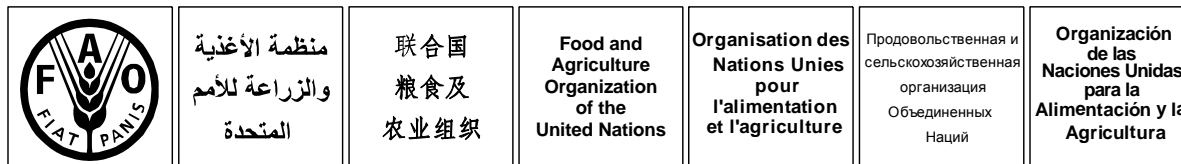


March 2012



FAO Regional Conference for Asia and the Pacific

Thirty-first Session

Hanoi, Viet Nam, 12 – 16 March 2012

STATEMENT BY THE DIRECTOR-GENERAL

*Mr Chairperson of the Conference,
Mr Independent Chairperson of the FAO Council, Luc Guyau,
Honourable Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development Mr Cao Duc Phat,
Chairperson of the Regional Conference,
Distinguished Delegates, Ministers,
Civil society representatives,
Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,*

On behalf of FAO and of all the participants of the Thirty-First FAO Regional Conference for Asia and the Pacific, allow me to express our profound gratitude to the Government and the people of Viet Nam for their hospitality and welcome.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The world has changed significantly since 1945, when FAO was created to contribute to a world free from want but to deliver better on its founders' vision, FAO needs to adapt itself to a changing global environment.

Our Organization must look forward to identify the emerging challenges we face in food security and agriculture, and how we can effectively respond to them. That is why I launched in January 2012 a Strategic Thinking Process. Based on a broad and participative consultation process with staff across the Organization, with inputs from an external Strategy Experts Panel and FAO Member countries, it will help determine the future strategic direction of FAO.

This process will feed into the planned review and development of FAO's main strategy and programming documents, including adjustments to our current Programme of Work and Budget.

The information document "Global trends and future challenges for the work of the Organization" shows where we stand and frames the dialogue on FAO's future strategic direction.

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This Conference represents the start of formal discussion on these topics with the Governing Bodies of FAO. The process will continue until we seek endorsement of the revised Strategic Framework and the new Medium Term Plan at the next Council in June and Conference in 2013.

We are looking for your inputs on the seven global challenges that have been identified in the Strategic Thinking Process, and the definition of FAO priorities in the Asia-Pacific Region. This way, we will ensure that the concerns of the countries are adequately taken into consideration at the global level, and that our global objectives and regional priorities are aligned and enable FAO to effectively respond to the issues we are facing.

Let me elaborate a little more on the global challenges that have been identified.

The first global challenge is to increase the production of agriculture, forestry and fisheries and their contributions to economic growth and development, while ensuring sustainable ecosystem management, adaptation and mitigation of climate change. We need to accelerate the uptake of truly sustainable agricultural systems, building on the many promising examples that already exist. But we need to recognize that it will take time and also will be very costly in some cases.

The second is to eradicate food insecurity, nutrient deficiencies and unsafe food, in a context of high food prices and volatility. I am confident that we can gain ground rapidly in the fight against hunger. Upon taking up office I instructed my staff to put in place an integrated approach to combat hunger, linking emergency with development, scaling up initiatives that are giving results, working closely with partners and acting under local leadership. Our initial focus is the Horn of Africa and the Sahel, but this approach can be replicated in other countries in protracted crisis and with high levels of food insecurity that seek our engagement.

The third global challenge is to rationalize food consumption and nutrition. A vast amount of food is wasted every day, and over-consumption is emerging as a major source of obesity and non-communicable diseases. By promoting healthier diets and reducing loss and waste in the food chain, we can meet demand with less production, thereby contributing to sustainable development.

The fourth challenge is to improve the livelihoods of rural people, including smallholder farmers, herders, foresters, fisher folk and persons working in the food chain, particularly women. Rural poverty remains a major problem in most developing countries and requires both agricultural and non-agricultural solutions to ensure the poor rural population has adequate access to food.

The fifth global challenge is to ensure fairer and more inclusive food and agriculture systems from the local to the international level. In recent years we have seen profound structural transformations in agrarian structures and food systems. In this connection, I want to congratulate all of you for successfully concluding the negotiations on the Voluntary Guidelines for the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries, and Forests in the Context of National Food Security last week in Rome. The Committee on Food Security will now consider the proposal agreed of the Voluntary Guidelines for final approval in May. I want to highlight and welcome the dialogue between governments, civil society and the private sector, which took place in the framework of the CFS and resulted in this groundbreaking result.

The sixth challenge is to increase the resilience of poor families to threats and shocks to agriculture and food security. We need to put in place measures that help prevent or mitigate the impacts of extreme events, including climate change. The example of the Horn of Africa is clear: we cannot prevent droughts, but we can prevent them from leading to famine. This requires a longer-term action, making sustainable development a goal even in our response to emergencies, or else we are condemned to continue jumping from crisis to crisis. Disaster risk management and responding to specific needs of countries and regions, such as the small island developing states, are an important part of this new approach. (Let me take this opportunity to very welcome the presence of islands states of Pacific to FAO's conference.)

The seventh challenge is to strengthen governance mechanisms for food, agriculture, forestry and fisheries systems at all levels. To do so, we must enhance the participation of all stakeholders, especially those that are weaker in terms of social and political representation.

Ladies and gentlemen, at this meeting we are also discussing regional priorities, as presented in the document "Programme of Work and Budget 2012-2013 and areas of priority actions for Asia and the Pacific region for the following biennium 2014-15".

There are specific trends to be considered in this exercise. Economic development is occurring at a rapid pace in the region and many people have moved out of hunger and poverty. However, the region is still home to 62 percent of the world's 925 million undernourished people. Within the region, undernourishment has declined from 20 percent in 1990/92 to 15 percent in 2006/08.

Land degradation also affects productivity in Asia and Pacific, a region that is increasingly threatened by water scarcity. In a number of countries we have come close to the limits for agricultural expansion. High food prices and volatility remain a threat. Retail price of rice, for instance, remain up to 30 percent higher than last year in many countries in Asia.

Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I look forward to your inputs and guidance on how we can best support your national efforts to reduce poverty and hunger and promote sustainable development in Asia. The Organization is renewing itself to give you a more decisive contribution, in a reform process that includes strengthening its decentralized capacities. Since taking up office in January, I have given a great deal of attention to better responding to what countries are asking us to do.

Decentralization means a new focus on improved delivery at the country level. It involves providing more resources to our decentralized offices, but, most importantly, empowering them with greater responsibility. Having served as a Regional Representative between 2006 and 2011, I know how important this is.

We have also concluded that a "one size fits all" approach to determine the staffing of decentralized offices doesn't work, and are trying to identify regional and country-specific requirements. The Regional Conference plays an important role in ensuring that we have the correct mix of expertise in place to respond effectively to the challenges.

At present, the Asia and Pacific Region has only one sub regional office to cover the Pacific Islands: we need to reinforce our presence in this sub-region but we also must find ways of creating a better coverage for the entire region. To accomplish this, I would like to invite the medium income countries within the region to look for innovative ways of expanding their support to neighbouring countries in a kind of "intra-regional South-South Cooperation" with the support of FAO and, perhaps, of higher income countries in the region under triangular arrangements.

Any such changes that might emerge from your deliberations would eventually have to be discussed by the Governing Bodies at the global level and would be conditional on resource availability.

I want to assure you that further decentralization will not come at the expense of weakening the core technical capacity at Headquarters. As I have said many times, our field programme and our normative work go hand-in-hand to make FAO a more effective knowledge institution with its feet on the ground.

Ladies and gentlemen, to face the challenges I have outlined, FAO is committed to working with other partners - governments, regional bodies, international agencies, civil society organizations, non-governmental organizations, the private sector, research institutions and the academia. The challenges we have are far too big for any single actor to face alone.

Before closing, let me touch on one last topic. Many developing countries are increasingly active in South-South Cooperation. They may see a need for training of their national experts so that they can broaden their experience and ability to work in an international context. FAO can provide opportunities for on-the-job training, in the same way as we do through our Associate Professional Officer programme. I will be very glad to discuss this further with interested countries.

To conclude, I wish to thank you and your delegations for participating in this Regional Conference. I also want to reiterate my thanks to the Government and the people of the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam for hosting this Conference. Thank you.