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FAO REGIONAL CONFERENCE FOR THE NEAR EAST

Thirty-fifth Session

21-22 September 2020¹

Statement by the FAO Director-General

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

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Your Excellency, Dr. Al-Habsi, Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries Wealth and Water Resources of Oman,
Honourable Ministers,
Mr. Independent Chairperson of the FAO Council,
Distinguished Delegates,
Representatives from Civil Society and the Private Sector,
FAO colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen,
Assalamu Alaikum!

1. It is an honour and a pleasure for me to be with you at this Thirty-fifth Session of the FAO Regional Conference for the Near East.
2. I would like to begin by applauding the Sultanate of Oman for the excellent Chairmanship of the various technical preparatory events and the flexibility shown in collaborating with the FAO Secretariat to convene this first virtual Regional Conference for the Near East in FAO's history.
3. I extend my gratitude to the Government and people of the Sultanate of Oman for hosting this conference.
4. My thoughts and solidarity are with all the victims of the COVID-19 Pandemic in the region and beyond, and the heroes fighting it.
5. 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 in these difficult times.

Dear brothers and sisters,

6. I assumed Office a little over a year ago. A lot has happened since then. Both inside and outside FAO. This is the first time that I have the chance to exchange with many of you since then. I look forward to hearing your views, concerns and priorities.
7. One of my first priorities when I assumed Office was to transform the Regional Conferences from largely formal stand-alone events into more dynamic, interactive and continuous processes.
8. FAO's Constitution envisages strong regional governance mechanisms, built on dialogue and the identification of common priorities.
9. The regional input is vital in shaping FAO's strategic outlook and actions.
10. Above all, this is your conference – the regional Governing Body session – and my colleagues and I will be listening closely and documenting your views on how FAO can serve you best.
11. We are particularly interested to listen to your views on two important policy items:
 - a. The priorities you want to see included in the new FAO Strategic Framework that is under preparation. Your contribution is substantial; and
 - b. Your expectations with regard to the UN Food Systems Summit in 2021.

12. I am pleased to see that the Members of the Near East and North Africa region are embracing the new innovative and forward looking approach that FAO has implemented.
13. Transforming the Near East Regional Conference into an exclusively ministerial meeting ensures high-level and priority-focused discussions, as envisaged by the FAO Constitution.
14. Two preparatory Regional Consultative Technical Meetings were held prior to the Regional Conference and ably chaired by Oman.
15. The first meeting, held face-to-face in Cairo in January this year and attended by 160 participants from 24 Members, agreed on a number of priorities for FAO's future work in the region: transforming food systems, addressing embedded rural hunger and poverty and achieving the SDGs.
16. The second one, focused on COVID-19, spread across four on-line meetings in July and brought together a remarkable 802 senior representatives of governments, private sectors, civil society and research institutions from 31 countries.
17. These preparatory meetings showed that modern technologies can help us increase our efficiency even in challenging times, as we work together to address some of the region's most pressing problems.
18. I believe that these preparatory events represent an important foundation for this new format of the Regional Conference and I look forward to hearing your views on whether they should become an integral part of the process in the future.
19. I am particularly encouraged to see the heightened inclusion and consultation with Private Sector representatives in both the run-up and during this Conference. We are grateful for your participation here today, and in the online discussions that were organized by the Regional Office.
20. I also appreciate that Civil Society Organizations continue to add their voices to this Regional Conference.
21. Together, you help make this process more inclusive and more effective, fully in line with the guiding principles of the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

22. The changes introduced to the regional conferences are part of a bigger set of actions that are transforming FAO.
23. A series of far-reaching adjustments, endorsed by Council, help build a more dynamic and efficient FAO, entirely aligned with its core vision and mandate, creating an agile Organization that serves its Members to achieve the "four betters" namely: better production, better nutrition, a better environment, and a better life.

24. To accomplish this, we introduced a modular and flexible organization that allows for optimal cross-sectoral collaboration and breaks down silos.
25. By embracing an innovative mindset and applying modern technologies, we adopted new ways of working, so that FAO becomes more efficient, inclusive and responsive.
26. We established a core leadership team consisting of the three Deputy Directors-General, the Chief Economist, Chief Scientist and Director of Cabinet.
27. And today, I am pleased to announce the appointment of the new Chief Scientist from your region, Ms. Ismahane El-Ouafi.
28. This core leadership group supports me in all areas of the Organization's mandate and exemplifies the new collaborative approach of FAO.
29. Among the other numerous adjustments and reform efforts, I am pleased to highlight the newly established Office for Innovation, the Office of climate change, biodiversity and environment, as well as a dedicated Office of SDGs.
30. And as you know, I established an office dedicated to assisting Small Island Developing States, Least Developed Countries and Landlocked Developing Countries.
31. And we created FAO's first Women's and Youth Committees that serve as conduits to drive women and youth solidarity and engagement within FAO and beyond. This is the first in the UN system.
32. The two committees have been very active and have contributed greatly to the emergence of a spirit of unity and solidarity among FAO employees, while translating our vision of a catalytic role that youth can play in FAO into concrete actions.
33. Now that these adjustments and restructuring efforts are finalized at headquarters, they will be introduced across all FAO offices across the world.

Honorable Ministers,

34. COVID-19 provides an unprecedented and worrying backdrop to this Conference.
35. It is primarily a health crisis, but its impact has touched all parts of our lives, most importantly food security and incomes.
36. Livelihoods, businesses, economies, social interactions and the movement of people and goods have all been affected dramatically and negatively in the last months.
37. The pandemic and measures to contain it, pose significant challenges to food security and nutrition especially to the most vulnerable communities, as a compounding threat to existing crises such as conflict, natural disasters, climate change, pests and plagues
38. This underscores the need for evidence-based, coordinated policy action and investment to make food systems healthier and more sustainable.

39. FAO is at the forefront of addressing the challenges posed by COVID-19, from the food security, nutrition and resilient food systems perspective, through a comprehensive and holistic approach for recovery and building back better.
40. We have recently presented the FAO COVID-19 Response and Recovery Program, which spans seven key priority areas, where action is urgently needed:
 - Reinforce a Global Humanitarian Response Plan for COVID-19;
 - 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
 - Trigger Food Systems Transformation.
41. The Program is aimed at preventing a global food emergency during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, while working on medium- to long-term development responses for food security and nutrition.
42. In pursuit of the Sustainable Development Goals, it aims to mitigate the immediate impacts of the pandemic while strengthening the future resilience of food systems and livelihoods.
43. It enables donors to leverage the Organization's convening power, real-time data, early warning systems and technical expertise to direct support where and when it is needed most.
44. The FAO COVID-19 Response and Recovery Program is a truly coherent, joined-up corporate response to your needs, linking all parts of the Organization, harnessing our technical, operational, normative and data capacities to support action at global, regional, and country levels.
45. But we have to look beyond COVID-19 and keep our focus on the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030.
46. We do this through the Hand-in-Hand Initiative.
47. A country-owned and country-led initiative that prioritizes those who are at risk of being left behind, where extreme hunger and poverty are increasing.
48. This includes Small Island Developing States (SIDS), Least Developed Countries (LDCs), Least Developed Land-Locked Countries (LLDCs), as well as those facing severe challenges in confronting the COVID-19 pandemic.
49. It is a new business model for collaboration, which uses a broad spectrum of partnerships and leverages the technical and data capacity of the Organization, to determine where and how actions can be targeted to reach the most vulnerable and have the greatest impact on poverty and hunger.
50. It is bolstered by state-of-the-art tools and technologies:

51. The Hand in Hand Geospatial Platform: A GIS data platform accessible to all, which supports stakeholders with rich, shareable data, while respecting the proper protocols of data confidentiality. The platform also includes a subnational system of donor information developed by FAO and its partners.
52. 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.
53. I am pleased to say that many Members are already engaging with the Initiative, and so far we have started implementing in 15 countries.

Dear friends,

54. This very diverse region contains some of the world's richest and poorest economies and faces varying enduring and new challenges:
55. Alarming water scarcity, persistent hunger but also growing levels of overweight and obesity, increasing gaps between rural and urban areas, as well as deep and enduring pockets of hunger and poverty in many rural areas.
56. To kick start rural transformation, fuel economic growth and help transform the region's food systems, four elements are needed:
 - First, well-designed multi-sectoral policies that create an enabling environment,
 - Second, innovation of processes and agricultural inputs,
 - Third, well targeted public and private investments that are mindful of the need to conserve and protect increasingly fragile natural resources, and
 - And the last, vital agricultural activity.
57. The first three pave the way for the hard work of the millions of family farmers, fisher folk, and pastoralists of the region to bring the aspired results.
58. Before concluding, allow me to pay tribute to someone who is not present at this event today, but has played a key role in leading FAO's work across the region for many years.
59. Mr. Abdessalam Ould Ahmed, the former FAO Regional Representative for the Near East and North Africa, has given outstanding service to the people of this region. He just left last month.
60. All of us who know him have appreciated his knowledge, experience and his dedication to building a region where every woman, man and child has access to sustainable and healthy diets.
61. I wish him all the best in his new Ministerial role in his home country, Mauritania.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

62. In a few weeks, we will celebrate FAO's 75th anniversary.

63. We do so under difficult circumstances, but full of hope with the renewed FAO.
64. And we take pride in the fact that FAO remains the foremost global authority on two fundamental aspects of human civilization: food and agriculture.
65. I always tell the Council, food is a human right.
66. The work we do together, distinguished delegates, is the key for a better tomorrow!
67. Learning from each other, sharing our knowledge and offering our expertise among Members.
68. This new generation of regional conferences contributes to this exchange and dialogue and results in stronger collaboration and true progress.
69. My sincere gratitude to the Sultanate of Oman, once again, for hosting the first of this new generation of regional conferences in the Near East.
70. I thank you all for your spirit of engagement and invite you to continue being part of this great and noble mission!
71. For a world free of hunger and full of happiness!

Thank you.