

*As delivered*

***Keynote Address by David A. Harcharik, FAO Deputy Director-General  
Water for Food and Ecosystems “Make it Happen”  
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Mr Chairman  
Your Royal Highness  
Distinguished Ministers  
Excellencies  
Ladies and Gentlemen

First, our Director-General, Jacques Diouf, has asked me to extend his apologies and regrets for not being here personally this morning. He had looked forward to participating, but had last-minute scheduling problems in departing from Abuja, and late last night asked me to represent him.

Water, food and ecosystems are three critical aspects of human well-being. They affect livelihoods, sustainable development and political stability. They are intrinsically related and non-substitutable, and they deserve priority attention. Indeed, food production depends on water and the surrounding ecosystems, and water resources depend on ecosystems as well as on their use in agriculture. On behalf of the Director-General, I wish to thank the Government of the Netherlands for convening and hosting this conference and for its generous support to the preparatory meeting in Addis Ababa. We expect this conference to convey a strong message on the constraints of water to food production and ecosystem management that the world is facing, and on the scope for reconciling competing demands.

Clear targets and formidable challenges have been set with the goals of the World Food Summit and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). In particular, Goal One of the MDGs aims to halve, by 2015, the proportion of people suffering from hunger, and Goal Seven which aims to integrate the principles of sustainable development into country policies and programmes and to reverse the loss of natural resources. FAO is firmly committed to work, together with its Member States and partners, towards the attainment of these goals.

The 2004 FAO report on the State of Food Insecurity in the World, shows that more efforts must be made to reduce hunger and food insecurity. The latest estimates indicate that 852 million people worldwide are undernourished and that progress in decreasing this number is lagging. It is estimated that the current level of hunger is costing developing countries at least US\$500 billion per year in foregone economic productivity. The tragic tsunami disaster, that has affected millions of households in South-East Asia, and some in Africa, will further jeopardize the food security and livelihoods of inhabitants in the affected areas, and will require concerted and intensive efforts in the coming years to overcome its devastating effects.

Water plays a key role in addressing the MDGs. It is vital for crop growing, livestock production and human consumption. Some 70 percent of the world's water use is for agriculture. Still, it is an under-utilized resource. Africa is a particularly striking case: it uses only 4 percent of available water reserves for irrigation compared with Asia's 17 percent.

Taking into account domestic and industrial usage, Africa uses 5 percent of its total water resources compared to 20 percent in Asia.

Only 7 percent of arable land is irrigated in Africa, compared with around 38 percent in Asia. In Latin America, home to 30 percent of the world's freshwater resources, 12 percent of the arable land is irrigated.

Output from irrigated agriculture is three times that of rain-fed farming. Yet, agriculture on 93 percent of Africa's arable lands is dependent upon the highly unreliable rainfall; thus, there are serious risks from drought.

Poor water management and the lack of infrastructure are the main structural constraints which account for the lack of productivity and competitiveness of African agriculture. The consequences are tragic for the continent - a continent with a present population of 832 million, which is likely to reach 2 billion by 2060.

Water is also an important factor in the agriculture of small islands in the Pacific, the Caribbean and elsewhere, as discussed just two weeks ago at a ministerial meeting in Mauritius. For instance, freshwater availability per caput in the Caribbean is lower than on any of the continents. Thus, agriculture faces strong competition from industrial and human consumption demands. Under such circumstances it is difficult to advance agricultural development and to be competitive in international trade.

Natural ecosystems are highly productive in themselves. It is essential to preserve this inherent productivity, bearing in mind the pressures on land and water resulting from population growth and changing consumption patterns. It is essential to reconcile these competing claims on our natural resource heritage and to achieve a balance between natural ecosystem functions and agricultural production.

For the poor and hungry, food security is first and foremost a matter of food production. However, it has to be achieved in the framework of viable economic activities that provide employment and income. The ability to engage in, and gain access to, food markets beyond the household is equally essential. These considerations are important when making strategic decisions regarding investments in water for food and ecosystems.

It has become increasingly evident that continued investments in agriculture, in particular in rural-based economies, are crucial for alleviating poverty and generating income. These investments need to be directed to more diversified and higher value-added products, taking into account the limits of local resources. In Africa, more emphasis should be given not only to the need for irrigation systems, but also to the need to improve the stability of rainfed agriculture. Small-scale water collection, irrigation and drainage facilities built in every village will make it possible to rapidly increase the area of irrigated land, at a reasonable cost. In Asia, the strong tradition of landscape moulding and hydraulic control interventions can be diversified by adopting improved aquaculture and by giving more attention to biodiversity issues. Existing large-scale facilities must be rehabilitated, such as the dams and irrigation and drainage systems, and their management must be improved by participatory methods that will give the principal role to the users.

In making these investments it should be borne in mind that they intervene in often complex and unique ecosystems which provide for multiple goods and services, including

biodiversity, tourism, carbon sequestration, as well as agriculture, fisheries, livestock and forestry. In order to be fully effective, such strategic investments must be accompanied by the establishment of well servicing markets where goods and services derived from both agriculture and natural resources can be exchanged.

Stakeholders must participate fully in the formulation and implementation of these strategies. FAO's farmer field school programmes, for instance, are geared towards fostering increases in productivity alongside diversification. Knowledge and learning systems should encompass a package including improved irrigation techniques and management, horticulture, crop production, integrated pest management, aquaculture, livestock, storage, processing and marketing. These elements should be the main components of national agricultural policies and programmes.

In this regard, initiatives such as the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) are very important. The NEPAD provides a regional focus for regional problems, and fosters ownership and collaboration among regional stakeholders and governments for regional solutions. However, the success of such initiatives also largely depends on the ability to generate high quality, coherent investment programmes at local, national and regional scales.

The resources for these investments must come primarily from national budgets. In this regard, it is most encouraging to note the increasing commitment at the highest political level in many countries. For instance, in 2003, in Maputo, the African Heads of State and Government undertook to substantially increase the share of the national budget for agriculture to reach at least 10 percent over the next five years.

This was reaffirmed at the Syrte Summit on Water Agriculture in February 2004. And, at the Maputo Summit in June 2004, the ACP Heads of State and Governments expressed their resolve to accord highest priority to increasing agricultural productivity.

Another example is the commitment of the European Union towards investment in water project and programmes in ACP countries through the €one billion "Water Facility". Clearly, awareness has been raised and policy makers are taking important decisions.

We are confident that this conference will contribute towards identifying and exchanging experience on good practices that can guide sound investments. Furthermore, it will provide policy-makers and practitioners from different fields such as agriculture, water and environment with an opportunity to discuss sustainable and integrated strategies for water for food production and the protection of ecosystems. The conclusions and recommendations ensuing from the conference will be important for the implementation of development plans for water, agriculture and the environment. They will need to be diverse both within and across these sectors, taking into account intra- and cross-sectoral comparative advantages and trade-offs.

In closing, I should like to affirm that FAO is fully committed to continue assisting Member States in the establishment and advancement of water for food and ecosystem development plans and to the implementation of the recommendations resulting from this conference.

On behalf of the Director-General, I thank you for your attention.