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FAO REGIONAL CONFERENCE FOR THE NEAR EAST

Thirty-sixth Session

10-13 January 2022 and 7-8 February 2022

Statement by the Independent Chairperson of the FAO Council

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*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 the Near East. This being my first 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.
2. Please allow me to convey my appreciation to His Excellency Mustafa Al Kadhim, Prime Minister of Iraq, to the Government of Iraq and His Excellency Engineer Muhammad Karim Al Khafaji, Minister for Agriculture of Iraq, for the excellent organisation of the 36th Session of the FAO Regional Conference for the Near East.
3. While countries recover from the severe impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change continues to pose “an existential threat to humanity”.¹ Prioritizing the climate change agenda, including its fundamental instruments, such as Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), is critical to achieving the global climate goals set forth in the Paris Agreement on Climate Change.
4. Let us not forget that aside from climate change, 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. . 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. That is why reading the Senior Officers Meeting Report, underscores the importance of your efforts to address the serious problem of food loss in your region, which requires collective effort and evidence-based strategies throughout the value chain. Recognizing the importance of food processing and packaging also has significant ramifications on food quality and safety.
5. In this respect, I concur with the expressed concerns in your region about the increasing trends of hunger, acute food insecurity and malnutrition, which reflect the region’s structural vulnerability and significant challenges resulting from colliding and overlapping shocks, including conflict, climate extremes and transboundary pests and diseases.
6. We can produce more food than ever, but biodiversity and the amount of arable land are decreasing. 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.
7. 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.
8. 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.
9. This 36th Session of the FAO Regional Conference for the Near East is the first Regional Conference since the FAO Strategic Framework 2022-31 was adopted. The Strategic Framework supports the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development through the transformation to more efficient,

¹ World Economic Forum, 2021

inclusive, resilient and sustainable agrifood systems for better production, better nutrition, a better environment and a better life, leaving no one behind, and the four regional priorities for FAO in the Near East and North Africa (NENA).

10. As you are aware, the four Regional Priorities underscore strategically important issues for the region, including: (i) supporting inclusive rural transformation to empower youth and women; (ii) addressing food insecurity and the triple burden of malnutrition by promoting trade; (iii) tackling root causes of vulnerabilities in the region by emphasizing climate change, water scarcity and sustainable management of natural resources; and (iv) building resilience and managing risk through a proactive and holistic approach.

*Excellencies,
Distinguished Delegates,*

11. FAO's publication *Near East and North Africa - Regional Overview of Food Security and Nutrition 2021* highlighted the necessity for concerted efforts and concrete actions if the Near East region is to address growing challenges resulting from conflicts, social unrest, immense dependency on imported food, financial and economic crises and shocks such as climate change, and the COVID19 pandemic.

12. 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 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Agenda 2030.

13. 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.

14. Allow me to recall that in 2021, the pre-Summit of the UN Food Systems Summit 2021 was convened at FAO headquarters. 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 the Rome-based Agencies (RBAs) was also highlighted during this event.

15. As a result, close cooperation with all relevant UN Agencies, funds and programmes, as well as all relevant international organizations in the follow-up of the Summit was strongly encouraged and also recognized by the 168th Session of the FAO Council in November-December 2021.

16. In this regard, FAO will be hosting the Coordination Hub, staffed by the RBAs and other Agencies, to provide the coordination for the follow-up actions, as well as potentially leveraging key partnerships in the wider ecosystem of support.

17. The coordinated action of the 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.

18. I warmly congratulate the region for taking the initiative of hosting the next Conferences of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in Egypt (COP 27) and the United Arab Emirates (COP 28), and to use the opportunity to accelerate climate action in support of sustainable agrifood systems in the region.

19. 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. Your recommendations to acknowledge the importance of interactions between agriculture and forestry for sustainable development and to consider food security, agriculture, rangelands, forestry, and other aspects of rural development in an integrated manner, is commendable.

20. 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. I would like to applaud you for the numerous initiatives on sustainable agrifood systems and mitigating the challenges associated with water scarcity, depletion of natural resources and climate change that exist in the region. 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 on Climate Change is directed to respond to an urgent need in the NENA 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. As a tool for implementation, you may consider national or local AgriTech competence centers.

21. Your region should be applauded for how you are tackling the Desert Locust upsurge. In addition, your priority to scale up nutrition-sensitive, gender-inclusive and sustainable agriculture practices, building on successful examples such as those supporting rural women to cultivate nutritious, water-efficient crops as a means to create vital livelihood opportunities, improve nutrition outcomes and strengthen women's effective engagement in agrifood systems, should be complimented. This demonstrates how important a One Health approach is for your region.

22. 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 and the 1 000 Digital Villages, as they aim to reduce the vulnerabilities of the rural poor through improved food system capacities using FAO's data tools.

23. 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.

24. 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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25. To conclude, this Regional Conference for the Near East 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.

26. 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.