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FAO REGIONAL CONFERENCE FOR LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

Thirty-eighth Session

Georgetown, Guyana, 11–13 March and 18–21 March 2024

Statement by the Director-General

*Honourable President, Honourable Prime Minister,
Dear colleagues – good afternoon,
As-salāmu ‘alaykum,
Happy Ramadan, Ramadan Kareem,*

1. I so am pleased to be here in Georgetown to open the 38th Session of the FAO Regional Ministerial Conference for Latin America and the Caribbean.
2. First of all, I wish to thank the people and government of Guyana for the warm welcome and for hosting this important conference for the region that is being held for the first time in this beautiful country, which is a meeting point between Latin America and the CARICOM.
3. Special thanks to The Honorable Zulfikar Mustapha, Minister for Agriculture of Guyana and Chairperson of the Regional Conference, who has ensured the highest quality of the preparations, and with whom I look forward to working with over the next biennium to support the implementation of the Regional Priorities that the Members of this region will identify over the next days.
4. I firmly believe that this Regional Conference will serve as an important platform among Members to exchange ideas and share knowledge on innovative solutions and best practices that are region specific.
5. This Convention Centre provides a harmonious place for you to debate and identify solutions and action plans in the future.
6. By leveraging the momentum and political commitment provided by this high-level meeting, we can accelerate and strengthen our collective efforts towards transforming agrifood systems in the region, and beyond.
7. This is the third FAO Regional Ministerial Conference being held globally this year, and I am encouraged by the high level of commitment and collaboration demonstrated by all FAO Members across the various regions: we have recently held the regional conferences for Asia and the Pacific Region (RAP), and for the Near East and North Africa Region (NENA).
8. The reaffirmation and strengthening of our partnerships at the country, regional and global levels underscore the fruitful collaboration we have tirelessly worked to achieve.

Documents can be consulted at www.fao.org.

9. In line with the FAO Strategic Framework 2022-31 endorsed by FAO Members, we will focus on four Regional Priorities at this Regional Conference.
10. These priorities are interconnected and are guided by the aspiration of the Four Betters.
11. I am pleased to see such a colourful display of the Four Betters all around us here – it really demonstrates ownership and partnership by your region; it reflects the working together by Ministers of Agriculture, governments, people, and partners.
12. The Four Betters ensure that no one is left behind:
 - One: Better Production: through efficient, inclusive, and sustainable production.
 - Two: Better Nutrition: by addressing hunger and malnutrition and working towards achieving food security.
 - Three: A Better Environment: through the sustainable management of natural resources and adaptation to climate change; and
 - Four: A Better Life: through emergency and rehabilitation to the hotspots, the reduction of inequalities and poverty, and strengthening resilience and social security.
13. I really admire the Government of Guyana, and especially the Honourable President who has always advocated for food security in this region and beyond. He has been walking the talk through strategies and action plans aimed at making this country, and this region, better than before.
14. The FAO Strategic Framework is supported by a number of flagship initiatives, all actively being implemented in Latin America and the Caribbean, and all with a strong focus on science, innovation, technology, and digitalization.
15. Through the FAO Hand-in-Hand Initiative, we are collaborating with 14 countries in this region, developing investment plans totaling approximately USD 772 million, by mobilizing resources through, among others, development banks and the private sector, as well as public investments in priority areas identified by the territorial approach of the Hand-in-Hand Initiative.
16. The Hand-in-Hand Initiative has also launched 2 Regional Initiatives, namely:
 - The Dry Corridor Regional Initiative: which was launched at the Hand-in-Hand Investment Forum in 2022 and has been expanded to 13 countries from the region, supporting governments at the highest level and in close cooperation with subregional partners.
 - The Hand-in-Hand Regional Initiative for the Amazonia: launched in 2023, it seeks to identify potential areas of intervention supported by a new economy that promotes inclusion, bioeconomy and just climate, offering opportunities to make agrifood systems more efficient, more inclusive, more resilient, and more sustainable.
17. In addition, the flagship FAO 1000 Digital Villages Initiative is supporting 52 agro-tourism projects in 14 countries in this region, enhancing digital capacity in rural communities and improving their living conditions.
18. And the FAO One Country One Commodity Initiative promotes 11 Special Agricultural Products in 14 countries in the region, enhancing food security, supporting sustainable development, and improving competitiveness of agri-products in this region.
19. Furthermore, the Regional Technical Platform on Family Farming is a key priority for the Organization that aims to promote the transformation of agrifood systems globally.
20. Through virtual and interactive content, it promotes the exchange of experience and knowledge among governments, family farming organizations, academia, and the private sector.
21. Its first edition successfully connected participants from more than 40 countries.

Dear Colleagues,

22. Latin America and the Caribbean, like many other regions, faces many challenges such as the economic slowdown, the climate crisis, and conflicts.

23. Despite being a major food exporter, the region's dependence on commodity trade makes agrifood systems vulnerable to economic and political fluctuations.
24. At the same time, persistently high food prices continue to pose challenges to food security and nutrition locally.
25. In addition, the region is vulnerable to the impacts of the climate crisis, especially impacting the Caribbean, with climate-related disasters increasingly affecting local communities.
26. FAO is collaborating closely with governments in the region to boost preparedness and timely responses in addressing the impacts of the climate crisis and to build resilience.
27. Our approach encompasses comprehensive strategies aimed at advancing inclusive rural development and sustainable natural resource management by integrating traditional knowledge with cutting-edge scientific and technological innovations to address these complex issues.
28. FAO has prioritized building resilience among the most vulnerable populations, including women, youth, and Indigenous Peoples.
29. We have also strengthened our work with Small Island Developing States (SIDS), including through the establishment of a team of experts led by the Chief Economist, Máximo Torero - he is originally from Peru so he can dialogue with you in both Spanish and English – to focus on the SIDS so as to provide the needed support based on the individual requirements and priorities.

Dear Colleagues,

30. Across all regions, the poorest bear a disproportionate burden, suffering double the average income loss.
31. In response to these challenges, we must urgently transform our agrifood systems to ensure that no one is left behind.
32. Collecting, analyzing, and disseminating timely market and food security and nutrition data and information for improved decision-making is key.
33. By supporting Members in monitoring policy decisions and measures, FAO aims to mitigate the negative impacts of price shocks on food costs and prevent disruptions in supply chains.
34. Since the G20 in 2011, FAO has hosted the secretary for AMIS - the Agricultural Market Information System – and we continue to work closely with the G20 Presidencies, including now the Brazilian government with a special thanks to the strong leadership of President Lula. We will provide them with technical support for the initiative “Fight against hunger and malnutrition” and will continue providing support in the coming years.
35. Through such efforts, FAO continues to play a crucial role in advancing progress towards achieving food security and sustainable development in the region, and globally.
36. For successful impact at scale, we need to foster even stronger partnerships for coordinated actions and targeted investments.
37. I have noted the information provided by the government of Guyana on their efforts to increase investments in agrifood systems. This is a good signal and a strong political initiative, and FAO is willing to offer technical support, together with other developing international financial institutions.
38. The concrete and successful experience in Latin America and the Caribbean has shown that transforming agrifood systems requires concerted multi-sectoral efforts.
39. We must remember that sustainability is a goal, and we need to build the bridges, create a clear pathway, and develop the instruments needed to achieve our objective.
40. To do this, we should also improve efficiency, effectiveness, and coherent reforms to leverage cooperation, investment, innovation, and technology both within and beyond the region.

41. At this Ministerial Conference, I look forward to your partnership and ownership to move forward. My emphasis is on strengthening the FAO Country Offices in this Region, as well as the Subregional offices and the Regional Office to ensure we speed up the process to achieve the SDGs and ensure sustainable development.
42. At the multilateral level, the G20 under the Presidency of Brazil in 2024, is providing a unique opportunity to discuss issues of common interest at a high level, and to advocate for the eradication of hunger and reduction of inequalities through an important, global multilateral forum.
43. For example, the G20 Task Force for the Global Alliance Against Hunger and Poverty, proposed by the Brazilian Presidency and strongly supported by FAO, aims to bring together resources and knowledge for the implementation of proven effective public policies and relevant technologies to reduce hunger and poverty worldwide.
44. FAO is working very closely with Brazilian G20 Presidency to advocate for this important initiative.
45. I would also like to emphasize the importance of the proposed new Food Security, Nutrition, and Hunger Eradication Plan of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), to address current agrifood systems challenges through regional integration.

Dear Friends,

46. Latin America and the Caribbean is well positioned to make significant contributions to global progress, despite the numerous challenges.
47. This region with its rich natural resources and low population density, accounts for 14 percent of global food production, 45 percent of net international trade in agrifood products, and with 12 percent of the world's population, it holds 47 percent of the world's drinking water reserves.
48. The region is also renowned for its biodiversity, hosting a notable concentration of endemic and native species.
49. You have big potential to accelerate progress, and to do even more with less.
50. FAO is committed to supporting you on this path, bringing science-based evidence, and providing innovative inclusive solutions and accelerating actions.
51. This regional conference provides an opportunity to identify and set tangible targets to accelerate national and regional progress towards agrifood systems transformation through the Four Betters.
52. I wish you fruitful discussions with productive outcomes during this Regional Ministerial Conference hosted here in the beautiful landscapes of Guyana, a very special territory that shares unique characteristics of both the Caribbean and South America.
53. Guyana's original meaning is a country with an abundance of water, so you need to ensure you use it for the benefit and prosperity of the country and its people.
54. Let us work together!

Thank you.