegates, representatives of FAO, thank you for giving us the floor.

1. My name is Ana Benoliel Coutinho, and I am from Chisinau, Republic of Moldova. I am speaking as a representative of civil society, on behalf of the Nyéléni Europe and Central Asia Food Sovereignty Network, following the Consultation which took place prior to this conference, with Civil Society from the region, including small scale farmers, pastoralists, small-scale and artisanal fisherfolk, Indigenous Peoples, migrant and rural workers, consumers, NGOs, rural women and youth, health and climate justice organisations.
2. In this time of crisis, the FAO Regional process is ever more important, being the only one which prioritises the less developed countries from the region. We take the opportunity to thank FAO REU and the governments for the cooperation and for the space given to Civil Society Organizations at this ministerial regional conference.
3. Two years ago, when we spoke in the 33rd Regional Conference, in Poland, we were alarmed by the consequences of COVID-19 pandemic, followed by the war unleashed by the Russian Federation against Ukraine and the humanitarian crisis. Two years later, our region is one of the most affected by multiple military conflicts worldwide, spanning across our territory. Russia's war against Ukraine continued to devastate the Ukrainian people and land, aggravated by other military aggressions, crimes against humanity and civil unrest in many countries in our region.
4. In the backdrop of ongoing wars and their far-reaching impact on prices and the market, a troubling reality persists on one hand the price of the products are still under the production cost, there is no decent income for farmers and agricultural workers and on the other hand consumers cannot afford fresh, nutritious food. The climate crisis has never stopped, in fact the consequences of climate change have worsened. Small-scale farmers, pastoralists, Indigenous Peoples are experiencing more frequent extreme weather events, while cultivating food on increasingly degraded or exploited soil. Access to water both for agriculture and as clean drinking water is a critical element in our region. The climate crisis has led to an increase in droughts and floods. What has been the response to this? The European Union is eliminating the environmental

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standards in agriculture that were hard-won after decades of struggle. This undermines the overwhelming majority of small-scale farmers advocating for agroecology and consumers seeking healthy food. The economic downturns have increased the inequalities in the food systems, leading to increased poverty, hunger, insecurity and fear for the future.

5. The war unleashed by the Russian Federation against Ukraine has been devastating for small scale farmers in Ukraine and at regional level, destroying the lives and health of people. The Right to Food and Nutrition takes on a specific relevance in areas of conflict and war. Rural people are particularly vulnerable in wartime. Some of the worst military actions in Ukraine are the mining of 10 millions hectares of agricultural land and the weaponisation of food. The fatal consequences of turning food into a weapon are the violation of the right to life and the right to food, the destruction of farmers' and peasants' food supplies, crops, animals, livestock and seeds facilities and hydraulic structures, the destruction and contamination of soil and water. We emphasise the important role of peasants and family farmers during the war and in the reconstruction process. They ensure the sustainability of Ukraine's food systems in general and especially in the context of military operations, in providing significant food and financial support to vulnerable civilian groups, and in performing other humanitarian tasks. The Ukrainian People express their infinite gratitude to the people and countries of Europe and the entire world for their solidarity and support. We continue to firmly condemn any military aggression and continue to stand with the Ukrainian people and all the victims of this war. We strongly support the membership of the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia in the European Union, as a pathway for building peace and stability in the region.
6. The key features of the food production model of small-scale farmers sustaining communities not only in Ukraine, but also in other countries in the Western and Eastern Europe, Caucasus, the Balkans and Central Asia are their strong connection to territory, particularly to nature and communities. Community seed banks and farmers seeds supported by CSOs are one of the key pillars of resilience that small scale farming has demonstrated in times of crises. To practise agroecological agriculture, farmers need seeds adapted to their local growing conditions and must therefore be able to select their own peasant seeds and realise a dynamic management of agrobiodiversity. To support these practices, we need a regulatory framework that enforces peasants' rights over seeds. We call instead for the application of the UNDROP and Plant Treaty (ITPGRFA) articles (in particular, article 9 and 12) and the application of the precautionary principle and respect for the Cartagena protocol of the Convention on Biological Diversity. We call for a ban on the patenting of plants and animal breeds everywhere in the region. We call on member states to support the peasants' seed systems, locally adapted seed control, improvement, exchange, seeds saving and animal husbandry initiatives, as practised by pastoralists and peasants in order to enhance community food resilience.
7. Women are the backbone of any sustainable food system, through seed saving, and preservation of agro-biodiversity, and dietary diversity. They serve as primary custodians of seeds, traditional practices, including the cultivation of local crop varieties and culinary traditions. Civil Society Organizations play a vital role in supporting artisanal producers, particularly women, to access markets and sell their products. In this capacity, we serve as essential actors contributing to the achievement of multiple SDGs.
8. In order to prevent food loss and waste we call to support localised and short food supply chains, which are the key features of resilient food systems and food security. The length of the supply chain and storage availability in the supply chain can also be a significant source of food loss. That is why, territorial markets should be based mainly on short supply chains. The notion of farm to fork (and deck to dish) can truly impact and reduce food loss. Another way is through the

creation of small, preferably cooperative local processing units. Community Supported Agriculture and food cooperatives are some of the examples of short food supply chains supported by Civil Society Organizations.

9. Within agri-food systems, CSOs support agroecology as key to mitigate both the climate and biodiversity crises. The specific ways that this can be achieved, whether it be through peasants' and Indigenous Peoples' rights to land, seeds and water, the right to food and nutrition, or social and solidarity economy.
10. Indigenous Peoples from our region are some of the the most marginalised and vulnerable communities of the society, which have also been affected by industrial food systems that disregard traditional diets and livelihoods. Their traditional practices to produce food in respect to nature, are one of the most important sources of knowledge for Agroecology and sustainable agriculture. The human rights of Indigenous Peoples have been historically and continuously violated, mainly through expropriation of their lands for the industrial companies or restriction of access to their land and natural resources. Deforestation in the Indigenous Peoples territories, as well as industrial extraction of natural resources and commercial fishing, destroy the traditional food base of Indigenous Peoples, and peoples as such. The human rights of Indigenous Peoples are a pre-requisite for their traditional way of life. We urge the Member States to recognise, respect and support the realisation of Indigenous Peoples' rights, with focus on the following: the right to food, the right to self-determination, the right to cultural identity and fair and unrestricted access to justice. The land tenure guidelines and UN Declaration on Indigenous Peoples Rights are the main guiding instruments and we urge the Member States to approve them as legally binding instruments at national level and to use the FAO REU process to find common ground in that sense.
11. We call on Member States to take bold action towards an alternative framework for global agriculture trade and ensure decent incomes for farmers by enacting specific legislation. States should avail themselves of diverse instruments for market regulation, including using subsidies to manage supply. Subsidies must be oriented to prioritise the agroecological and sustainable transition of farms. There is a need for public stocks to stabilise prices and keep food affordable for everyone, particularly in times of crisis. The notion of food sovereignty also includes the strengthening of traditional food systems and access to traditional food and resources for the Indigenous Peoples of our region.
12. Dear delegates, in conclusion we strongly ask that you direct resources and support the implementation of all human rights instruments that are relevant for food security, with a special focus on the followings:
 - The UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas;
 - The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples;
 - The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women – CEDAW;
 - The framework of the UN Decade of Family Farming.
 - VOLUNTARY GUIDELINES to support the progressive realisation of the right to adequate food in the context of national food security
 - The Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests - and Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries
13. Today, a decision will be made about the law on “foreign agents” in the Parliament of Georgia. We stand with the Georgian people and Georgian civil society who protest in the streets for democracy. We urge the EU and all the countries in the region to stop the oppression and

criminalization of civil society and their citizens. We are your allies and we want to work together.

Thank you.