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FAO REGIONAL CONFERENCE FOR ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

Thirty-fifth Session

1-4 September 2020¹

Statement by the Independent Chairperson of the FAO Council

Chairperson,

Honourable Ministers,

Director-General, and

Distinguished Delegates,

1. It is a privilege for me to participate in this 35th Session of the FAO Regional Conference for Asia and the Pacific, and to address this meeting in my role as Independent Chairperson of the FAO Council. This is the first FAO Regional Conference to be held in a virtual format, and I am pleased that Members are able to build on the successful experiences of the virtual meetings of the Council and its Committees held earlier this year. Before sharing some thoughts on the issues that this Regional Conference will focus on, please allow me to convey my appreciation to the Government and people of Bhutan for their offer to host and their engagement in conducting this important meeting, which unfortunately has to be held in a virtual format.

2. The Asia and Pacific region is home to over half of the world's population and covers about 30 percent of the global land mass. This puts significant pressure on its natural resource base in a context where undernourishment, climate change and water scarcity are key challenges. The need to accelerate efforts to ensure food security and nutrition in the region is more relevant than ever. Despite the advancements witnessed in Southern Asia in the past few years, 279 million people in this subregion are still undernourished, according to a recent FAO Report². Without the concerted efforts of FAO and its Members, achieving Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 2, eradicating hunger, by 2030 is a daunting challenge.

3. I take this opportunity to remind you of the importance of this Conference in directing FAO to provide effective and targeted support to countries facing key challenges. Given the enhanced role of the Regional Conferences within the governance stream of the Organization since 2009, Members here have the serious task of reviewing FAO's activities in the region and setting priorities for its future work. I am certain that you will conduct this important work with diligence and enthusiasm.

¹ Rescheduled from 17-20 February 2020, Thimphu, Bhutan.

² Asia and the Pacific Regional Overview of Food Security and Nutrition: Placing Nutrition at the Centre of Social Protection, page 3; <http://www.fao.org/3/ca7062en/ca7062en.pdf>

4. The Covid-19 pandemic and the measures to contain the virus have affected livelihoods, employment, agricultural activities, trade, and more. The novel coronavirus has implications for local, national, regional and global policies and it is important that global and local conditions alike are recognized when confronting this pandemic. Members at this Conference will contribute the essential country and region-specific challenges and priorities regarding how the pandemic has affected, and continues to impact, the livelihoods of the populations in Asia and the Pacific. This is crucial to enable the Organization to steer its response work in the most effective direction.

5. As you are aware, the Council, at its 164th Session, endorsed a reorganization of the FAO headquarters structure to cultivate a more agile, dynamic and fit-for-purpose organization, one that is able to respond quickly and effectively to emerging needs and crises. The new Office of Sustainable Development Goals was welcomed by the recent session of the Council as an important step towards corporate engagement with Agenda 2030 and in assisting Members in the achievement of the goals as well as their follow-up and review. The strengthening of the Organization's Centres will also enable strong collaboration with other UN Agencies and International Financial Institutions, in line with the repositioning of the UN development system and the need to work in partnerships to address complex and multifaceted issues at the country level.

6. Another flagship innovation of FAO's new Director-General, Dr Qu Dongyu, is the Hand-in-Hand Initiative. This is an inclusive and holistic business model, which aims to forge a broad spectrum of partnerships on the one hand; and leverage FAO's technical capacity and data compendium on the other, in order to deliver on food security and development. It will enable all stakeholders to take their respective responsibilities, in a transparent manner, and to work together towards the achievement of FAO's goals, as well as the SDGs and Agenda 2030.

7. This Initiative is a country-led and country-owned approach, and prioritises those countries whose populations are at risk of being left behind. Priority countries include Small Island Developing States (SIDS), Least Developed Countries (LDCs) and Land Locked Least Developed Countries (LLDCs), as well as countries seeking support to manage the impact of Covid-19 through the Initiative. Activities are underway in a number of countries and the Geospatial Platform has been launched, with planned capacity development for Members to access the platform.

8. This Initiative has been welcomed by the Council and its Committees. This week, Members of this Regional Conference will be informed of its key contributions that aim to accelerate progress toward the realization of the SDGs. Through linking different stakeholders, the programme aims to reduce the vulnerabilities of rural poor through improved food system capacities, while utilising FAO's data tools to identify investment gaps.

9. A related topic of debate this week is e-agriculture. I note with enthusiasm the inclusion of the items on Digitalisation in Food and Agriculture, and on leveraging Digital Agriculture for the SDGs, on the Agenda for this Conference. These issues are pertinent in our efforts to ensure food production and trade are capable of sustaining growing populations and meeting the challenges of an ever-changing world. Members will have the opportunity to discuss how digital technologies can, and are, transforming farming and the entire agricultural value chain. I encourage Members to engage in the possibilities of agricultural innovation and to provide guidance to the Organization on policy-level interventions.

10. The Hand-in-Hand Initiative and the drive for innovation in agriculture - in particular the availability of a substantial and meaningful data platform - are two sides of the same coin which FAO must grasp firmly in order to serve its Members effectively in years to come. Hence, it is important that these two concepts must work together, in other words— **hand in hand, so to speak**.

Chairperson,

Honourable Ministers

Director-General and

Distinguished Delegates,

11. As the Organization's current Strategic Framework comes to a close, an important task is ahead of all of us. The 164th Session of the Council looked forward to inputs from the Regional Conferences to refine the roadmap for consultations on this important document. The new Strategic Framework, to be adopted by the Conference at its 42nd session in 2021, will be the blueprint guiding the direction of the Organization into the future, towards and beyond Agenda 2030. The regional priorities identified at this and other Regional Conferences will shape the basis of decision-making on the future Strategic Framework, which will also be informed by recommendations of the Technical Committees and the guidance of the Council and its Committees.

12. Chairperson, it is clear that urgent action is required to address the challenges of rapidly increasing diet-related health concerns, damage to ecosystems and the threat of climate change. In order to achieve the SDGs by 2030, food systems must be addressed. In 2021, the UN Secretary-General will convene a UN Food Systems Summit, which reflects the prominence that the 2030 Agenda affords to improved health, nutrition and ecosystems, and the key role food systems play in the achievement of these goals.

13. The UN Secretary-General and indeed the 163rd Session of the FAO Council in December 2019 recognised the central role of FAO in the Food Systems Summit, and emphasized that Members be fully involved in the preparatory process. In this regard, an informal Group of Friends to the Summit has been established to provide a platform for Members to contribute to the preparations towards the Summit. Members will have the opportunity, under Agenda item 14, to request clarification and provide inputs for this Summit.

14. To conclude, Chairperson, this Regional Conference for Asia and the Pacific has a role to play in helping define FAO policies, in establishing the Programme of Work and Budget for the next biennium, as well as the next Strategic Framework. It also has a unique opportunity to give impetus to the drive begun by the Director-General for innovation at FAO, as well as the Hand-in-Hand Initiative. I wish delegates to this Conference fruitful deliberations, and encourage clear outcomes.

15. Thank you for your attention.