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FAO REGIONAL CONFERENCE FOR NEAR EAST REGION

Thirty-Seventh Session

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Statement by the FAO Director-General

*Your Excellency Khaled Hneifat, Minister of Agriculture of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan,
And Chairperson of the 37th Session of the FAO Regional Ministerial Conference for the Near East*

Excellences,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear Colleagues,

Salam Alekum!

Good morning!

I am so pleased and honoured to welcome you to the FAO Regional Ministerial Conference for the Near East.

I wish to convey my appreciation to and to all of you for participating in this key FAO Regional Governing Body meeting, which is an important platform for dialogue among FAO Members in the region on the future of agriculture and food security in the Near East and North Africa (NENA) Region.

I am also grateful to the outgoing Chairperson, His Excellency the Minister of Agriculture of Iraq, for having hosted the 36th Session of the Regional Conference and for his leadership during the inter-sessional period.

Excellences,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The world, and this region in particular, has witnessed drastic changes since we met in Baghdad two years ago. The surge in conflicts and unrest is worrying as it has severely affected human life, livelihoods, and food security.

Documents can be consulted at www.fao.org

The situation in Gaza, as well as the sufferings in Sudan, Syria, and Yemen, due to protracted crises are of great concern. Together with other development partners, we have been participating in the emergency, relief, and rebuilding efforts in Gaza since the start of the conflict.

FAO is part of the joint UN flash appeal and closely coordinating with the wider UN family and partners in responding in the most appropriate and effective manner, in line with our mandate. We have issued a call for USD 20 million in the Nov 2023 UN Interagency Flash Appeal, extended to March 2024, and we plan to reactivate the production of perishable, highly nutritious food that cannot be imported as food aid, including fresh milk, meat, and vegetables.

The NENA region has been facing multiple challenges such as the negative impacts of the climate crisis, lowest per capita freshwater availability, rising populations and urbanization, as well as heavy dependence on imported food.

In addition, overlapping crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the effects of ongoing conflicts and war in other parts of the world, together with growing economic and fiscal challenges, particularly the increase in food prices, have added to the difficulties.

All these challenges are affecting global agrifood systems and an urgent transformation is needed to address the difficulties.

We need to transform our agrifood systems to be more efficient, more inclusive, more resilient, and more sustainable.

For this reason, the theme of this Regional Conference is “accelerating” this transformation – it could not be more relevant and timelier than now.

In the NENA region, not only are we far from achieving SDG2 Zero Hunger, but we are seeing a worrying trend of a continuous increase in hunger and malnutrition in the past years.

With approximately 60 percent of the region’s population suffering from hunger and more than half of the population not able to afford a healthy diet, there is a strong reliance on imported food to meet more than 60% of caloric requirements, leading to rapid soil erosion and depleting agricultural resources.

There is no more time to waste in controlling the damage caused – we urgently need to safeguard our agrifood systems for current and future generations.

To do this, we need a shared vision, foresight, ownership, an implementation strategy, and a clear path leading to impact and results, in the short, medium, and long-term.

We need to synergize the acceleration of agrifood systems transformation.

We need to do more and better together!

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The FAO Strategic Framework 2022-31 that you have endorsed, together with the new thematic strategies, the increased budget level you agreed upon, our flagship initiatives such as the Hand-in-Hand and the One Country One Priority Product, as well as a strong focus on science, innovation, and technology, and the four programmatic priorities at the NENA regional level, are all critical instruments to support this transformation and help you achieve the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the SDGs.

Currently, we have three countries in this region participating in the Hand-in-Hand Initiative, and we hope to have more soon as this is a vital mechanism that supports the implementation of nationally led ambitious programmes to accelerate agrifood systems transformations.

And we have eight participating NENA countries in the OCOP Initiative that supports countries in the development of more sustainable food value chains of Special Agricultural Products (SAPs) and improved rural livelihoods.

The question is how to put the transformation into action and how to accelerate this action. With the history of millennia old agriculture systems, farming practices and community systems in this region, you have the potential to be a leading example for the rest of the world.

I started my second term as FAO Director-General with the premise of the “Four Rs V1.0” approach: Recover, Reform, Rebuild, and Renaissance. These are also applicable to the NENA region.

Recovery from long and short-term damages caused by the multiple and overlapping crises that have affected us globally; and recovery towards a recognition of the agrifood systems approach, utilizing available agricultural resources, harnessing unique practices, such as the desert and oasis food ecosystems.

Reforming our agrifood systems, as well as national and regional policies and enabling frameworks to support their transformation. At FAO, we have also reformed ourselves and our structure to make us more fit-for-purpose to serve you better in achieving your reforms.

Rebuilding the agriculture infrastructure through local and foreign investment from public and private sectors; rebuilding the institutional and human capacities needed to accelerate the transformation; and most importantly, rebuilding the trust of local populations and partners in sustainable and resilient agrifood systems.

And a Renaissance of the historic agriculture systems of the region, such as in the Nile Delta, Syria, Iraq, Sudan, Yemen, Maghreb sub-region, among others. We also need a Renaissance of intra-regional cooperation to ensure food security across the region, and beyond.

FAO is committed to supporting you in implementing the approach of the Four Rs to achieve the Four Betters: better production, better nutrition, a better environment, and a better life, leaving no one behind.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Through the restructured Regional and Sub-regional Offices, and the work in progress for the transformation of Country Offices, the new FAO is stronger, more agile, and more responsive to the needs of Members, as well as a trusted, longstanding, and professional partner of choice!

Within this region, we have already started working with a strong focus on strategic and policy initiatives, providing tailored and timely data and analytics for informed policies, developing leadership capacities for agrifood systems transformation, focusing on enhancing engagements with you and forging transformative partnerships.

However, this transformation must be owned and led by you – FAO is YOUR Organization.

Allow me to highlight some key areas that require more focus and attention from you the Members.

First, the use of science, technology, and innovation. While we have good examples in some countries, mainly the higher income ones, we need to mainstream and encourage innovation and ensure access to technology across the whole region, especially where it is needed the most.

Second, trade, particularly intra-regional trade, as an enabler for food security. While the region is heavily dependent on imported food, we see a clear gap in harnessing the intra-regional food trade potential.

Third, the encouragement of foreign and national investments, both from public and private sectors. This may include the repurposing of existing fiscal support or subsidies towards more efficient and sustainable pathways.

In this regard, we have started working towards the concept of “Regional Food Corridors”, which will highlight regional cooperation in these areas, and identify pathways that are helpful in ensuring food security through shared ownership and efforts.

Fourth, managing the adverse impacts of the climate crisis. We need more action now through efforts such as the Water Scarcity Initiatives in the region, among others, which provide the solutions we need. Time is running out!

I commend the hosts of the UNFCCC COP27 and COP28, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates, for advancing the agenda of agrifood systems and food security, as well as the food-water-energy nexus.

We also look forward to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia’s leadership in advancing progress made in support of agrifood systems transformation during the UNCCD COP16 later this year.

Dear Colleagues,

You have already recognized the importance of accelerating the transformation of agrifood systems in the region, and globally.

Now, I hope that you will accelerate this transformation through enabling policies and institutional frameworks, with the support of FAO and other development partners, but most importantly through your leadership, your vision, and your legacy for the future.

I wish you all the best for your deliberations over the next two days, leading to collective outcomes and action.

A special thanks to the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan for hosting this session and to His Excellency the Minister of Agriculture for Chairing the meeting and providing his leadership.

Thank you, and Allah ma’a kum.