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FAO REGIONAL CONFERENCE FOR THE NEAR EAST

Thirty-fifth Session

21-22 September 2020¹

Statement by the Independent Chairperson of the FAO Council

Chairperson,

Honourable Ministers,

Director-General, and

Distinguished Delegates,

1. It is a privilege for me to participate in this 35th Session of the FAO Regional Conference for the Near East, and to address this meeting in my role as Independent Chairperson of the FAO Council. This is the second FAO Regional Conference to be held in a virtual format, and I am pleased that Members are able to build on the successful experiences of the virtual meetings of the Council and its Committees held earlier this year. Before sharing some thoughts on the issues that this Regional Conference will focus on, please allow me to convey my appreciation to the Sultanate and people of Oman for their offer to host and their engagement in conducting this important meeting, which unfortunately has to be held in a virtual format.

2. The Near East is one of the regions where both the prevalence and the quantity of malnutrition have increased over the last decade. In addition, the intensification of agriculture and resource use has led to the widespread degradation of land, water and biodiversity, all of which are exacerbated by climate change. The degradation of the region's already scarce resources is alarming and water scarcity is a particular challenge, as is the prevalence of conflict. There is a clear and urgent need to respond to these challenges by developing locally appropriate and sustainable approaches to food and agriculture. Members will have the opportunity at this Regional Conference to discuss sustainable and innovative practices, such as climate smart agriculture, to foster resilience in the region.

3. At the last Regional Conference for the Near East in 2018, Members requested that transboundary pests and diseases be considered one of the most pressing priorities for the region. FAO has since implemented 15 new projects worth USD 17 million to address this issue. FAO developed a regional strategy to combat the Red Palm Weevil and initiated, in 2019, a regional project focusing on the prevention and control of transboundary animal diseases. As part of the Regional Initiative on Water Scarcity, FAO has scaled up its support to strategic planning and policies, and increased the number of focus countries under the initiative. A key result is the development of a regional partnership and strategic platform on water scarcity. The Land and Water Days event convened in

¹ Rescheduled from 2-4 March 2020, Muscat, Sultanate of Oman.

Egypt in March 2019 gathered 480 participants from 45 countries to review progress in addressing water scarcity in the Near East and North Africa region.

4. There remain challenges for FAO to face and our efforts will continue to be impacted by changing conditions around the world. Conflict, climate change, migration and transboundary diseases play no small part in this. Renewal must be a dynamic and living plan, which evolves on the basis of experience. FAO is needed now more than ever before as a dynamic work in progress to achieve its most noble mandate.

5. I take this opportunity to remind you of the importance of this Conference in directing FAO to provide effective and targeted support to countries facing key challenges. Given the enhanced role of the Regional Conferences within the governance stream of the Organization since 2009, Members here play a vital role in reviewing FAO's activities in the region and setting priorities for its future work. I am certain that you will conduct this important work with rigour and enthusiasm.

6. The Covid-19 pandemic and the measures to contain the virus have affected livelihoods, employment, agricultural activities, trade, and more. The novel coronavirus has implications for local, national, regional and global policies and it is important that global and local conditions alike are recognized when confronting this pandemic. Members at this Conference will contribute the essential country- and region-specific challenges and priorities regarding how the pandemic has affected, and continues to impact, the livelihoods of populations in the Near East. This is crucial to enable the Organization to steer its response work in the most effective direction. Members will have the opportunity at this Regional Conference, under Item 6, to discuss the challenges facing the region in light of Covid-19, and agree on a Regional Plan to respond to these challenges. This will be essential to put the region back on track to achieve Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

7. As you are aware, the Council at its 164th Session, endorsed a reorganization of the FAO headquarters structure to cultivate a more agile, dynamic and fit-for-purpose organization, one that is able to respond quickly and effectively to emerging needs and crises. The new Office of Sustainable Development Goals was welcomed by the recent session of the Council as an important step towards corporate engagement with Agenda 2030 and in assisting Members in the achievement of these goals as well as their follow-up and review. The strengthening of the Organization's Centres will also enable strong collaboration with other UN Agencies and International Financial Institutions, in line with the repositioning of the UN development system and the need to work in partnerships to address complex and multifaceted issues at country level.

8. Another flagship innovation of FAO's new Director-General, Dr Qu Dongyu, is the Hand-in-Hand Initiative. This Initiative has been welcomed by the Council and its Committees. It is an inclusive and holistic business model, which aims to forge a broad spectrum of partnerships on the one hand; and leverage FAO's technical capacity and data compendium on the other, in order to deliver on food security and development. It will enable all stakeholders to take their respective responsibilities, in a transparent manner, and work together towards the achievement of FAO's goals, as well as the SDGs and Agenda 2030.

9. This Initiative is a country-led and country-owned approach, and prioritises those countries whose populations are at risk of being left behind. Priority countries include Small Island Developing States (SIDS), Least Developed Countries (LDCs) and Land Locked Least Developed Countries (LLDCs), as well as countries seeking support to manage the impact of Covid-19 through the Initiative. Activities are underway in a number of countries and the Geospatial Platform has been launched, with planned capacity development for Members to access the platform.

10. This week, Members of this Regional Conference will be informed of its key contributions that aim to accelerate progress toward the realization of the SDGs. Through linking different stakeholders, the programme aims to reduce the vulnerabilities of rural poor through improved food system capacities, while utilising FAO's data tools to identify investment gaps.

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11. As the Organization's current Strategic Framework comes to a close, an important task is ahead of all of us. The 164th Session of the Council looked forward to inputs from the Regional Conferences to refine the roadmap for consultations on this important document. The regional priorities identified at this and other Regional Conferences will shape the basis of decision-making on the future Strategic Framework, which will also be informed by recommendations of the Technical Committees and the guidance of the Council and its Committees. The new Strategic Framework, to be adopted by the Conference at its 42nd Session in 2021, shall form the blueprint guiding the Organization's work into the future, towards and beyond Agenda 2030.

12. Chairperson, it is clear that urgent action is required to address the challenges of rapidly increasing diet-related health concerns, damage to ecosystems and the threat of climate change. In order to achieve the SDGs by 2030, food systems must be addressed. In 2021, the UN Secretary-General will convene a UN Food Systems Summit, which reflects the prominence that the 2030 Agenda affords to improved health, nutrition and ecosystems, and the key role food systems play in the achievement of these goals and in accelerating solutions to the world's greatest challenges.

13. The UN Secretary-General and indeed the 163rd Session of the FAO Council in December 2019 recognised the central role of FAO in the Food Systems Summit, and emphasized that Members be fully involved in the preparatory process. In this regard, an informal Group of Friends to the Summit has been established to provide a platform for Members to contribute to the preparations towards the Summit.

14. To conclude, Chairperson, this Regional Conference for the Near East has a unique role to play in helping define FAO policies, and in formulating not only the Programme of Work and Budget for the next biennium but also the next Strategic Framework that will shape FAO policy for the next ten to fifteen years. This Conference will also have an opportunity to give impetus to the drive begun by the Director-General for innovation and the Hand-in-Hand Initiative. I wish delegates to this Conference fruitful deliberations, and encourage clear outcomes.

15. Thank you for your attention.