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منظمة
الأغذية والزراعة
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FAO REGIONAL CONFERENCE FOR EUROPE

Thirty-second Session

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**Statement by the Chairperson of the 31st Session of the Regional
Conference for Europe (ERC)**

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Honourable Ministers,
Director-General,
Independent Chairperson of the FAO Council
Chairperson of the Committee on World Food Security,
Your Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

1. I have the honour to present to you the outcomes of the 31st Session of the Regional Conference for Europe (ERC), which took place in Voronezh, Russian Federation, on 16–18 May 2018.

2. In presenting this report, I should like to focus particularly on the importance of preserving the continuity of the sessions of the Regional Conference for Europe, which determine the detailed orientation of FAO's work in our region.

3. The 31st session of the ERC, attended by representatives of 44 Member States of the region, adopted important recommendations which were transmitted to the **FAO Council at its 159th session in June 2018**.² The Council endorsed all the recommendations.

4. In its consideration of the **Results and priorities for FAO in the region**, the ERC requested FAO to continue the implementation of two Regional Initiatives, RI-1 "Empowering smallholders and family farms for improved rural livelihoods and poverty reduction" and RI-2 "Improving agrifood trade and market integration", to implement the third Regional Initiative "Sustainable natural resource management under a changing climate", and ensure the linkage between RI-1 and RI-3 regarding sustainable agriculture and food systems. The outcomes, including the main results achieved by the three Regional Initiatives over the last biennium, are listed in document ERC/20/5 Rev.1 and will be considered under agenda item 12.

5. FAO was also requested to support Members in applying the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests (VGGT), Voluntary Guidelines on the Right to Food (RTF) and Principles for Responsible Investment in Agriculture and Food Systems (RAI) and to ensure that the cross-cutting issues of gender, governance, climate change and nutrition were addressed. I am pleased to say that, with regard to the implementation of the VGGT, FAO has conducted a study of cutting-edge European practice in legislation on land consolidation and has published the Legal Guide on Land Consolidation. Work related to the VGGT, particularly solutions to problems of land fragmentation and abandonment by means of land consolidation, land banking, development of land markets and the promotion of robust laws on land ownership and use, are important areas of work under RI-1.

6. The ERC recognized the importance of the Strategic Framework in providing direction for FAO technical work to address priorities in the region and ensure effective delivery of results at the country level, and welcomed the alignment of the FAO Strategic Objectives with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

7. With reference to the **Decentralized Offices Network**, Members underlined the continuing need to prioritize partnerships at the decentralized level and strengthen further the collaboration between

² <http://www.fao.org/about/meetings/council/cl159/documents/en/>

FAO, Rome-based and other United Nations Agencies, taking into account the future outcome of the ongoing discussion in relation to the United Nations development system.

8. Members encouraged the strengthening of FAO's internal control systems and noted the review of country office staffing models to increase flexibility and adjust rapidly to the emerging needs of countries.

9. During the Ministerial Round Table on **Sustainable Agriculture and Food Systems in Europe and Central Asia in a Changing Climate**, the Regional Conference requested FAO to support a food systems approach in rural and urban policies and planning; to incorporate agroecological approaches and diversification into the three Regional Initiatives; and to continue its work on agroecology. Valuable work has been conducted in this area, including two subregional multistakeholder dialogues on agroecology in 2019, covering the Balkan and Central Asian subregions, and a publication providing an overview of activities and initiatives in agroecology in Europe and Central Asia, including key recommendations for the strengthening of this work in the region.

10. On the agenda item "E-agriculture: the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) for the development of sustainable and inclusive food systems and trade integration", the ERC requested that FAO continue to assist countries in the region in transforming their agricultural sectors and leveraging the livelihoods of farmers, both women and men, through e-agriculture in the three Regional Initiatives. Members also requested that FAO develop a comprehensive capacity-development framework and strategy in e-agriculture and provide a neutral regional platform on which to share knowledge and support the implementation of national e-agriculture strategies for the countries of the region. Accordingly, the FAO Regional Office joined forces with the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) to conduct a study on the situation of e-agriculture in Europe and Central Asia; the initial results were presented at the ITU Telecom World 2019 event in September 2019. Work continued to collect examples of policy and initiatives in the digital transformation of agriculture, which formed the basis of the publication "Status of Digital Agriculture in 18 Countries of Europe and Central Asia". In addition, a number of countries, including Albania, Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Republic of Moldova and Turkey, received FAO support in the development of their national digital strategies.

11. Finally, Members considered reports on the outcome of discussions at the regular sessions of the regional commissions. Members:

- called upon FAO to promote further the prudent and responsible use of antimicrobials, the monitoring of such use, and the surveillance of antimicrobial resistance (**European Commission on Agriculture**);
- requested FAO to pursue and enhance further its forestry work and supported the joint activities of FAO and the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe in the field of forestry (**European Forestry Commission**);
- requested FAO to provide sufficient resources and encouraged Members to make voluntary contributions for the stated aim (**European Inland Fisheries and Aquaculture Advisory Commission**).

FAO has supported dialogue with the commissions throughout the biennium. In 2019, representatives of the commissions engaged in such discussions as part of informal consultations for Europe and Central Asia, to strengthen collaboration under the work programmes of the commissions and the FAO Regional Office.

12. Although the COVID-19 pandemic broke out after the 31st session of the ERC, it has affected the food supply chain in Europe and Central Asia. FAO supported countries in the region: i) in assessing and mitigating the adverse effects of the pandemic on food systems; in developing emergency response plans in collaboration with United Nations country teams; iii) in developing analytical tools and information products to maintain food supply chains and ensure food security; and iv) in contributing

to exchanges of experience and political dialogue by means of webinars. Further information about the impact of COVID-19 on food and agriculture in the region and FAO's response is summarized in Web Annex 6 of document ERC/20/5.

13. I am pleased to note that the FAO Conference, at its 41st session in June 2019,³ endorsed the report of the 31st session of the ERC and took note of the recommendations presented therein.

14. I will highlight just a few of the recommendations.

- The ERC called on governments to adopt a food systems approach for creation of policy coherence in the implementation of the SDGs and to support the establishment or strengthening of coordination mechanisms involving all relevant sectors and stakeholders to design integrated policies and strategies for sustainable, efficient, inclusive and resilient agriculture and food systems.
- The Regional Conference also stressed the need for the agricultural sector to address climate change, in terms of both adaptation and mitigation, and highlighted the importance of reducing food loss and waste at all points in the supply chain.
- Members also underlined the importance of developing e-agriculture as a tool for implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and reiterated the importance of combining digital technological innovations with other innovations, including agroecology, as well as the importance of enhanced capacities of all actors in order to promote radical change in food and agriculture systems.

15. Permit me now to turn to the work awaiting us in the session which is now beginning. I am pleased to say that we will continue to deal with a number of relevant issues also considered at the 31st session.

16. It is important that the present meeting is not a one-off event, but a part of a process in which we, the Members, work with the Secretariat on current problems and priorities in the region. The regular informal consultations held by the Secretariat and Members on priority issues – of which the most recent took place in May 2019 as part of the preparations for the current session of the ERC – are clear evidence of the active participation in the process by the countries of the region.

17. **The Regional Conference for Europe** is called upon to play an important role in the FAO governing bodies. Although the FAO country programmes in the region are relatively small in scale compared with those of other regions, 54 of the 194 Members of FAO belong to the Europe and Central Asia region. The region can thus make a major contribution to the work of the Organization, shown both by its substantial financial support (Members from the European Central Asia region contribute over 37 percent of assessed contributions to FAO and almost half of all voluntary contributions) and by its contributions of expertise and experience of appropriate policies and tried-and-tested solutions.

18. Moreover, it is important that this Regional Conference should devise clear and relevant solutions, to be reflected in the decisions of the FAO Council and Conference, on the future Strategic Framework and the forthcoming Food Systems Summit 2021 – to name only two of the key issues on our agenda. The world is changing, as the COVID-19 pandemic has clearly shown; it is therefore vital that we use this forum to define a clear regional vision of the global agenda of the Organization and revitalize the development of this regional vision.

19. While we need to focus on strengthening partnerships with civil society and the private sector in the region, we also need to strengthen the partnerships between the States of the region and maintain a constructive dialogue with other regions. This outreach work will help us to find common ground on important issues in advance of the meetings of the Governing Bodies.

³ <http://www.fao.org/about/meetings/conference/c2019/documents/en/>

20. In closing, I should like to thank the Secretariat for its enormous and valuable support and for the work it has done to implement ERC recommendations into the work of the Organization in the region. I wish you all successful and productive work at this virtual 32nd session of the Regional Conference for Europe.

21. Thank you.