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FAO REGIONAL CONFERENCE FOR ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

Thirty-fifth Session

1-4 September 2020¹

Statement by the Director-General

*Your Excellency, Yeshey Penjor, Minister for Agriculture and Forests,
Honourable Ministers,
Mr Independent Chairperson of the FAO Council,
Distinguished Delegates,
Representatives from Civil Society and the Private Sector,
Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,*

1. Let me start by applauding the Royal Government of Bhutan for the flexibility shown in collaborating with the FAO Secretariat to convene this first virtual Regional Conference in FAO's history amid the ongoing global pandemic. On behalf of FAO and all the participants in this regional conference, I extend my profound gratitude to the Royal Government of Bhutan and the people of Bhutan for hosting this conference.
2. My thoughts and solidarity are with all the victims and the heroes fighting the COVID-19 Pandemic in the region.
3. 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.
4. It is an honor and a pleasure for me to be with you for this Thirty-fifth Session of the FAO Regional Conference for Asia and the Pacific.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

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

5. It has been just slightly more than one year since I started my mandate as Director-General.
6. So, this is my first regional conference and I have been looking forward to it very much.
7. In fact, one of my early priorities as Director-General was to transform the regional conferences from purely formal stand-alone events, into something more dynamic, continuing and seamless.
8. The regional conferences are an integral and essential part of FAO governance.
9. It is my vision to ensure that the regional perspective is well heard; and that the regional conferences enable us to serve your needs more closely and to improve and accelerate our delivery on objectives set out.
10. We want to ensure that the regional conferences become dynamic and efficient platforms for policy setting.
11. Through open dialogue and the active exchange of good practices amongst participating countries, we can better support policy makers across the region in facing common challenges.
12. Most importantly, the regional conference needs to be useful for you.
13. We therefore welcome your advice on how to achieve this, be it in terms of content or format.
14. Of course, this is your conference – the regional Governing Body session – and my colleagues and I will, as always, be listening closely and documenting your guidance to us.
15. In that respect, we are eager to listen to your views on two important policy items:
 - a. Your expectations for the UN Food Systems Summit in 2021; and
 - b. The priorities you want to see included in the new Strategic framework of the Organization that is under preparation.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

16. The changes introduced to the regional conferences are part of a bigger transformative action we undertook that included structural, programmatic and operational adjustments.
17. These adjustments translated my vision of building a dynamic FAO for a better

world, while remaining committed to the original aspirations, mandate and mission.

18. The transformations we have implemented, following approval by the FAO Council, create an inclusive and agile FAO that serves its Members to achieve the “four betters”: better production, better nutrition, a better environment, and a better life.

19. This is done by creating a renewed FAO that is transparent, open, innovative, responsible and effective.

20. We introduced a more modular and flexible Organigramme, to allow for optimal cross-sectoral collaboration.

21. This way we break down silos and we are faster in responding to emerging needs and priorities.

22. A core leadership team consisting of the three Deputy Directors-General, the Chief Economist, Chief Scientist and Director of Cabinet was also established.

23. This core group, which supports me in all areas of the Organization’s mandate, exemplifies the new collaborative approach of FAO.

24. Among the other numerous adjustments and reform efforts, I am pleased to highlight the establishment of a dedicated Office for Small Island Developing States (SIDS), Least Developed Countries (LDCs) and Landlocked Developing Countries (LLDCs), Office for Innovation, Office of climate change, biodiversity and environment, as well as an Office of SDGs.

25. These transformations and adjustments are nearly finalized at headquarters and will soon be applied to all other FAO offices across the world.

26. I am therefore encouraged to see that – as part of these transformations – the Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific has been proactive in reaching out to you in its preparation of this conference.

27. Many of you and your senior officials participated in National Consultations late last year and early this year.

28. I believe that those consultations will add clarity and focus to the proceedings of today and tomorrow – and have already paid dividends in the sessions and discussions of the senior officials’ meeting earlier this week.

29. Another addition is the inclusion and consultation with Private Sector representatives.

30. We are grateful for your participation in the online discussions that were organized by the Regional Office.

31. I also appreciate that Civil Society Organizations continue to add their voices to this Regional Conference.

Excellencies and colleagues,

32. As COVID-19 continues its rampage throughout the world, the poorest and most vulnerable have been hit the hardest.

33. In this region, particularly in densely populated countries of South Asia and SIDS, some with few or no social safety nets, millions are suffering not just the health effects of the virus itself, but also severe socio-economic impacts from lost livelihoods.

34. Even before the pandemic, we were not on track to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – particularly SDGs1 and 2 – which aim to defeat poverty and hunger worldwide.

35. And it is here, in this region, that we find a large proportion of the world's undernourished.

36. The negative effects related to the pandemic have been felt across the entire food system.

37. Measures to control virus outbreaks are disrupting global food supply chains.

38. Border restrictions and lockdowns are destroying livelihoods and hindering food transport.

39. Food loss and waste is increasing, as farmers must resort to dumping perishables, and many people in urban centers are struggling to access fresh food.

40. Smallholder farmers and their families, food workers in all sectors, and those living in commodity- and tourism-dependent economies are particularly vulnerable. They urgently need our attention.

41. Equally urgent is the compounding threat of the pandemic on existing crises such as conflict, natural disasters, climate change, pests and plagues that are already stressing our food systems and triggering food insecurity around the globe.

42. 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.

43. 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.

44. In line with the UN approach to “build back better,” and 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.

45. The Program 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.

46. And we must, as a priority, attend to the most urgent issues at the very source.

47. We need to re-examine our food systems and value chains, make greater use of existing agricultural innovations and technologies, and consider new ones.

48. This Regional Conference will have a special session on innovation tomorrow morning.

49. The innovative technology in agriculture and food system are of special interest for nowadays and the future.

50. This is clearly reflected in our efforts to establish an office of innovation and an International Platform for Digital Food and Agriculture.

51. And the concrete benefits of such innovative approaches are tangible.

52. For instance, in the use of a mobile app called eLocust3 to support the fight against one of the most dangerous migratory pest species in the world, the desert locust.

53. The app is an efficient monitoring and early warning system that has contributed significantly to a decline in the duration, severity and frequency of devastating desert locust plagues in Africa and here in Asia.

54. I am hopeful that as soon as possible, innovation will provide similar tools to

defeat other major threats that we face here in Asia and the Pacific such as the Fall Armyworm and the African Swine Fever.

55. Indeed, leveraging agricultural technologies (including cut-edge technology for agri-food system) and innovations is the wave of the future.

56. And it is a wave that must grow and grow.

57. We need to take full advantage of the digital age through innovative partnerships with national governments, farmers, the private sector, academia, NGOs and many others.

58. That is why we introduced the FAO Hand-in-Hand Initiative.

59. This evidence-based, country-led and country-owned initiative aims to accelerate agricultural transformation and sustainable rural development to eradicate poverty and end hunger and all forms of malnutrition (SDGs 1 and 2).

60. In doing so, it also contributes to attaining all of the Sustainable Development Goals.

61. The initiative prioritizes countries where national capacities and international support are the most limited or where operational challenges, including natural or man-made crises are the greatest.

62. We are bolstering the initiative with state-of-the-art tools:

- a. The Hand in Hand Geospatial Platform: A GIS data platform that supports all 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.
- b. 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, where timeliness is a crucial quality dimension.

63. The point of all these initiatives is to get the latest knowledge and tools into the hands of decision makers but also smallholder farmers, fishers, herders and foresters.

64. And this is the region where a vast majority of smallholders are producing the food and agricultural products that we rely upon.

65. Many of these smallholders are themselves mired in poverty and their families

are food insecure.

66. I know what rural life is like. I was born in a village in Hunan Province of China.

67. Smallholders need to be able to increase their productivity and marketing channels through innovation and technology, which will benefit their livelihoods and their own food security.

68. And that will help all of us meet the challenges of food insecurity and malnutrition.

69. It is with this understanding that FAO is supporting the UN Decade of Family Farming.

70. I am convinced that without improving rural prosperity we cannot defeat global poverty or hunger.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

71. I am an agricultural scientist. It is my passion and has been my life's work.

72. My professional career of some 30 years in China has also allowed me to visit more than 100 countries and so I have seen how things work in different parts of the world.

73. Through the years, and during these travels, I have met with hundreds of high-level officials from governments, captains of industry and scientists.

74. And of course I have met with farmers, and I know the hardships they face.

75. We need to bring all these actors together to make a real change by innovation, reform and action!

76. To realize a fundamental food system transformation – a transformation that will supply nutritious and diversified foods, produced in a sustainable way, to billions of children, women and men, in the Asia-Pacific region and globally.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

77. Your region is huge, vast and various; and you often have different and varying needs.

78. So, there is no one-size-fits-all, no magic bullet or cure-all to hunger and

poverty.

79. But we can learn from each other, share our knowledge and offer our expertise among members.

80. Stronger collaboration supported by more dynamic regional conferences!

81. I believe that this is the path to making greater progress.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen

82. FAO will celebrate its 75th anniversary in a few weeks.

83. We do so under difficult circumstances, but full of hope with new FAO

84. And we take pride in fact that FAO remains the foremost global authority on two fundamental aspects of human civilization: food and agriculture.

85. The work we do together, distinguished delegates, is the key for a better tomorrow!

86. From the bottom of my heart, and full of determination I invite you to continue being part of this great and noble mission!

87. The world counts on this region's vitality, endurance and genius.

88. For a world free of hunger and full of happiness!

Thank you.