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Food and Agriculture
Organization of the
United Nations

Organisation des Nations
Unies pour l'alimentation
et l'agriculture

Продовольственная и
сельскохозяйственная организация
Объединенных Наций

Organización de las
Naciones Unidas para la
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الأمم المتحدة
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FAO REGIONAL CONFERENCE FOR EUROPE

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Statement by the Director-General

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Honourable Jamshid Khodjaev Minister of Agriculture,
Distinguished Ministers,
Mr Independent Chairperson of the FAO Council,
Dear Delegates,
Representatives from Parliaments, Civil Society and the Private Sector,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

1. Let me start by recognizing the **Government of Uzbekistan** for the flexibility shown in collaborating with the FAO Secretariat to convene this virtual Regional Conference amidst the ongoing global pandemic. It is a challenging time for all of us. Adaptation helps us to get used to a new business model.
2. On behalf of FAO and all the participants in this regional conference, I extend my profound gratitude to the Government and people of Uzbekistan for hosting this conference. As I had planned to visit your beautiful country, I am still committed to do so later when the condition allows us to travel again.
3. My thoughts and solidarity are with all the victims and the heroes fighting the COVID-19 Pandemic in the region and beyond.
4. And I would like to pay tribute to the national authorities of all our Members who are hosting FAO offices across the region, and who help us keep our employees safe, while they continue delivering FAO's mandate.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

5. Since I assumed office more than one year ago, a lot has happened inside and outside FAO. You can notice the change by following FAO's website, news, activities and publications.
6. One of my first priorities as Director-General was to **transform the regional conferences** from largely formal, stand-alone events, into dynamic and efficient platforms for raising public awareness, policy setting, capturing the regional flavors and styles.
7. FAO's Constitution envisages strong regional governance mechanisms, built on dialogue and the identification of common priorities.
8. Through open dialogue and the active exchange of good practices amongst participating countries, we can better support policy makers across the region in facing common challenges.
9. And above all, the regional conference needs to be useful for you, as it is your conference. My colleagues and I will be listening closely.
10. In that respect, we are eager to hear your views and inputs on a number of important policy items, including:
 - First, the **new FAO Strategic Framework** that is under preparation: Which priorities do you wish to see incorporated? Even several months ago, a lot of representatives from your region had asked questions about developing FAO's new Strategic Framework. Since then, we have already organized several informal consultations. Now, it is the time for you to make contributions. FAO has already received many contributions from other regions.
 - Second, the **2021 UN Food Systems Summit**: What are your expectations?
 - Third, the **transformation of agri-food systems**: What are the priorities we need to act on, based on your specific conditions? and

- Fourth, your **political commitments** to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially SDG 2 and SDG1.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

11. I am pleased to see that the Members of the Europe and Central Asia region are already embracing this innovative and forward looking vision for successful and dynamic regional conferences.
12. The Informal Regional Consultations that are taking place in the years between regional conferences are an important tool to ensure continued contact with the Members of the region.
13. Another commendable approach is updating the Members of the region on FAO's activities and jointly reflecting on priority implementation through the various regional commissions.
14. The topics for your discussion in the next 3 days were selected in close consultation with you.
15. The Regional Office in Budapest hosted informal consultations at senior level to brainstorm on FAO Regional priorities in 2019. 76 participants attended these consultations from 34 members and 14 non state actors.
16. Pre-Conference consultations were held with representatives of civil society.
17. And I was pleased to note that, for the first time, the Regional Office organized a dedicated dialogue with the private sector in preparation for this conference.
18. I would like to thank the representatives of the private sector, civil society and other partners for their interest and I am delighted that they are joining us today and enriching the discussions.
19. Together, you help make this event more open, inclusive and effective. Because the world does not need another sophisticated event behind closed doors in a beautiful castle!
20. This is not only fully in line with the guiding principles of Agenda 2030 but it also reflects the spirit of the **renewed FAO**.
21. We have introduced an **agenda of transformative action** to build a dynamic, inclusive and agile FAO that serves its Members to achieve the "**four betters**": better production, better nutrition, a better environment, and a better life.
22. The Council has endorsed this agenda of change that includes **structural, programmatic and operational adjustments**.
23. We have adopted a modular and flexible structure that allows for cross-sectoral collaboration and breaks down silos.
24. We brought together the three Deputy Directors-General, the Chief Economist, the Chief Scientist and the Director of Cabinet, who now form a collective leadership team. This is a way to build a transparent and accountable FAO. Now, FAO is managed by a group of senior staff, not just relying on one person or depending on one individual. This team supports me in all areas of the Organization's mandate, exemplifying the new collaborative approach of FAO.
25. Among the other numerous adjustments and reform efforts, I wish to highlight the establishment of an Office for Innovation and an Office of Climate Change, Biodiversity and Environment.
26. We have also established a dedicated Office for Small Island Developing States (SIDS), Least Developed Countries (LDCs) and Landlocked Developing Countries (LLDCs).
27. We have strengthened our investment center to increase its catalytic effects with International Financial Institutions and the private sectors globally.
28. We have also established an Office of SDGs, to make sure that all our work contributes to Agenda 2030, which is our common framework for sustainable development.

29. The Joint FAO/WHO Centre, which could also be considered a coordination platform, houses two important joint efforts: The Codex Alimentarius Commission as well as all of FAO's work on zoonotic diseases and others, like One Health, AMR and food safety.
30. These transformations and adjustments started at FAO headquarters and have now been extended to all our FAO offices across the world, as we are One FAO regardless of where we are.

Distinguished Delegates,

31. As COVID-19 continues to spread throughout the world, the poorest and most vulnerable have been hit the hardest.
32. Measures to control virus outbreaks are disrupting food supply chains at the national, regional and global levels.
33. Smallholder farmers and their families, food workers in all sectors, and those living in commodity- and tourism-dependent economies are particularly vulnerable. Remittances from migrant workers, on which so many households rely in this region, has dropped sharply.
34. These issues urgently need our attention.
35. Equally urgent is the compounding effect of the pandemic on existing crises such as conflict, natural disasters, climate change, pests and plant diseases.
36. To combat these negative effects, in July we have officially launched the holistic and comprehensive **FAO COVID-19 Response and Recovery Programme**.
37. The program aims to mitigate immediate impacts, while strengthening the long-term resilience of agri-food systems and livelihoods - in line with the UN approach "build to transform" and in pursuit of the Sustainable Development Goals.
38. And at the regional level, FAO joined forces with its Members to find the best ways to cope with the pandemic's impact on agri-food systems.
39. FAO organized a Regional High-level Dialogue under the title: *Multi-Partner Response to COVID-19 in the Food and Agriculture sector*.
40. And a **Regional Response Plan for Europe and Central Asia** was developed in an evidence-based, consultative process, comprising six regional priorities for immediate and medium-term actions:
 - Improve Data for Decision-making;
 - Ensure Economic Inclusion and Social Protection to Reduce Poverty;
 - Bolster Trade and Food Safety Standards;
 - Boost Smallholder Resilience for Recovery;
 - Prevent the Next Zoonotic Pandemic through a strengthened One Health Approach; and
 - Food Systems Transformation through strengthening local agri-food value chains.
41. Numerous efforts were also undertaken at the sub-regional level,
42. We held consultations with our Members who are part of the Eurasian Economic Union and co-organized the first ever meeting of the Ministers of Agriculture of all five Central Asian countries under the chairmanship of Uzbekistan.
43. We discussed the crucial issue of facilitating intra-regional trade at a meeting with the Ministers

of agriculture of West Balkan countries, together with our partners - the Regional Rural Development Standing Working Group for South Eastern Europe and the European Commission.

44. And FAO assisted the Ministers of Agriculture of Romania, Moldova and Belarus to identify ways and means to strengthen sub-regional collaboration.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

45. The Region of Europe and Central Asia is very diverse. It stretches over 12 time zones and includes large agricultural producers and consumers as well as smaller countries.
46. It is an economic and agricultural powerhouse and contains diverse cultures, food systems, climate and topography and, naturally, you have different and varying needs.
47. But it also faces many enduring and new challenges: pressure on natural resources, land degradation and water scarcity in large parts of the region, persisting food insecurity but also growing levels of obesity, increasing gaps between rural and urban areas, gender inequalities and enduring pockets of hunger and poverty in many rural areas.
48. I note the key achievements that demonstrate the response to the regional challenges and the regional diversity. To name some of them:
- The strategy for accessing the Green Climate Fund resulted in two large projects for Kyrgyzstan and Armenia, which are starting in 2021.
 - The work on land consolidation in the Region as well as the legal guide on land consolidation is providing normative support to countries.
 - The Regional Gender Strategy and the numerous gender assessments in the countries.
49. FAO is also a strong supporter of the reinvigorated UN System in the Region. Co-leading the Issue-Based Coalition (IBC) on sustainable food systems, together with UNECE, UNICEF, WHO, WFP and WMO.

Dear colleagues,

50. I note that the themes identified for this regional conference are equally interesting and important.
51. *Sustainable Food Systems and Healthy Diets in Europe and Central Asia* as well as *Solutions for Youth, Employment and Developing Rural Areas in relation to the UN Decade of Family Farming* are two highly relevant and timely topics.
52. I am confident that your deliberations on the first theme will contribute to advancing the FAO global agenda, especially before the UN Food Systems Summit.
53. As to the second theme, I am convinced that innovation and digital technologies are crucial to promote modern sustainable agriculture and rural development.
54. Digital technologies such as satellite imaging, remote sensors and mobile and blockchain applications promise revolutionary changes for smallholder farmers and consumers.
55. They can help optimize food chains, increase access to markets, reduce food loss and waste, improve water management and fight pests and diseases.
56. And most importantly, digital technologies can help us overcome the inequality between the rural and urban areas, which is a central goal of FAO.
57. And we need to explore all potential partnerships and synergies.
58. For instance, FAO and the International Telecommunications Union recently organized a webinar on Fostering Digital Agriculture in Europe and Central Asia covering the joint assessment of digitalization in 18 countries of the Region.

59. Also, on 29 September, we signed an agreement with the **World Tourism Organization of the UN (UNWTO)** to join forces in supporting the development of sustainable tourism in rural areas.
60. Agri-tourism and eco-tourism are important drivers of socio-economic growth and could reduce inequalities, increase the resilience of rural communities, and boost incomes.
61. In that context, I announced our intention to launch the **1 000 Digital Villages Project**. The idea is to identify 1 000 villages across the world and convert them into digital villages or towns.
62. Digital villages and rural tourism could be engines to increase resilience, diversify incomes of farmers and to build back better.
63. I invite each Delegation to propose three locations or sites in their country that combine advantages and characteristics of agricultural production, food systems, cultural products and touristic attractions to be transformed into digital villages where you have a lot of things to share and to offer online.
64. We can advertise for these digital villages and their agricultural production, food systems and cultural elements through our various digital platforms.
65. We can also promote this initiative through the **Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems (GIAHS)** platform. I just got a new proposal of a pilot project to be implemented from our Regional Representative of RAP this morning. I think we are at the early stage of implementing this initiative now. I have already called for all the regional conferences to participate in this initiative. Now, it is time for Europe and Central Asia Region. I know many countries have National Strategy for Digitalization in Food and Agriculture. This 1000 Digital Village Initiative will be a solid entry-point for your strategy of digitalization to benefit farmers and consumers, and to transform their production systems, consumption pattern, social and economic impacts and governance. I advise that the 1000 digital villages with their cultural elements could be promoted through FAO's various digital platforms: FAO website, International Platform for Digital Food and Agriculture, Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems (GIAHS), and various FAO social media platforms, to make them more accessible not only by farmers, but also by consumers in the cities. Then, globally we can generate added values for agri-products produced by the farmers in the digital villages.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

66. As its flagship initiative, FAO had launched the **Hand-in-Hand Initiative**, which aims to matchmake donor and recipient countries to accelerate innovation, investment, institutional change, agri-food systems transformation and sustainable rural development based on data and information.
67. This innovative approach is supported with state-of-the-art tools:
 - The **Hand in Hand Geospatial Platform**: A GIS data platform that supports all stakeholders with rich, shareable data, while respecting the proper protocols of data confidentiality.
 - The **Data Lab for Statistical Innovation**: that implements the combined use of non-conventional data sources, big data, data science and text mining methods for decision-making and impact assessment.
68. The Hand-in-Hand approach is flexible and open to all countries. Countries can be beneficiaries and contributors at the same time.
69. I invite you to join this country-owned and country-led initiative.

Dear colleagues,

70. On 5 November, we will launch the **Food Coalition** at a high-level event with participation of a number of Ministers and Nobel Peace Prize Laureates.

71. The Food Coalition is a multi-stakeholder, multi-sectoral alliance to mobilize the resources, expertise and innovation that will support the COVID-19 Response and Recovery Program and the Hand-in-Hand initiative.
72. The Coalition will be an advocate for strengthening agri-food systems around the world and will raise awareness, mobilize financial resources and technical expertise, and source innovation and knowledge in support of those countries most in need
73. I am pleased to see that some 40 countries have already expressed interest in being active members of the Food Coalition, which was first proposed by the Government of Italy and other key partners. FAO will provide a neutral platform to promote it with other key partners from Members.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

74. Last month FAO celebrated its 75th anniversary.
75. We did so under difficult circumstances, but full of hope with the renewed FAO.
76. We made a point of taking the celebration outside of the main halls of our headquarters to the street and share this historic moment with the citizens of Rome and the world.
77. Tens of thousands followed the event over stream and through 200 TV Stations.
78. And we reached 1.5 billion people on social media, sharing our message of continued solidarity, multilateralism and hope.
79. Because FAO remains the foremost global authority on two fundamental aspects of human civilization: food and agriculture.
80. And our appreciation of FAO's past strengthens our determination for the future.
81. With the Sustainable Development Goals as our focus and our mandate in our heart, we are ready to work, together with you, for a better tomorrow!
82. For a world free of hunger and full of equality, harmony and happiness!

Thank you