H.E. The President of Bolivia,
H.E. Prime Minister of Haiti,
H.E. First Lady of Colombia,
H.E. Vice-Presidents of Ecuador and El Salvador
Honourable, Ministers of Nicaragua,
Honourable Ministers of LARC,
Mr Independent Chairperson of the FAO Council,
Distinguished Delegates,
Representatives from Civil Society, Private Sectors, Parliaments, and Academia,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

1. I am pleased to be with you at this 36th Session of the FAO Regional Conference for Latin America and the Caribbean.

2. Let me start by recognizing the Government of the Republic of Nicaragua for the flexibility shown in collaborating with the FAO Secretariat to convene this first virtual Regional Conference for Latin America and the Caribbean in FAO’s history, amid the ongoing global pandemic. I extend my gratitude to the Government and people of the Republic of Nicaragua for hosting this conference.

3. Latin America and the Caribbean has been affected disproportionally by the COVID-19 Pandemic. My thoughts and solidarity are with all the victims and the heroes fighting the COVID-19 Pandemic in the region.

4. 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 ensure our employees’ safety while they continue delivering under these difficult circumstances.

1 Previously scheduled for 27 to 29 April 2020 in Managua (Nicaragua).
5. I have seen that your countries adopted a slogan in this pandemic: Agriculture will not stop! I pay tribute to the millions of farmers, entrepreneurs, food processors, workers, traders and merchants, who made sure that every single day food was available in every city, town and village from the Rio Bravo to the Patagonia.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

6. Hunger elimination, poverty reduction, or the increase of food production do not happen at our headquarters in Rome.

7. What we can do in Rome, is only useful if it is rooted in your specific conditions and priorities, and if it translates into concrete, practical action and change in the field.

8. That is the fundamental reason why FAO’s Constitution envisages strong regional governance mechanisms, with the regional conferences being an integral and essential part of FAO governance, built on dialogue and the identification of common priorities.

9. The regional perspectives are vital in shaping FAO’s strategic outlook and actions, for they enable us to serve your needs more closely and to improve and accelerate delivery.

10. This is your conference, the Regional Governing Body, and it needs to be useful to you. My colleagues and I will be listening closely to your views and suggestions.

11. We are eager to listen to your views on three important issues:

   • First, the priorities that the region wishes to include in the new FAO Strategic Framework that is under preparation;
   • Second, your expectations for the UN Food Systems Summit will take place in 2021; and
   • Third, your priorities for the transformation of agri-food systems based on your own condition that we need to act on.
   • Stronger political commitment of achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially SDG 2 and SDG 1 in your countries.

Ladies and Gentlemen

12. You will have noted important changes in the process leading to the Regional Conference. They are part of our agenda of transformative action to build a dynamic FAO for a better world, 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.

13. The Council has endorsed this agenda of change that includes structural, programmatic and operational adjustments.

14. We have adopted a modular and flexible Organigram that allows for cross-sectoral collaboration and breaks down silos.

15. We brought together the three Deputy Directors-General, the Chief Economist, the Chief Scientist and the Director of Cabinet, who now form a collective leadership team. This team supports me in all areas of the Organization’s mandate, exemplifying the new collaborative approach of FAO.

16. 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). This is important as 18 of the 33 Members in your region belong to one or more of the groups of countries served by this Office.
We have also established an Office for Innovation and an Office of Climate Change, Biodiversity and Environment, two of the top priorities of countries in this region that will be discussed in this regional conference.

We have also strengthened our investment centre to increase its catalytic effects with the investment Banks and the private sectors globally.

And, we have established an Office of SDGs, to make sure that all our work contributes to Agenda 2030, which is our common framework for sustainable development.

These transformations and adjustments started in headquarters and are now extended to all FAO offices from regional to the country across the world, as we are One FAO regardless of where we are.

I am therefore encouraged to see that the Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean has been proactive in advancing this transformative agenda for a dynamic FAO.

It is encouraging to see how the region is breaking silos and fostering more collaboration with the adoption of a One FAO Programmatic Approach.

I am pleased to see that in preparation for this Regional Conference, important consultations took place with our government partners, with the private sectors, with civil society, with scientists and academics, and with the Parliamentary Fronts against Hunger.

Several thousand persons participated in one way or another in the process leading to this conference, and this is a clear sign of the new FAO that we want: more transparent, more open to dialogue and to working with others, to serve you, the Members, better.

Honorable colleagues,

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

It is primarily a health crisis, but its impact has touched all parts of our lives, most importantly food security and incomes.

Over 34 million jobs have been lost in this region, and the United Nations projects that up to 28 million people could fall into extreme poverty, which means a high likelihood of also suffering severe food insecurity.

The pandemic adds to existing crises such as conflict, natural disasters, climate change, pests and diseases. Communities and households living in poverty are under enormous stress, and this includes half of the rural population of this region.

FAO is at the forefront of addressing the challenges posed by this pandemic. We have recently launched the FAO COVID-19 Comprehensive Response and Recovery Programme, an evidence-based, coordinated and comprehensive initiative, aimed at preventing a global food emergency during and after the pandemic, while strengthening the future resilience and inclusiveness of food systems and livelihoods.

The Programme 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.

To meet the multiple challenges of our time, including but not limited to the COVID-19 pandemic, we need to foster innovation and collaboration, with and among national and subnational governments, the private sector including farmers, scientists, NGOs, and many others.

We also need to promote data, innovation, technology and the complements of governance, human capital and institutions needed to make the transformation inclusive.
33. That is why we introduced the FAO Hand-in-Hand Initiative.
34. This evidence-based, country-led and country-owned initiative aims to accelerate agri-food systems transformation and sustainable rural development to eradicate poverty and end hunger and all forms of malnutrition (SDGs 1 and 2).
35. 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 the best options to reach the most vulnerable and have the greatest impact on poverty and hunger. Of course, to open to others like middle income Members.
36. This initiative is equipped with state-of-the-art tools:
37. The Hand in Hand Geospatial 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.
38. The Data Lab for Statistical Innovation that combines non-conventional data sources, big data, data science and text mining methods to improve the precision and the timelines of decision-making and impact assessment.
39. I am pleased to say that many Members are already engaging with the Initiative. So far, we have started implementing it in 27 countries, of which six are in this region.
40. It is very encouraging to see that in Latin America and the Caribbean, an additional five countries have already adopted the Hand-in-Hand approach to accelerate the achievement of SDG1 and SDG2 in their lagging rural territories.
41. This means that one third of the Members in your region are already working based on the principles and tools of the Hand in Hand approach. This is excellent progress in less than one year since we launched the Initiative.

Dear Colleagues and Friends,

42. Latin America and the Caribbean is responsible for 13 percent of the world’s agriculture production. The agri-food sector contributes 26 percent of total exports and is an engine of economic growth and job creation.
43. The region is not only a pillar of global food security. But it also houses a very large share of the world’s biodiversity, forests, water and productive soils and has pioneered important policies to eradicate poverty and reach zero hunger. The region will be the Biggest Food Basket for the world in the near future. You have everything!
44. However, the region also faces important challenges, which we can only overcome if we work together, with ambition, and pragmatism. I like to say, aim high and do concrete.
45. We can aim to eradicate the poverty that today affects half of the rural population.
46. We can aim to make healthy food available to every person in this region, particularly to the 62 million people that before the pandemic were facing severe food insecurity and to the millions more, who find themselves now in this condition in the midst of this crisis.
47. We can aim to stop another epidemic: the epidemic of obesity that affects the health systems, the economies, and the wellbeing of half of the region’s population.
48. We can aim to promote innovation and digitalization in agriculture and food systems, thereby increasing efficiency and productivity, especially among small and medium family farmers and rural entrepreneurs.
49. We can aim to create new opportunities for rural people by taking advantage of the new demands of urban consumers, such as in the bioeconomy, in agritourism and in the provision of environmental services to cities.

50. We can aim to expand trade and access to markets for farmers and agri-food entrepreneurs, through science-based and fair multilateral rules.

51. We can aim to turn 72,000 kilometers of near coast areas and the vast oceans of this region into a source of sustainable Blue Growth, new engine to transform your agri-food systems while ensuring that marine and coastal ecosystems are preserved for future generations.

52. We can aim to improve food safety, to prevent antimicrobial resistance, and to contain pests and diseases that threaten important crops such as coffee, banana and cocoa, and contain the locust plague in South America.

53. We can aim to make this region’s agriculture more sustainable reducing its environmental footprint and its emissions of greenhouse gases, improving its use of water resources, reducing deforestation, restoring soils and landscapes, and managing risks thereby making agriculture more resilient.

54. We can aim to tap into the knowledge and the agricultural heritage systems of indigenous peoples to conserve this region’s great tropical ecosystems that are so vital for the health of the entire planet.

55. All these require starting a package of concrete actions based on investment, policy, regional development design and business innovation by a holistic, comprehensive, coherent and collective approach.

56. And FAO is your trusted partner, supporting you in all these efforts.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

57. We meet in trying times, but a new opportunity ahead us too.

58. Look at ourselves in the mirror of history and learn from the experience.

59. Three days ago, we celebrated FAO’s 75th anniversary. Like us today, the founders, 19 out of 42 from your region, were also facing very challenging times, when in 1945 they created an Organization dedicated to “promoting the common welfare of its Members”, as stated in FAO’s Constitution.

60. Be inspired by them and be strong. Let us focus on finding ways to contribute farmers, agri-food systems and rural societies for the common welfare of the peoples of Latin America and the Caribbean and beyond.

61. The food heroes from farmers, producers, traders, suppliers and more others that have kept foods on our tables every day, every communities and everywhere, can also be real heroes of building a better world.

62. It is our historic duty to support them and pursue our noble mission together!

Thank you.