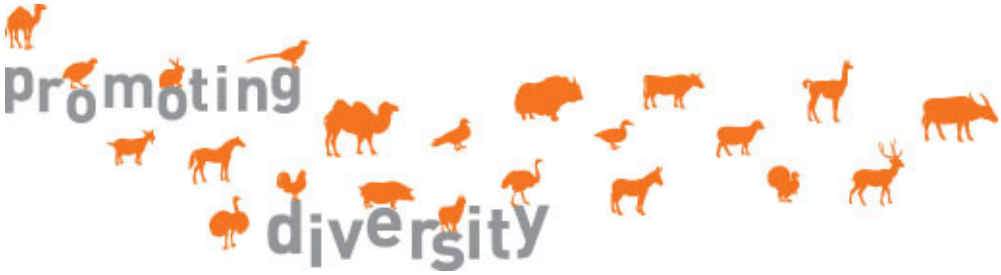

FIRST INTERNATIONAL TECHNICAL CONFERENCE ON ANIMAL GENETIC RESOURCES FOR FOOD AND AGRICULTURE

3-7 September 2007, Interlaken, Switzerland

Opening address by Alexander Müller

Assistant Director-General, Natural Resources Management and Environment Department

Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of the Director-General of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, Mr Jacques Diouf, it is my pleasure to welcome you all to the International Technical Conference on Animal Genetic Resources. This is first ever inter-governmental conference to deal with animal genetic resources, and a milestone in the management of agricultural biodiversity.

The Conference is the fruit of a process launched in 1995 by the FAO Commission on Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture, to provide an internationally agreed framework for the wise management of animal genetic resources. One of the major outputs of that process, which you have before you, is *The State of the World's Animal*

Genetic Resources. This in itself is a major achievement. It is the first ever global assessment of the status and trends of animal genetic resources, and the state of institutional and technological capacity to manage these resources. The need felt by countries on all continents to establish a sound basis for the management of animal genetic resources is shown by the fact that fully 169 countries Country Reports were prepared, and are reflected in *The State of the World's Animal Genetic Resources*.

A crucial task of this Conference is to finalize and adopt the *Global Plan of Action for Animal Genetic Resources*, and to agree how it will be implemented. The draft of the *Global Plan of Action* builds on the findings on the *State of the World's Animal Genetic Resources*. Once adopted, it will provide a framework for action and international co-operation for many years to come, in order to safeguard the valuable animal genetic resources that we have under our care, which we have inherited from the generations before us. We must pay homage to their skills, as Charles Darwin himself did, when he wrote in 1868 of "*that wonderful skill and perseverance shown by the men who have left an enduring monument of their success in the present state of our domesticated animals*".

The need for the wise management of the world's animal genetic resources is of ever greater importance and concern. The options that these resources offer for maintaining and improving animal production will be of enormous significance in the coming decades. Climate change and the emergence of new and virulent livestock diseases highlight the importance of retaining the capacity to adapt our agricultural production systems. In the next forty years, the world's population will rise from 6.2 billion to 9 billion, with all this growth taking place in developing countries. More people will require more meat, milk, eggs and other livestock products. A wide portfolio of animal genetic resources will be crucial in adapting and developing the world's agricultural production systems and increasing the resilience of our food supply.

And yet, animal genetic diversity is under threat. The rate of breed extinctions, as reported in *The State of the World's Animal Genetic Resources*, is alarming. At least one livestock breed a month has become extinct over the past seven years, which means its genetic characteristics have been lost forever. Around 20 percent of the world's breeds of cattle, goats, pigs, horses and poultry are currently at risk of extinction.

In this situation, the world cannot simply take a business-as-usual, wait-and-see attitude. Climate change means that we are entering in a period of unprecedented uncertainty and crisis, which will affect every country. Climate change is a major factor to be added to those that are already driving animal breeds to extinction. To name only a few of these: rapid and poorly regulated economic and social changes; a globalizing economy; increasing specialization around a small number of high-input, high-output production systems; animal diseases and zoonoses and the drastic disease control measures often needed; as well as poverty, socio-economic instability and armed conflict in some of the areas richest in animal genetic resources.

These forces all combine to increase the level of risk and the rate of breed extinction. Urgent action is required to manage this risk and to stem excessive losses. This is best done by improving opportunities, through appropriate policies and technologies, for the better utilisation of animal genetic diversity. Sustainable use is a key component of the *Global Plan of Action* that is before you for negotiation. Just as important, however, are the components dealing with characterization and conservation, in the light of the strong dynamics of the genetic erosion process. The world must safeguard the widest possible range of animal genetic resources, to be able to adapt to rapidly changing economic and bio-physical environments throughout the world. Such changes affect every country, and make international cooperation imperative.

You and your Governments have a unique opportunity and responsibility at this Conference to make effective arrangements for the long-term management of these crucial resources. Your decisions here will set the scene for international efforts to save and sustainably use these resources for the future. The *Global Plan of Action* that you are going to negotiate this week is intended to express the international community's resolve to provide effective stewardship to this important element of humanity's vital heritage.

Although animal genetic resources are important for everyone, they are particularly important for many livelihoods in developing countries, often of the very poorest. Poor livestock keepers have been the stewards of much of our animal genetic diversity. We cannot and should not ignore this, or neglect the needs of livestock keepers. Your

decisions here will set the basis for international efforts to help them use these resources sustainably, both to improve their livelihoods, and to save the genetic resources themselves for the future.

FAO and its Commission on Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture – under whose aegis this conference is being held – will follow up on your decisions, and monitor the success of the actions you decide on, as a major part of its Multi-year Programme of Work, which covers all components of biological diversity of interest to food and agriculture. These include – in addition to animal genetic resources – aquatic, forestry, microbial and invertebrate, and plant genetic resources. Farming systems are complex mixtures of these resources. Animal production, for example, depends on pastures, feeds and fodders, which themselves depend on soil microbes. Recent outbreaks of avian flu and foot-and-mouth disease show the crucial importance of understanding and controlling animal disease genomes.

The Commission's Multi-year Programme of Work therefore promotes cross-sectorial integration to assist countries to face new and emerging challenges for food and agriculture, perhaps most urgently the dislocation of farming systems by accelerating global warming. The international community must find an international consensus on ecologically sound approaches to managing biodiversity for food and agriculture under these difficult conditions, if we are to achieve the ambitious Millennium Development Goals. Your deliberations here will be a major contribution to solving this problem.

In closing, I wish to convey my gratitude and deepest appreciation to the Government of Switzerland and particularly the Federal Office for Agriculture for hosting this Conference and collaborating closely with FAO to make it possible. I would also like to thank the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, and the Governments of Australia, Germany, Ireland, Norway and Spain for their financial support.

I wish you a successful meeting.