

(22 March 2012)



STATEMENT OF THE DIRECTOR GENERAL OF FAO

Distinguished Delegates, Honourable Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour to open this World Water Day 2012 event. FAO is organizing this year's campaign on behalf of the 27 UN Agencies and programmes that are part of the "UN-Water" initiative. I want to thank you all for your presence.

This year's World Water Day theme, *Water and Food Security*, is central to FAO's mandate. As FAO recently documented in *The state of the world's land and water resources for food and agriculture*, our planet's natural resources are becoming increasingly scarce and their capacity to deliver social, economic and environmental services is becoming severely degraded. As usual, scarcity of water has a greater impact on the poor population around the world. Water is also increasingly a source of tension between countries.

So, food security and water pose many challenges. I would like to point out some of them.

The first challenge is that demand for food is rising and changing. Between two thousand and five thousand litres of water are necessary to produce the food consumed daily by one person. If we maintain current trends, agricultural output will have to increase by sixty percent by Twenty-Fifty. Moreover, diets are changing. Meat consumption is expected to rise from thirty-seven to fifty kilograms per person per year between 2000 and Twenty-Fifty. And while it takes about fifteen hundred litres to produce one kilogram of cereals; it takes ten times that amount to produce one kilogram of meat.

The second challenge is the increasing competition for water. Due to population growth and economic development, cities and industries will demand more water. By Twenty-Twenty-five, two-thirds of the world's population could be living in water stressed areas. Even *within* the agriculture sector, competition for water resources is already intensifying and we see this playing out in the debate over biofuels. But there are also important implications for regional and global stability. As water scarcity takes grip, the impacts spread beyond borders, transmitted through shared watercourses, lakes and aquifers. As we know from our support to such institutions as the Nile Basin Initiative, accurate

information on the current and projected water use by agriculture is fundamental for any negotiation over shared water resources and the governance of national and international water systems.

The third challenge is land and water degradation, that put productive systems at risk.

Growth in agriculture will have to come mainly from the intensification of production, particularly from irrigated areas. However, a quarter of the world's cultivated lands are already degraded. Many large rivers run dry during part of the year. Large lakes and inland seas have shrunk, and half of the wetlands of Europe and North America no longer exist.

Then there is our fourth challenge, climate change, with its impacts on agriculture, livestock, aquaculture and forests. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, with temperature changes of up to 2 degrees Celsius, high latitude areas may see an increase in their agricultural potential, whereas those near the Equator will experience a worsening of their production conditions with more frequent and extreme climatic events such as severe droughts, excessive rainfall and floods, putting populations and production at risk, especially those that live in fragile environments. Any increase above that limit will affect population and production all around the globe.

Ladies and gentlemen, twenty years ago, the first Rio Earth Summit highlighted the vital importance of sound water management in building a sustainable, food-secure future for the planet. While many countries have made great strides in improving their management of water resources, much more needs to be done.

Food and water remain critical issues for the Rio+20 Summit in June 2012. We must look at them together: agriculture holds the key to sustainable water use, because it uses more than 70 percent of the world's freshwater resources.

There are many ways to move forward. We need creative solutions, involving governments, civil society, the private sector and the academic, scientific and research communities, in which sustainability is the common denominator.

One thing is certain: the traditional business as usual approach will not work. We need behaviour changes, to be practical and respond to the needs of rural communities around the globe. Technically-sound solutions must be adapted to the specific natural, economic, social and cultural environments where they are deployed, to be accepted and become part of improved water governance.

Supporting small-scale farmers and rural communities is a key aspect to sustainability. They depend on natural resources to live, but usually have access only to degraded resources or lack the know-how to explore them

sustainably. By assisting them, in many cases we can reduce the environmental impact of their activities.

We must meet the agricultural demand in a way that conserves water and other natural resources. From the sustainable intensification of agriculture and using water more intelligently to produce food, to changing the way we eat, reducing losses and waste and promoting healthier diets.

This is part of the change of behaviour I mentioned, and which goes beyond the agriculture sector: responsible use of water requires changes in the present standard of production and consumption as a whole, including in industry.

We also need to build resilience against climate change, through a set of climate-smart investments that include water storage for multipurpose uses including irrigation, livestock, domestic and other uses.

These proposals require investments in people, infrastructure, education and awareness building, as well as finding incentives for small farmers to adopt best practices and strengthening their capacity to improve their productivity to do so.

Ladies and gentlemen, it is my firm belief that through our collective wisdom we can find sensible solutions, but again I stress that the challenges in agricultural water management have to be solved first to give other essential uses of water room for manoeuvre.

Thank you.