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Food and Agriculture
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Продовольственная и
сельскохозяйственная организация
Объединенных Наций

Organización de las
Naciones Unidas para la
Alimentación y la Agricultura

منظمة
التغذية والزراعة
للأمم المتحدة

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FAO REGIONAL CONFERENCE FOR EUROPE

Thirty-fourth Session

Rome, Italy, 14–17 May 2024

Statement by the Director-General

Excellencies,

Chairperson of the Regional Ministerial Conference

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear Colleagues,

1. First, let me warmly welcome you all to FAO Headquarters. I know a lot didn't come. (it's hybrid)
2. I wish to thank the Government of Moldova for hosting the Regional Conference even though it had planned to meet in Chisinau, capital of the Republic of Moldova on this occasion. But as I am from China I always look at the crisis as an opportunity. It's a small crisis, but also a big opportunity.
3. Because even the former colleague I have just met, the representative of Finland, and the others who didn't come to see the change of headquarters in the past four years since I came. Especially after 2022, because that's when a new plenary hall was finished with the help of the host country, the Italian Government together with my colleagues, just before the last global ministerial Conference on 29 June 2023. So it is really an update, a new phase for some of you, who didn't come to FAO.
4. So crisis is one word in English, but if translated into Chinese, it is two words: damage and opportunity.
5. While the Europe and Central Asia region is recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic, it continues to see devastation and loss of lives and livelihoods from, among others, natural disasters and man-made disasters.
6. The ongoing war in Ukraine continues to hamper regional efforts, and beyond, to achieve the SDGs.
7. As I always say, peace is a prerequisite for food security, and the right to food is a basic human right.
8. Globally, we are facing critical times marked by food insecurity and fading prosperity. Especially in this continent. During the past four years, since I came in 2019, your GDP is almost at zero increase.

Documents can be consulted at www.fao.org

But sometimes it has increased by more than 9 trillion dollars. So the gap, even among the most developed economies is getting bigger and bigger. That's the reality, that's the real data.

9. While countries within the region continue to play a pivotal role in mitigating the effects of the pandemic, war and conflicts, other global and overlapping challenges due to the climate crises and man-made crises are impacting the economy and agrifood systems,
10. With far-reaching effects on the global financial system, fragmented trade systems, ecosystems and biodiversity.
11. This Regional Conference for Europe and Central Asia is taking place in the context of these compounding shocks.
12. This is, therefore, a critical moment to engage in discussions to identify the most professional responses, and how to effectively implement them.
13. We need to exchange knowledge and best practices on the most effective solutions in the support of agrifood systems transformation.
14. FAO continues to closely monitor the implications of the war in Ukraine, and other conflicts globally, on world food security and agriculture, and provides Members with regular, comprehensive information and analysis on the effects of the war and all other crises on agrifood systems, in line with our mandate and technical expertise.
15. FAO is also engaged in emergency response, recovery assistance, and resilience building across agrifood systems.
16. This Regional Conference brings us together to address the challenges, explore prospects, and build up hope and solidarity.
17. You are here today because we are the ones – in different roles and at different levels - that have been tasked to focus on agrifood systems and rural development. The responsibility lies with you!
18. FAO is committed to providing all the technical supports needed, but FAO is your organization, and you need to take the lead, both nationally and regionally, and beyond. As Secretary-General of these conferences said it's 50 years for this Regional Ministerial Conference. The Latin America and the Caribbean region started the first Regional Conference in 1947. I was recently there [at their Regional Conference] and it was managed very well by the Minister of Guyana. This is why I had a long discussion with the honourable Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Agriculture and Food Industry of the Republic of Moldova at the ERC. The chairman is the chairman, who is the last person to make a decision based on a consensus or other. Of course, you have the best regulations and approach of FAO and I would like to remind you that you are part of FAO.
19. FAO continues to emphasize the importance of collaborative, coordinated efforts and policy actions.
20. To achieve our collective objectives, FAO calls on all countries to:
 - **One:** increase the resilience of agrifood systems;
 - **Two:** provide humanitarian and social protection responses to vulnerable groups;
 - **Three:** invest in infrastructure and logistics on agrifood systems and rural development;
 - **Four:** enhance agrifood system productivity and inclusiveness;
 - **Five:** strengthen data-based food security information, assessment and analysis systems; and
 - **Six:** develop science and innovative solutions to common challenges.

Dear Colleagues,

21. We gather today with a vision to transform agrifood systems to enhance their efficiency, inclusiveness, resilience, and sustainability.
22. This is also central to the FAO Strategic Framework 2022–31 endorsed by the global ministerial Conference, and its aspiration of the four betters: better production, better nutrition, a better environment and a better life – leaving no one behind.
23. To do this we need to prioritize improving production methods – for **better production**. First and mostly, we need to produce more with less.
24. Improved production can solidify the regional contribution to scientific, innovative, and sustainable agricultural practices, alongside digital agriculture, to promote climate-resilient and low-emission pathways in agrifood systems.
25. Healthy and affordable diets should be available, accessible and affordable to all – this is **better nutrition**.
26. To enhance access to nutritious, healthy food options we need effective legislation and awareness raising to promote locally produced perishable products and establish healthy lifestyle.
27. It is therefore also critical that environmental factors be taken into consideration – for **a better environment**.
28. Which requires more efforts to reduce the footprint of our production and trade on the environment, strengthen agroforestry and develop aquatic food availability.
29. I just came back last Friday from New York, we had the UN Collaborative Partnership on Forests (CPF). Back in Rome, in front of my building they started to plant so many trees, after four years!
30. So, we need to develop agroforestry. And of course, not only the tree and the fruit are important for this region: in the summer, some countries can enjoy a green environment, but some countries have challenges to make it greener. We share a common vision to make this region more environmentally friendly and beautiful. Which also requires more effort to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and increase the green areas to absorb it or improve soil health. Next month, we'll have a Global Soil Partnership meeting and Europeans are always active on that. Which is good, because by keeping the soils healthy, you can reduce CO2 emissions.
31. As I said at the COP28, agrifood systems provide the solutions to the climate crisis and agrifood systems transformation accelerates climate action to the benefit of people, prosperity and the planet.
32. Innovations in technology, policy, finance, and social aspects are crucial for steering agrifood systems toward climate resilience.
33. More responsible investments are needed to support transition of countries towards more climate-resilient and environmentally friendly agrifood systems, while also protecting biodiversity and enjoying food diversity. Many countries in this region, especially Central Asia and eastern Europe have a lot of food diversity. In this regard, you can share your experience with other regions and food cultures.
34. And ultimately, our aim is to ensure **a better life for all – leaving no one behind**. We need to reduce all types of inequalities: between urban and rural areas, between men and women, between rich and poor. Building one shared future for the whole of Europe with peace and prosperity.
35. We must create greater economic opportunities in rural areas, supporting smallholders, and leveraging diverse income streams, including non-farm activities.

36. FAO is starting to look at the true cost of food, especially on hidden costs in this region, which are just over 3 trillion US Dollars at Purchasing Power Parity, with health hidden costs constituting 80 percent of the total. I hope farmers will highly appreciate this work. Because in this region you don't have serious starvation. You should start to appreciate the farmers' work and effort. While one enjoys the food, it can forget how much hard work in the field it entails by European farmers. That is why it isn't only about agricultural issues, but also about social issues. All the top leaders in your region understand that agriculture and agrifood systems and rural development aren't only about food security, especially not in Europe and Central Asia. It is about social justice.
37. Tackling **food loss and waste** is also vital for strengthening agrifood systems. Food loss and waste presents major hurdles in the region, affecting income, livelihoods, food security, nutrition, climate, and resources.
38. In particular, the reduction of food waste in the region should take a leading role and include various dimensions to address knowledge gaps, strengthen frameworks, and encourage action across the food supply chain – from the field to the table.

Dear Colleagues,

39. The four betters are overall guidelines and key contributions to accelerate the path to achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the agreed upon SDG targets.
40. While working with partners at the regional and international levels, FAO is a country-owned, country-driven organization. Therefore, the objective of the Regional Conference for the Europe and Central Asia region is to localize priorities and establish regional consensus, emphasizing your ownership, partnership, and leadership to facilitate implementation at the national level. As said, the leaders of the Members are game changers and the ministers of agriculture along with other line ministries are real implementors.
41. The countries in this region are well-positioned and have already taken steps toward achieving the four betters.
42. FAO has a wealth of networks, resources, knowledge and technical expertise to support you.
43. As the host of the UN Food Systems Summit Coordination Hub on behalf of the UN System, we support Members in implementing their national pathways, by providing our technical expertise and mobilizing resources for the three regional priorities you have identified. I know some of you are also national conveners for the UN Food Systems Summit.
 - **First:** empowering smallholders, family farmers and youth;
 - **Second:** transforming agrifood systems and facilitating market access and integration; and
 - **Third:** managing natural resources sustainably and preserving biodiversity.
44. Further to the regional priorities identified by the previous Regional Conference in 2022, FAO has, among others:
 - Launched its **AgriTEch Observatory**, a virtual platform designed for the navigation of digital agriculture developments in Europe and Central Asia;
 - Supported the development of national strategic documents to **mainstream digitalization in the agrifood sector** in many countries of the region;
 - Promoted the **One Health** approach, within a quadrilateral partnership with WHO, OIE and UNEP through several initiatives with the Central Asia Animal Health Network and a One Health pilot initiative in Kazakhstan;

- Established the regional chapter of the **Global Agenda for Sustainable Livestock in Central Asia and Eastern Europe**;
- Accelerated **climate action and climate finance** in nine countries of the region;
- Prepared a regional action plan to **mainstream biodiversity** in the region, and published guidelines on forest biodiversity monitoring methodologies;
- And conducted an overview of **land degradation neutrality** in Europe and Central Asia, as well as country profiles on the status of land degradation neutrality.

Dear Colleagues,

45. I am pleased to see the number of countries in the region participating and actively contributing to the **FAO One Country One Priority Product (OCOP) Initiative** implementation projects that aim to develop sustainable production and value chains for special agricultural products, and promoting national brandings for agricultural products that is critical. I said several times that the ‘One Country One Priority Product’ is just the simplified slogan of the initiative. It means ‘one plus n’, depending on your size and comparative advantage.
46. OCOP initiatives were successfully launched in four countries within the region; and I hope you will see – and taste for yourselves – some of these products over the next few days. FAO, as I said, is a platform and a network for you. Through the digital FAO, you can promote your special products for free, making this the most cost-effective approach to promote your national branding.
47. I was also pleased to see that over 60 villages in nine countries of the region are part of FAO’s **1000 Digital Village Initiative**, which seeks to transform villages worldwide into digital hubs. This region is left behind in this area, compared to Asia or Africa, so you need to speed up. Like it or not, we are already in the digital world. In Europe, you have all the infrastructure to speed up and take serious action.
48. The maturity level of these villages is currently being analysed to allow expansion of this initiative to revitalise rural areas across the Europe and Central Asia region.
49. Since its launch in 2022, the **Regional Technical Platform on Green Agriculture**, offers a digital, user-friendly, and open gateway for information sharing, and has published a total of 30 blogs and 70 thematic publications.
50. Additionally, the Platform has developed a repository of green practices allowing other regions to access and to benefit from this information.
51. Green agriculture plays a crucial role in the transformation of local agrifood systems, as it can alleviate pressure on natural resources, while simultaneously addressing poverty, hunger, and malnutrition.
52. The diverse geographic and economic extent of the Europe and Central Asia region presents an important opportunity for the FAO **Hand-in-Hand Initiative**, which can mobilize investment in support of agricultural and rural development.
53. The FAO **Technical Cooperation Programme (TCP)** has been catalytic to leverage new investment and financing to support regional priorities.

Dear Friends,

54. The Regional ministerial Conference for the Europe and Central Asia region serves as a platform to gather the best ideas, policies, innovations, technologies, and knowledge from the region.
55. It serves as a bridge to connect other regions with FAO’s latest knowledge, scientific advancements, and expertise, thereby benefiting both the regional and the global communities. That’s why each

region has its own priority and approach – that’s the nature of agrifood systems. Not like any industrial product, such as a computer or an electronic vehicle you can make the same all over the world. But for the agriculture, you need to have the best natural and climate conditions.

56. Let us continue to work together efficiently, effectively, and coherently supporting farmers and consumers in Europe and Central Asia, and beyond.
57. United by our collective and ambitious vision of a world free from hunger and malnutrition, for a better future for all.
58. I wish you all a good meeting and a pleasant stay in Rome!
59. Thank you.