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China Agricultural University, Plenary Lecture

"FAO and the Challenges of Food Security"

Professor Qu, Chair of the China Agriculture University Council

Professor Ke, President of the China Agriculture University

Ladies and gentlemen,

Dear students,

It is a great honor to be here, on my first official visit to the People's Republic of China as Director-General of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.

On behalf of FAO, I would like to thank the people of China and the Chinese Agricultural University for welcoming me here today.

I am a visitor to this university, but in some ways, I feel right at home. I have spent more than half of my life in academic settings – first as a student, then as a professor and researcher on rural development.



One of the great challenges we have today is to use academic knowledge to understand and improve the lives of rural populations around the world. To do so, we need to look at the reality outside of university walls.

As you know, China is one of the founding nations of FAO, an organization created in 1945, at the end of the Second World War.

There was hope that, with peace, it would be possible to guarantee food security for all human beings.

At that time, expanding food production in a world devastated by war was the most obvious way to reduce hunger.

So, FAO has dedicated most of its efforts in the last 67 years to improving agricultural production. It has done so with great success.

FAO has contributed to remarkable growth in food output: per capita food availability has risen by 40 percent in this period.

The world now produces enough food to meet the needs of its current population. And, certainly, it will be able to feed the additional two billion or more that we will have by 2050, when the world population is expected to stabilize.

Improvements in agricultural technology clearly are at the heart of the success we have had so far and are key to the future.

In China, FAO has contributed to, and witnessed tremendous achievement in feeding 21 percent of the world's population.

China's grain output has grown steadily for the last nine years. This has contributed significantly not only to national but also international food security.



China has made important progress overall in farming, forestry, animal husbandry and fisheries. When I use the term agriculture, I mean all these areas.

However, globally, the success in expanding food output has not been enough to end hunger.

Around 900 million people in the world continue undernourished. Another 2 billion are affected by other forms of malnutrition, including the health-damaging effects caused by over-consumption of food.

In other words, over half of the world's population suffers from not eating properly.

We now live in a world of plenty where people go hungry, where people go hungry mainly because of a problem of access to food. This is what food insecurity means today in most countries.

So, how do we move forward?

Immediately after I took office in January, FAO started what we call the "Strategic Thinking Process. The idea is to set priorities so that FAO can achieve its main goal - eradicating hunger.

Today, I would like to share more information with you on this process and ask you to think about how academia can enhance the future focus of FAO's work.

In the Strategic Thinking Process, first, we identified the global trends and main challenges that will frame agricultural development over the medium term.



And, second, we are looking at FAO's basic attributes, core functions and comparative advantages to see how FAO can best respond to these trends and challenges.

The first and most urgent challenge is eradicating food insecurity in the face of increasing food prices and high price volatility.

The policies to overcome this challenge need to balance short- and long-term needs and constraints, as well as the interests of poor farmers and poor consumers.

They should also balance imports with local production and, whenever possible, link small-scale farming with social programs that help improve access to food.

The second challenge is to sustainably increase the production and manage natural resources. This becomes even more important in light of climate change.

The third challenge is to improve healthy diets. Meeting this challenge implies changing consumption patterns and habits.

Our fourth challenge is to improve the livelihood of the population living in rural areas, including smallholder farmers, foresters and fisher folk in the context of urbanization and changing agrarian structures.

In addition, specific policies to support small and family farms, cooperatives and farmers' associations must be implemented.

The fifth challenge is to ensure more inclusive food and agriculture systems. This includes integrating small-scale producers into the value chains.



The sixth challenge is to increase the resilience of poor families to agriculture and food security threats and shocks. Instruments to manage risk and safety nets to diminish the impact of these shocks are important.

The seventh challenge is to strengthen food governance systems at national, regional and global levels.

This includes enhancing the participation of all stakeholders, especially those that are weaker in terms of social and/or political representation.

From these eleven global trends and seven global challenges we are deriving five cross-cutting strategic objectives on which FAO proposes to work on.

They are:

First, eradicate hunger, food insecurity and malnutrition.

Second, increase production in agriculture, fisheries and forestry in an economic, social and environmentally sustainable manner.

Third, improve the livelihood of rural populations, in particular women and youth, through enhanced employment opportunities and increased access to production resources.

The fourth is to enable more inclusive and efficient agricultural and food systems at local, national, regional and international levels.

The fifth is to increase the resilience of rural livelihoods to threats and crises.

In all these strategic objectives, it is important to consider the role of poor rural families and small-scale producers.

They already generate most of the world's food; but are among the most vulnerable to food insecurity.



Ladies and gentlemen,

FAO is taking a holistic approach to respond to the food and agriculture challenges the world faces.

And we recognize that neither FAO nor any other development actor can overcome these challenges alone.

FAO's total budget is made up of assessed and voluntary contributions. It totals up about one billion dollars per year, or only about one dollar for every hungry person in the world.

The way to make the best use of this money is by focusing our work on areas where our cooperation can make a difference.

In this scenario, working with partners is essential. That is why one of my priorities has been to strengthen our partnerships and open the doors of FAO to potential allies.

As we are a knowledge institution, academia is one of FAO's most important partners.

In this regard, let me share with you some possible areas of research which we believe are especially relevant. I have chosen three areas for their political importance.

FAO has often said that under-investment in agriculture seriously handicaps the fight against hunger and poverty in the developing world.

Investing is one key way to improve sustainable agriculture and related products and services. But we must choose those investments carefully.



In this regard, let me point out the importance of national implementation of the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the Context of National Food Security.

The guidelines were endorsed by the Committee on World Food Security after intense negotiations involving governments, civil society and the private sector.

They can now assist countries in securing the tenure rights of poor rural families and communities.

Here in China, we have seen how increased tenure rights can benefit the community in different ways: A 2008 reform of tenure in collective forests secured the rights of rural communities that depend on forest land and forest products by giving people ownership of trees.

Just as it worked on the Voluntary Guidelines, the Committee on World Food Security should soon start discussing principles for responsible agricultural investments.

This is important given the debate around “land-grabbing”, which has become a major concern for many developing countries.

I would say that this issue is a kind of revival of the classic debate about small versus large-scale agriculture.

The contribution of the academia clarifying concepts and setting proper standards on this issue is particularly relevant to help find the minimum consensus needed.

A second important area of investigation is the agribusiness and value chains.



There is a growing concentration in the agricultural and food chain, and this has an impact on small-scale farmers. Therefore, how to integrate them into value chains is one of today's most important challenges.

Improving local circuits and local markets can help reduce food loss and waste and ensure healthier diets, based on fresh foods, and sustainability in food production and consumption.

Rural labor markets constitute a third important area for investigation. Worldwide, they usually present high levels of informality and gender- and age-based inequalities.

Rural working conditions are often poor, labor legislation poorly enforced and access to social protection limited.

In China, rapid industrialization and urbanization have posed challenges.

China's development agenda is responding to these challenges. Government policies have placed a priority on sustainable rural and urban development, and increasing agricultural and alternative livelihoods in rural areas.

As Premier Wen has noted, the income gap between urban and rural areas in China began to show signs of narrowing in 2010.

Professors, students, ladies and gentlemen,

I have talked about many issues today. But they all translate into one thing: improving lives.

The academic world has an important contribution to make, by reflecting upon the pending tasks that we have as regards the social, environmental, political and economic challenges that rural populations face and taking action to transform them.



In the years to come, feeding the world in a sustainable way will mean finding ways to produce more food, more efficiently, while minimizing the impact on natural and financial resources.

We will depend on each new generation of scholars and researchers – and each one of you here today - to help lead the technological innovation and exchange of ideas that will be necessary to do this.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Just yesterday, I presented His Excellency Wen Jiabao, Premier of the State Council, the Agricola Medal, with FAO's highest honor. This is a recognition of his efforts to support agricultural and social development.

The medal includes a quote from Premier Wen, which reads: “One who knows not Chinese farmers knows not China.

Perhaps this could be said of farmers everywhere in the world.

Thank you very much for your attention.