

**Opening speech at the International Scientific Symposium on
*Biodiversity and Sustainable Diets: United Against Hunger***

3-5 November 2010

Green Room, FAO headquarters, Rome

Excellencies,

Distinguished participants,

Colleagues,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Welcome to the International Scientific Symposium on Biodiversity and Sustainable Diets: United Against Hunger. As you are aware the theme for this year's World Food Day is "United Against Hunger". This theme underscores the fact that achieving food security is not the responsibility of one single party; it is the responsibility of all of us. The 2010 celebration also marks the 30th World Food Day, a celebration that has been observed around the world over the last three decades. The latest hunger figures show that 925 million people live in chronic hunger. While there is a welcome decline from the 2009 level, the number of hungry people remains unacceptably high. Furthermore, this number does not reflect all the dimensions of malnutrition. Micronutrient deficiencies, for instance, affect an estimated two billion people. Responding properly to the hunger and malnutrition problems require urgent, resolute and concerted actions. It calls for united efforts by all relevant actors and at all levels..

Already, close to two million people around the globe have signed the "Against Hunger" petition, as part of an international advocacy and awareness campaign launched by FAO ("1BillionHungry.org"). It aims at placing pressure on political leaders and mobilizing all parties to take an united action against hunger and malnutrition. As we are aiming to have as many signatures as possible by the 29th of November, when the petition will be presented to

member countries on the occasion of the 140th session of the FAO Council, I am inviting all of you, if you have not yet done so, to sign the petition on the tables placed outside the Room.

Coming back to this year's International Scientific Symposium, the theme for the symposium is "Biodiversity and Sustainable Diets: United Against Hunger", jointly organized by FAO and Bioversity International as a contribution to the 2010 International Year of Biodiversity.

For the first time, the concept of "biodiversity" is linked with the emerging issue of "sustainable diets" in exploring solutions for the problems of malnutrition in its various forms, while addressing the loss of biodiversity and the erosion of indigenous and traditional food cultures. Our purpose is to promote the development of new sustainable food production and consumption models.

There is currently no universally agreed definition of a 'sustainable diet'. However, a definition is needed to develop policy, research and programme activities for the promotion of sustainable food systems that minimize environmental degradation and biodiversity losses. There is growing academic recognition of the complexity of defining sustainability, as well as an increasing body of evidence showing the unsustainable nature of current food systems. A definition of sustainable diets shall therefore address sustainability of the whole food supply chain and thus provide guidance on promoting and applying the concept in different agro-ecological zones.

The alarming pace of food biodiversity loss and ecosystem degradation, and their impact on poverty and health makes a compelling case for re-examining food-agricultural systems and diets.

FAO has been working with member countries, international and regional partners for the past few years to determine the status and trends of plant genetic resources that feed the world. We looked into the key achievements as well as the major gaps and needs that require an urgent attention. This effort has culminated in the publication of *The Second Report on the State of the World's Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture* that was launched by the

Director-General of FAO last week. The Report provides a wealth of information from over 100 countries for improving conservation and sustainable use of plant diversity to meet the key challenges of malnutrition, food insecurity and rapid climate change. It points out that plant diversity can be lost in a short lapse of time in the face of rapid climate change, population pressure and environmental degradation. There is an urgent need to collect, document and better use this diversity including crop wild relatives, not least because they hold the genetic secrets that enable them to resist heat, drought, floods and pests. New and better-adapted crops derived from genetic diversity can offer more nutritious and healthier foods for rural and urban consumers, and provide opportunities to generate income and contribute to sustainable rural development. Now more than ever, there is a greater need to strengthen linkages among institutions dealing with plant diversity and food security, and with other stakeholders, at global, regional, national, and local levels. Far greater efforts are required to counteract the effects of longstanding underinvestment in agriculture, rural development and food security.

The Declaration of the World Summit on Food Security held at FAO in 2009, stressed the urgent need and concrete actions to promote “new investment to increase sustainable agricultural production and productivity, support increased production and productivity of agriculture”, and for the implementation of “...sustainable practices, improved resource use, protection of the environment, conservation of the natural resource base and enhanced use of ecosystem services”. In this Declaration it is also stated that FAO “will actively encourage the consumption of foods, particularly those available locally, that contribute to diversified and balanced diets, as the best means of addressing micronutrient deficiencies and other forms of malnutrition, especially among vulnerable groups”.

Agricultural biodiversity should play a stronger key role in the transition to more sustainable production systems, in increasing production efficiency, and in achieving sustainable intensification. The agriculture sector is responsible for ensuring the production, commercialization and distribution of foods that are nutritionally adequate, safe and environment friendly. Therefore, there is an urgent need to develop and promote strategies for sustainable diets, emphasizing the positive role of biodiversity in human nutrition and poverty

alleviation, mainstreaming biodiversity and nutrition as a common path, promoting nutrition-sensitive development and food-based approaches to solving nutrition problems.

The importance of food-based approaches is fully recognized by FAO. Many developing countries, international agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and donors are beginning to realize that food-based strategies are viable, cost-effective, and provide long-term and sustainable solutions for improving diets and raising levels of nutrition. Narrowing the nutrition gap - the gap between what foods are grown and available and what foods are needed for better nutrition - means increasing the availability, access and actual consumption of a diverse range of foods necessary for a healthy diet. Focusing on the distinctive relationship between agriculture, food and nutrition, FAO works actively to protect, promote and improve established food-based systems as the sustainable solution to ensure food and nutrition security, combat micronutrient deficiencies, improve diets and raise levels of nutrition, and by so doing, to achieve the nutrition-related Millennium Development Goals (MDG).

Globalization, industrial agriculture, rural poverty, population pressures and urbanization have changed food production and consumption in ways that profoundly affect ecosystems and human diets, leading to an overall simplification of diets. High-input industrial agriculture and long-distance transport increase the availability and affordability of refined carbohydrates and fats, leading to an overall simplification of diets and reliance on a limited number of energy-rich foods.

In spite of the increasing acknowledgement of the value of traditional diets, major dietary shifts are currently observed in different parts of the world, representing a breakdown in the traditional food system. This trend has coincided with escalating rates of obesity and associated chronic diseases, further exacerbated by the coexistence of micronutrient deficiencies, owing to the lack of dietary diversity in modern diets. Dietary shifts that have occurred in urban areas are currently extending to rural communities as well, where people have abandoned diets based on locally-grown crop varieties in favour of “westernized” diets.

Your deliberations should, therefore, focus the need for repositioning nutrition security, developing and strengthening food value chains and promoting public/private sector collaborations, with biodiversity and sustainability at its core. The symposium shall also serve to explore ways in which agricultural biodiversity can contribute to improved food security and to feeding the world within a framework of enhancing agricultural efficiency and ensuring sustainability. I do hope that your collective intellectual wisdom will also offer broad perspectives on ways of changing current global thinking on how to feed the world sustainably and achieve food and nutrition security.

I am sure that the outcome of the Symposium will guide FAO and others in their work towards addressing the role of biodiversity for sustainable food production, in light of global changes.

I once again wish to emphasize that in the current context of difficulties and challenges, it is the shared responsibility of all actors to solve the problems of hunger and degraded ecosystems, and I am convinced that united we can reach the goal of sustainable diets, now and for future generations.

I thank you for your kind attention.