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Statement by the Independent Chairperson of the FAO Council

*Chairperson,
Honourable Ministers,
Director-General and
Distinguished Delegates,*

1. I am deeply honoured to **participate in the 37th Session of the FAO Regional Conference for Asia and the Pacific**. This holds particular significance as the first Regional Conference since my re-election as the Independent Chairperson of the FAO Council last year. I express my heartfelt gratitude for the renewed confidence bestowed upon me. Additionally, I extend my appreciation to the Government and **people of Sri Lanka** for the exemplary organization of this conference.

2. In the spirit of "**One FAO, one family**," it is crucial to acknowledge the reality that the world is not on track to achieve global food security, and to meet the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. In fact, the world is failing in this mission. We must face the uncomfortable truth. We know our challenges, with Agenda 2030 and its SDGs, we have set our goals and targets, and we know the solutions, or at least we think we know. But what about the 'how'? How are we going to do it? At that moment, there is deafening silence.

3. How is it possible that, 27 years after the first World Food Summit in 1996 in Rome, where we were discussing 800 million people in hunger, we still have 800 million people suffering in hunger, in 2023. And the number is growing again. How is it possible that every year we are losing one-third of our produced food, with a worth of 1 trillion US dollars, and 3 billion people do not have access to safe, affordable, and nutritious food?

4. The magnitude of challenges facing the achievement of food security is calling on all of us to scale up and coordinate our actions with the objective of eliminating hunger, food insecurity and malnutrition in the world. If we want to achieve sustainable food systems, we need transformative actions. It seems to be a mega and almost impossible task. So, we need to think outside of the box. And we all know it can only be done if we deliver at the country level. We need you more than ever!

This and other documents can be consulted at www.fao.org

5. Our beloved FAO is in a unique position to make this change happen and to support concrete action on the ground, in your countries. Of course, with all necessary partners such as the private sector and youth.
6. Your region hosts over half of the world's population and covers about 30 percent of the global landmass. Nevertheless, your region is also blessed with ingenuity, resilience, technological innovation, and financial potency. It has inherited thousands of years of traditional and ingenious agrifood systems and know-how. With these combined innovations and technologies, your region has the tremendous capability for developing a variety of solutions.
7. **The Asia-Pacific region is grappling with multiple crises**, including conflicts, supply chain disruptions, consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, the 5F crisis (food, feed, fuel, fertilizer, and finance), and natural disasters. These crises have led to economic slowdowns, increased unemployment, and higher food prices. Eighty percent of your people are living below the international poverty line. Over 40 percent of the people in your region cannot afford healthy diets. The region's natural resources are strained by climate change and water scarcity, presenting huge challenges.
8. **The good news is that your region is turning around the negative trends.** The PoU estimate for Asia and the Pacific points to a turnaround in the trend of hunger, which had been on the rise in the region since 2018. The PoU fell from 8.8 percent in 2021 to 8.4 percent in 2022 – a decrease of more than 14 million people, mostly in Southern Asia. Southern Asia and South-eastern Asia both experienced a turnaround, with the largest improvement in Southern Asia, showing 12.4 million fewer people facing hunger. This certainly deserves our compliments.
9. Now, more than ever, the ancient knowledge, resilience, innovation, and financing potential of your region must be safeguarded through the ongoing implementation of **the FAO Strategic Framework 2022–31**. The transformation to more efficient, inclusive, resilient, and **sustainable agrifood systems is imperative for achieving Sustainable Production and Healthy Diets**. Further transformative changes are needed in agrifood systems to reduce total greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions.
10. What is more, the mesmerizing biodiversity of your lands, particularly in the **Pacific Small Island Developing States (SIDS)**, is under threat from intensive agricultural production systems. It is crucial to **manage natural resources sustainably**, to preserve the terrestrial and marine ecosystems and the indigenous heritage. In this context, **supporting the Rural Transformation with Asian traditional knowledge** is crucial, by strengthening on-going cooperation with multiple stakeholders, fostering a more systematic and coordinated approach for the sustainable management for food and agriculture.
11. FAO is needed now more than ever before to fulfil its most noble mandate and our joint efforts should continue to be directed towards transforming agrifood systems in the region. All stakeholders must take their respective responsibilities and work together towards the achievement of FAO's goals, as well as the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda.
12. Most of your countries are increasingly conscious of the need to create healthier food environments for healthier diets and empower consumers in this respect. Mainstreaming of nutrition across sectoral policies is essential in this respect. It is great to see the priority your region is giving to the **One Health approach**. I compliment your region for its ongoing initiatives. Implementing evidence-based, successful risk management approaches in your region should receive the broadest global support. But now it is crucial to join forces, translating it into programmes, policy development, legislation, research, partnerships and resource mobilization.
13. **Food Loss and Waste reduction** should be regarded as the entry point for transforming agrifood systems to make them more efficient, inclusive, resilient, and sustainable. The **World Food Systems Summit** identified this as one of the main priorities. **The global Champions 12.3 coalition in close cooperation with the World Bank and FAO** has taken the initiative to make this happen at country level. Based on country diagnostics about how much food is lost and wasted, where in the food supply chain losses occur, and the reasons why they occur, business cases will be developed for

investments to tackle the problems. Of course, the private sector plays a crucial role in this initiative. Reducing food loss and waste will require strong policy support and an adequate institutional framework to create an enabling environment, as well as awareness. I invite you to join this initiative.

14. Also, **digitalization** holds the promise of accelerating development in rural areas. This will be achieved by translating technological innovations into accessible, adapted, and affordable digital services that benefit small-scale producers, rural women, small-scale entrepreneurs, and rural communities and villages.

15. Certainly, your blue growth potential should be fully utilized. The focus should be on transforming fisheries and aquaculture to promote sustainable management through development of capacity and using innovations where feasible, promoting **the Blue Transformation Roadmap** in regional initiatives, enhancing access to blue and climate finance for resilience, innovation and transformation of aquatic food systems; and supporting regional capacity-building programmes.

16. We know, it's only sunlight which comes for free. To deliver on priorities, we need adequate financing. Here we have to use all our creativity to access available funding options and sharing experiences from countries regarding national approaches and policies to financing. Action is needed at the country, regional and global levels to redirect available support towards investments in climate-resilient and climate-smart agrifood systems, research and development, and infrastructure for greater resilience. Blended finance, combining public and private capital, can de-risk investments and provide long-term finance for small-scale farmers and businesses to adopt resilient practices. It can also build coordination, attract new investors, and strengthen the capacity of local financial institutions to support agrifood systems transformation.

17. FAO is uniquely positioned to lead this transformative change, but it requires concrete action in collaboration with partners, especially the private sector, and civil society. May I make a special appeal to you for supporting the youth, via programmes and financial support, for example for start-ups. The lessons learned from FAO's implementation of programs in the region underscore the implications for supporting the transformation to more efficient, inclusive, resilient, and sustainable agrifood systems.

18. Given the regional differences and specific challenges, decentralization is needed to get the action done on the ground. Your feedback and guidance on the proposed measures are absolutely needed to adjust the FAO Country Offices network to better respond to Members' expectations for FAO support and delivery under the FAO Strategic Framework. In this respect, I would like to mention the recommendation of the Joint Inspection Unit in the recent Review of management and administration in the FAO. The unit recommends an update, and clearly defined responsibilities, of regional and national offices to ensure that they are fit for purpose, and can respond to the expectations of the members, donors and financial institutions.

19. I thank and honour you, the wonderful and great staff of FAO, especially in your region. They, particularly at national level, have to work under difficult circumstances and are often confronted with the direct suffering of so many people. We have to compliment and applaud them for the great work they are doing.

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20. To conclude, this Regional Conference for Asia and the Pacific has a unique role to play in helping define and implement FAO policies. I firmly believe that the continuing engagement and commitment of the governments in this region will do much to ensure that FAO continues to serve you well and to be an effective agent in the struggle to free the world of hunger and malnutrition. It is thus with eager anticipation that I await the outcome of your deliberations.

21. As you have seen and heard, the DG and his team, certainly the staff in the offices in your region, stand ready to deliver on FAO's and our mandate to secure food security, leaving nobody behind, and our collective efforts towards **transforming agrifood systems** in your region.

22. And let's not forget the famous words of Nelson Mandela: "It always seems impossible, until it is done". Let us work with his spirit and with his guts and passion!!