



联合国
粮食及
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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
Alimentación y la Agricultura

منظمة
الغذية والزراعة
للأمم المتحدة

CONFERENCE

Forty-third Session

Rome, 1-7 July 2023

Statement of the Director-General

*Excellences,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear Colleagues,*

I am honoured to address the 43rd Session of the FAO Ministerial Conference. I wish to thank you once again for the confidence you have placed in me to lead FAO for the next four years. I will make every effort to fulfil the promises and commitment I have set out in my Manifesto, in pursuit of FAO's mandate for a world without hunger, together with you.

I stand before you this morning as the Director-General of a new, reinvigorated, dynamic, modern and fit-for-purpose Organization. An FAO that has put Food back into the Food and Agriculture Organization, and Agriculture back at the top of the global agenda, after four years, together with the UN SG, DSG and all colleagues across the system.

FAO continues to advocate for food and agriculture to be recognized as part of an inter-related system, to redirect transformation of global agrifood systems to be more efficient, more inclusive, more resilient and more sustainable.

The emergence of a new vision of agriculture that will work towards the Four Betters: Better Production, Better Nutrition, a Better Environment and a Better Life. An Organization that is ensuring that no one is left behind.

To do this, we need to assure food security for all. This is at the core of the FAO Strategic Framework 2022-31 that you endorsed at the last session of the Ministerial Conference, and which guides the work of the Organization to ensure a better future for all.

To achieve these objectives we need to rewrite the narrative on food security. We need to define the concepts that will enable a better understanding of how FAO is moving into the future.

First of all, food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.

Many concepts are behind this definition of food security, and there are four key drivers that we normally refer to when we look at food security:

The first driver is availability, the second one is accessibility, the third one is utilization and the fourth is stability.

Documents can be consulted at www.fao.org

When we refer to food availability, we mean that sufficient quantities of appropriate and quality food are available for domestic production, commercial import, food assistance or emergency food reserves on a consistent basis.

This is clearly reflected in Better Production.

It means that we have to provide the science, innovation, technologies, and know how to be able to accelerate production.

However, it is not only that, we are also talking of the best possible quality food and that requires that we have to focus on its nutritious content.

That is our concept of Better Nutrition.

It is essential that we have all the necessary micronutrients in the food we consume, and that it is available in all the varieties needed, so we can have affordable healthy diets.

The affordability of healthy diets is the result of supply and demand, and clearly the supply of the diverse food required to achieve food availability, and the access to healthy diets, will be essential.

This is where we need to bring all the different elements together that can help us to achieve local, regional and global production.

This definition also brings in the concept of trade, and how optimal combinations of local, regional and global production are essential to assure food availability and accessibility.

It is important not only to produce locally where there are comparative advantages, but also to try find all the diversity that is needed through trade, at global and regional level - because it is not only about global trade, it is also about the facilitation of intra-regional trade.

In this regard, food safety is critical because the food we need to supply the world and ensure food availability, must not only be nutritious, but also safe.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is clear that production, food safety, and health are interrelated. This is why it is so important that we speak of the “agrifood system” as a whole. And our agrifood systems cannot be looked at individually – we need to view them in relation to the health sector because of the food safety dimension.

That is where FAO, through its work on food safety, the One Health approach, and the Codex Alimentarius, has to excel in setting standards and norms. The normative role of FAO is of central importance to ensure that we have the needed quantities of healthy food required to achieve food availability.

In addition, food availability requires that there be access to the nutritious food also in emergencies, and for this our joint work with the World Food Programme (WFP), as well as the proper design of emergency food reserves, are essential.

But we must do even more and better, together.

That is why our work on Emergencies and Resilience is so important, and I strongly encourage donor countries to support this work.

The second component in our definition of food security is food accessibility.

This means that people need to have adequate income or other resources that enables access to proper food domestically through home production, and through buying food at local, regional or global markets.

Food access is one of the major challenges we are facing today. We have seen how prices have been increasing. Fortunately, the FAO Food Price Index has indicated a steady decrease in food prices over more than 12 months. Yet, the price of final food products is not decreasing due to a food accessibility problem.

In some high-income countries we are starting to see it, but not across the world, and especially not in the poorest countries. Moreover, what it means is that we have a problem of the most vulnerable import dependent countries facing a significant increase in their food import bill, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa where countries are not able to cope with the increase in their food import bill as a result of the increasing prices and the exchange rate devaluation of their currencies.

For this reason, I was pleased that the International Monetary Fund (IMF) established a Food Shock Window. We need to support these countries - this is why FAO proposed the Food Import Financing Facility to help the most vulnerable countries.

That is also why in the medium and long term we are proposing mechanisms to increase resilience so that countries will have the necessary income, and why the definition we use of “agrifood systems” is so important.

We cannot only focus on food production, we also need to include non-food production because it improves food access for farmers, and improves their purchase power.

All these pillars are directly related to Better Production and Better Nutrition, and a Better Life.

Dear Colleagues,

We need to accelerate trade, not only at the global level, but also inter-regionally. This will bring significant opportunities for regions to move commodities across borders. And it applies not only to the output commodities that we consume, but also to the inputs that we need for production.

We have seen a significant crisis in terms of fertilizers in the last couple of years, even before the pandemic. Fertilizer prices went up four times since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, they were twice their cost six months ago, and now finally they are at market levels.

This unexpected situation created a challenge to the agriculture sector, and a challenge to farmers’ affordability - and trade has been essential in resolving this. For this reason, it is important that we keep the international supply chain operating smoothly.

We need to find solutions for the mobility of the outputs and the inputs to ensure that we can have local value chains, medium-term value chains and global value chains. To achieve this, it is critical that we work collectively to facilitate trade.

Dear Colleagues,

The other two dimensions of food security are utilization and stability.

Utilization refers to the proper storing and processing of food, with appropriate knowledge regarding nutritional health, sanitation, social, cultural and other parameters.

It is in this dimension that the reduction of Food Loss and Waste is essential.

Proper utilization means that we use what we need; and that we have the science, innovation and technology required to ensure we have food available, accessible and affordable. For this reason, our accelerators on innovation and technology in the FAO Strategic Framework are fundamental.

FAO needs to keep increasing its efforts through our new Science and Innovation Strategy to support Members in identifying evidence-based solutions to the challenges they face in the way they produce, process and commercialize food.

Finally, the fourth dimension of food security is stability.

Stability of food refers to the availability of adequate food at all times, ensuring that access to and utilization of proper food is not hampered by any shortage, emergency or sudden crisis.

It is in this dimension where the core concept of agrifood systems is operating.

Global agrifood systems are operating under risks and uncertainties.

We have seen this in the last two years, and we will keep seeing an increase in the frequency of shocks in the future.

The cereal world is characterized for being very concentrated, that is: a few big producers supply the world and are therefore more vulnerable to climate shocks.

Climate shocks will affect agrifood systems in four ways:

One: extreme temperatures;

Two: lack or excess of water;

Three: variability of the climate conditions; and

Four: the evolution of pests and diseases.

To ensure stability it is essential to be prepared to cope with these challenges. Here is where a Better Environment, and a Better Life, plays a critical role.

We need to find solutions to increase resilience. To be resilient implies two core concepts:

First: Prevention. This is where our efforts in early warning systems to climate shocks, the One Health approach, and new insurance tools, play a crucial role. In this regard, we have recommended that the G7 in Italy next year looks at these insurance tools for agriculture.

Second: Being able to absorb a shock when it occurs. This is where we need to prioritize investments to increase productivity and production across the world, reduce bottlenecks for producers, and produce more with less.

FAO is working intensively to address these problems, and we have launched many initiatives over the past four years to provide the required adequate support to Members.

Dear Colleagues,

I started six core initiatives in my first mandate:

ONE: The Hand-in-Hand Initiative that supports the implementation of nationally led, ambitious programmes to accelerate agrifood systems transformations by eradicating poverty (SDG1), ending hunger and malnutrition (SDG2), and reducing inequalities (SDG10).

It uses advanced geospatial modelling and analytics, as well as a robust partnership-building approach to accelerate the market-based transformation of agrifood systems, to raise incomes, improve the nutritional status and well-being of poor and vulnerable populations, and strengthen resilience to climate change.

Currently, the Hand-in-Hand Initiative comprises 64 countries, and is accelerating and aims to provide the link between needs and proper investments plans, and those who can provide the required resources through the private sector, International Financial Institutions (IFIs), and other mechanisms.

TWO: The Green Cities Initiative that focuses on improving the urban environment, strengthening urban-rural linkages, and improving the resilience of urban food systems, services and populations to external shocks.

THREE: The 1000-Digital Villages Initiative that promotes digitalization in rural areas for the benefit of the local community, enabling them to apply, deploy or harness digital innovations and technologies, services and solutions, to improve their economic livelihoods, individual wellbeing, and create social cohesion through better connectivity. We are looking at how to facilitate production, and how we can create digital agriculture, digital villages and digital communities. In other words, all the potential digital services that can reduce bottlenecks and try to accelerate transformation.

FOUR: The One Health approach, as part of agrifood systems transformation for the health of people, animals, plants and the environment. This involves a spectrum of actors and a range of work on sustainable agriculture, animal, plant, forest, and aquaculture health, food safety, antimicrobial resistance (AMR), food security, nutrition and livelihoods.

Ensuring a One Health approach is essential for progress to anticipate, prevent, detect and control diseases that spread between animals and humans, tackle AMR, ensure food safety, prevent

environment-related human and animal health threats, among others. A One Health approach is critical for achieving the SDGs.

FIVE: The One Country One Priority Product (OCOP) initiative that places the production, distribution and marketing models of smallholders and family farming at the centre of interventions. It helps countries leverage their potential and identify Special Agricultural Products (SAPs) adapted to their agro-ecological production systems, and national or cultural heritage, ensuring improved access to stable markets and acting as a key entry point for reaching their defined priorities.

We also need to recognize the importance of fish, and how efficient the production of fish is. And that is why our sixth initiative is Blue Transformation. This is central for increasing nutrients, through fisheries and aquaculture, in an efficient way in relation to input and output, so as to allow us to achieve a diverse diet and increase food availability, and especially to improve access to healthy diets.

Now, we are working on the implementation of all these initiatives, including through South-South and Triangular Cooperation.

Dear Colleagues,

We are in a world with more than 800 million chronically undernourished people.

In a world where 255 million people are in acute food insecurity, that could turn into chronic hunger.

In a world where 3.1 billion people do not have access to healthy diets.

In a world that we are putting a lot of pressure on water and nature.

In a world where agrifood systems are facing shocks due to climate, and continuously from different dimensions.

We need to start the transformation!

We need to find opportunities and solutions, and take action to move forward. This is my objective today in setting out these core concepts for our common discussion.

At this Ministerial Conference I am asking two things:

One: a small increase in our budget, after 12 years of no increase, to ensure FAO can continue to effectively carry out its work;

And two: to concentrate on the key issue of water – with many countries in the world currently facing flooding and drought, it is now time to draw urgent attention to water and to keep it high on the international agenda.

To help us understand the way forward, and how FAO is going to support Members in implementing actions going forward we need to look at the opportunities, not only the challenges.

In English the word crisis is only one word, but in Chinese it is two words: one is damage and one is opportunity.

Let us identify the best solutions, together, so we can move forward into a world of better production, better nutrition, a better environment, and a better life, leaving no one behind.

Thank you.