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FAO REGIONAL CONFERENCE FOR ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

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Statement by the Director-General

Queries on the content of this document may be addressed to:

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*His Excellency, the Chairperson of the Regional Conference for Asia and the Pacific,
Excellences,
Ladies and Gentlemen,*

1. I would like to begin by extending my gratitude to the Government of Bangladesh for hosting this important FAO meeting,
2. In particular, I wish to thank His Excellency Dr Mohammad Abdur Razzaque MP, Minister for Agriculture of Bangladesh, for his leadership,
3. As well as his team for the excellent collaboration and commitment in preparation for this regional conference, despite the many challenges.
4. We last met virtually for the 35th Session of this Regional Conference, hosted by the Kingdom of Bhutan, in September 2020.
5. Over the past two years, the world has been learning to cope with the difficult circumstances brought about by the pandemic.
6. Many sectors, including the agrifood sectors, have been struggling to recover from overlapping shocks.
7. The pandemic has forced us to reconsider our priorities and approaches, and has highlighted the importance of more sustainable and resilient societies,
8. As well as of the urgency to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals to secure food, health, education, a healthy environment, and a decent life for all.
9. It has also made us realize the need to transform our agrifood systems to be more efficient, more inclusive, more resilient and more sustainable.
10. The pandemic, the impacts of the climate crisis, conflict and other humanitarian emergencies continue to pose daunting challenges to food security and nutrition, especially for rural and vulnerable communities.

*Excellences,
Ladies and Gentlemen,*

11. Since my arrival at FAO, I have been engaged in a series of actions to make FAO more effective, more efficient and fitter for purpose.
12. The FAO Strategic Framework 2022-31 is aligned with the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda,
13. And it is focused on achieving the Four Betters: Better Production, Better Nutrition, a Better Environment and a Better Life for all, leaving no one behind.
14. The aspirations of the Four Betters reflect the interconnected economic, social and environmental dimensions of agrifood systems and rural development.
15. The Strategic Framework has 20 Programme Priority Areas that will shape FAO's actions in supporting countries, and act as pathways towards achieving the SDGs in line with national priorities.
16. Action at country level is at the core of the 2030 Agenda.
17. In the Asia and Pacific region, the pre-pandemic food security situation was already deteriorating in some parts of this vast region.
18. After many years of progress, hunger is on the rise again.
19. Inequalities are increasing, particularly between rural and urban populations, and women and youth are being left behind.
20. The degradation of natural resources, water scarcity and transboundary pests and diseases have interrupted the momentum for achieving the SDGs, notably SDG 1, 2 and 10.

21. According to the 2020 Regional Overview of Food Security and Nutrition, about 350 million people in the Asia and Pacific region were undernourished in 2019 – which is approximately 51% of the global total.
22. With 1.9 billion people, almost 40% of the region, unable to afford a healthy diet due to high food prices.
23. Now, the pandemic has further increased the number of undernourished people in the region by 4.3 million, compared with 2019.
24. Global estimates predict that an additional 140 million people were living in extreme poverty in 2020,
25. And the number of people facing acute food insecurity nearly doubled to 265 million by the end of 2020.
26. For a region which has consistently led economic growth rates for most of the last 3 decades, these numbers are deeply worrying.
27. These trends in hunger and food insecurity suggest that it will be very difficult for the region to achieve the SDG 2 target of Zero Hunger by 2030 without extraordinary efforts.
28. Four priorities, identified through an extensive and inclusive consultation process, are driving FAO's programme of work in the region and are aimed at achieving extraordinary results:
 - One: Transforming agri-food systems for sustainable production and healthy diets;
 - Two: Accelerating sustainable natural resources management for biodiversity conservation and climate action
 - Three: Supporting inclusive rural transformation for sustainable agrifood systems and equitable rural societies; and
 - Four: Building sustainable and resilient agri-food systems in the Pacific SIDS
29. To better support these priorities, I have restructured the Organization, starting with headquarters and now focused on reforms in the Regional and the Sub-regional offices.
30. We are fostering coherent actions and breaking down silos, to deliver as One FAO.
31. The Regional Offices have a strategic role to play to ensure that FAO's core competencies are systematically harnessed through regional, cross-regional, and cross-continental cooperation.
32. Furthermore, FAO's flagship initiatives support implementation of the Strategic Framework across all regions.
33. The Hand-in-Hand Initiative facilitates agrifood systems transformation and sustainable rural development by targeting countries and regions that have the highest rates of poverty and hunger,
34. And brings them together with developed countries, focusing on analysis and partnerships, with approaches tailored to country specific needs.
35. So far, 9 countries in the region are participating in the Initiative, and we look forward to more Members extending a hand.
36. FAO's Global Action on One Country One Priority Product, aims to develop green and sustainable production and value chains for special agricultural products.
37. There are important opportunities for its implementation in the region as it focuses on products with unique qualities and special characteristics associated with geographic locations and cultural heritages,
38. Which can significantly contribute to food security and healthy diets, by supporting farmers' livelihoods and economic competitiveness, while protecting the environment and biodiversity.

39. The 1000 Digital Villages Initiative aims to convert villages across the world into digital hubs to support the acceleration of rural transformation.
40. The initiative facilitates smallholder producers' access to knowledge and markets, while reducing the digital gap, including the gender and rural divide.
41. Here in the Asia and Pacific region, the FAO Regional Office has taken on this initiative as a regional pilot programme, already rolled out in 15 countries across the region.
42. A regional strategy on digital innovation will further accelerate the trend towards strengthening the use of digital tools in agriculture,
43. And will leverage the entrepreneurial spirit of the youth and women in the region by creating an enabling environment, and supporting the development of national e-agriculture strategies and digital tools and services.
44. We have also invested in the development of Regional Technical Platforms that bring together the best knowledge, taking advantage of regional expertise.
45. The FAO Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific is currently developing a Regional Technical Platform on aquaculture, which will become a knowledge hub for this sector,
46. Where countries worldwide will be able to benefit from the vast experience acquired in this region on how to incorporate innovations and technologies for the responsible and sustainable use of fisheries and aquaculture resources.
47. Following the successful SIDS Solution Forum last year, we launched a platform to share innovative solutions developed by Pacific island states to overcome challenging circumstances in unique and fragile environments.

Dear Colleagues,

48. Two key thematic strategies are being developed to support the implementation of the Strategic Framework.
49. The FAO Strategy on Science and Innovation will firmly place science, technologies and innovation, including traditional knowledge, at the center of our action,
50. Helping to accelerate progress and ensuring that our work is grounded on scientific evidence.
51. An updated Strategy on Climate Change is also being developed for effective adaptation and mitigation to the impacts of the climate crisis.
52. The Strategy will accelerate and mainstream climate action across all our programmes.
53. Regional consultations with a wide range of stakeholders will ensure that regional perspectives are included in the preparation of both thematic strategies.
54. There is an urgent need to address the various crises affecting a number of countries in the region.
55. The Humanitarian-Peace-Development nexus provides a sound framework to promote integrated approaches to effectively improve resilience and address food insecurity in crisis countries.
56. Achieving our common goals and vision of a region free from hunger, malnutrition and poverty will depend on our ability to build effective partnerships, to implement collective actions and programmes.
57. And to engage a broad spectrum of stakeholders, including civil society organizations and the private sector.
58. At country level, FAO collaborates with other UN agencies through the UN Sustainable Development Framework, and at regional level through the Regional Collaborative Platform.

59. FAO is hosting the Coordination Hub for the follow up of the UN Food Systems Summit, to coordinate technical and policy support to countries in further developing and implementing national pathways towards agrifood systems transformation.

60. FAO is committed to working together with all countries and partners in the region in an efficient, effective and coherent manner to reach our collective, regional and global objectives.

61. I wish you a successful Ministerial Session, which will build upon the political commitments set out during the regional conference.

62. Thank you.