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FAO REGIONAL CONFERENCE FOR THE NEAR EAST

Thirty-fourth Session

Rome, Italy, 7-11 May 2018

Statement by the Chairperson of the 34th Session of the Regional Conference for the Near East

Your Excellency Mr Independent Chairperson of the Council,

Your Excellency Mr Director-General of FAO,

Your Excellencies Ministers,

Your Excellencies Ambassadors,

Honourable Delegates,

Distinguished Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

1. It is an honour and a pleasure for me to welcome you today at the 34th Session of the Regional Conference for the Near East and North Africa (NENA) and to thank you and your honourable delegates for your participation.
2. Our region continues to be a hot spot in terms of food insecurity, water scarcity and climate change.
3. For the fourth year in a row, the prevalence of undernourishment has increased in the region reaching 8.8 percent, particularly because of the impact of the conflicts.
4. Malnutrition and overweight continue also to be major challenges in the region, as 18.9 percent of the region's children under 5 years of age, on average, are stunted and 7.8 percent suffer from wasting. 8.8 percent of all children under 5 years of age in the NENA region are overweight according to latest data available.
5. The worsening of conflicts and crises in the region has fuelled large movements of refugees and displaced, and displacements in countries under conflict as in Iraq, Libya, Syria and Yemen, in addition to Palestine notwithstanding the different nature of conflicts.

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6. Moreover, neighbouring countries such as Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, have been paying a huge price. Not only through the burden of hosting millions of refugees and displaced, but also because of the negative impact of the crisis on regional trade, investors' confidence and economic growth as a whole, and especially on achieving sustainable development.

7. My own country Lebanon is still hosting more than one and a half million displaced, and has lost an estimated USD 18 billion of its Gross Domestic Product over the period from 2011 to 2017, as a result of this crisis, let alone the implications on the economic, service and trade sectors, the increase of poverty, and the high unemployment rate.

8. Let me thank here the FAO Director-General, Mr Graziano da Silva, and the whole FAO staff in the regional, subregional and country offices for the support they have been providing to the areas affected by conflicts, specifically Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, Sudan, Syria and Yemen.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

9. In my capacity as the Chairperson of the 34th Session, I would like to provide you with highlights on the progress made concerning the implementation of our recommendations at the 33rd Session of the Regional Conference for the Near East held in Rome, in May 2016.

10. Let me first commend the quality of collaboration between FAO and the member countries in the region and thank the FAO Director-General Mr Graziano DaSilva once again for the effort he exerted in support of the regional collaboration in the Near East and North Africa.

11. I will not go through the details of the implementation of the recommendations provided for in the conference document NERC/18/INF/5.

12. As you can see in the report, many recommendations have been implemented in the areas of livestock development, support to animal health and plant production and protection, development of fisheries, forestry and range lands and South-South cooperation.

13. I will highlight a few achievements that are important for our conference and our discussions, focusing essentially on three regional initiatives that we have agreed as priorities for our region: the regional initiative on Capacity Building in order to achieve Food Security and Nutrition, Water Scarcity and Small-Scale family farming.

14. I would like to emphasize the continuous support FAO has provided to our countries in the formulation of agriculture, food security and nutrition strategies and investment plans, in the context of the food security initiative.

15. With reference to that, support has been provided, to the Sudan for the formulation of the Agriculture Investment Plan, to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) for the formulation of the food diversification strategy, to Egypt for the Agriculture Investment forum and to Palestine for the formulation of the Agricultural strategy.

16. At regional level, FAO took the leadership in convening the first joint UN Regional Nutrition Symposium in collaboration with the World Health Organization, the World Food Programme, the United Nations Economic and Social Council for Western Asia, the UN Children's Fund, the Committee on World Food Security (CFS), the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Movement and the International Food Policy Research Institute.

17. The meeting was generously hosted by the Sultanate of Oman, in Muscat, in December 2017, and attended by most of our countries.

18. The participants to the Symposium identified major nutritional priorities and recommendations for their respective countries and what role the UN agencies could play in supporting delivery against those priorities.

19. The UN and their partners committed to work together at country and regional levels to deliver a comprehensive nutrition agenda that fully integrates the health and the agriculture-nutrition sensitive dimension.
20. This is obviously addressing important issues in our region: the issue of malnutrition and the issue of obesity with their many health implications.
21. I call on FAO but also on our countries to ensure that this framework is effectively implemented and also ensure that UN agencies and other partners work in unison at country level to address the nutrition problems in the context of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 2.
22. I would like to also mention the ongoing promising field projects on “Food Loss and Waste Reduction and Value Chain Development for Food Security” in Egypt and Tunisia, that was also implemented in Lebanon.
23. These are important experiences that can provide solutions for improving food security and nutrition and I call on FAO support with the aim to scale up these projects and to implement them widely in the region.
24. Although in the context of the regional initiative on food security, I wish to commend the personal engagement of the FAO Director-General in convening the first international conference on Red Palm Weevil, which represent a major threat to this symbolic tree and for the establishment of a trust fund to combat the pest.
25. I join Mr Graziano Da Silva in thanking the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia for its contribution.

Excellencies, Honourable Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

26. Water scarcity and climate change are fundamental challenges for food security and for sustainable development in our region.
27. We have collectively made this area as the first priority area of collaboration with FAO.
28. Let me recognize the important advocacy work done over the recent years by FAO and the broad regional and international partnership that it has built to promote regional dialogue and support capacity building.
29. The ministerial dialogue convened last year by the Director-General and attended by most of us was also an important moment in promoting experiences sharing and enhancing regional cooperation in this important area.

Let me also mention the important work made by the organization in mobilizing resources in support of water resources management and irrigation in the region, including in Egypt, Iraq, Islamic Republic of Iran, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia, and Yemen.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

30. The small-scale family farming is particularly important in our region.
31. In the context of the small-scale family farming regional initiative adopted at the 32nd Session of the Regional Conference for the Near East (NERC), FAO has implemented several interventions over the last two years in response to our recommendations.
32. Support provided by FAO to small-scale agricultural producers and producers’ organizations, includes capacity building for producers’ organizations, as well as interventions aimed at value chains development and food losses and waste reduction in Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, the Sudan, Tunisia and Yemen,

33. Let me mention here some innovative projects being implemented in the context of the regional initiative from which the whole region can learn.

34. I wish to mention in particular the Pilot Phase of the Farmers Registry project in Lebanon, which has been completed in a few villages, and we hope the efforts can be pursued to cover the whole country.

35. The establishment of a farmers' registry with a certified list of farmers, based on a legal definition defined will be an important tool for defining policies for agricultural development and provision of agricultural services and a sound basis for social assistance programmes.

36. I wish also to mention the ongoing multidonor project "*Reform and Development of Markets, Value Chains and Producers' Organizations*" in Palestine to help improve incomes and the welfare of Palestinian agribusinesses through integration of production, productivity, quality and provide added value to agribusiness.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

37. One of the main recommendations of the NERC-33 was to strengthen resources mobilization to support the FAO cooperation programme in the region.

38. I am happy to report that the volume of extrabudgetary resources mobilized for the region over the last two years has exceeded USD 290 million, almost 85 percent more than the previous biennium (USD 158 million).

39. This a significant improvement and I call on FAO management at headquarters, at the regional and country offices to further strengthen the resource mobilization efforts to meet the enormous needs of the region, in particular in countries affected by crises.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

40. Our conference will discuss very important topics, throughout the next two days, including the topics on Agricultural Transformation and Employment, Agroecology and climate change, transboundary pests and animal diseases.

41. I am confident our conference will give constructive guidance to the FAO management on these fundamental matters.

42. Looking ahead, we need to frame our cooperation in the context of the SDGs, being the universal reference for international cooperation.

43. We count on FAO to provide the needed support to our countries for the implementation and monitoring of the SDGs, in particular SDG2 on ending hunger and malnutrition, achieving improved nutrition and promoting sustainable agricultural development.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

44. Unfortunately, this is the last regional conference under the mandate of our Director-General, Mr Graziano Da Silva.

45. On my behalf and on behalf of all of you, I want to pay tribute to his efforts to build a strong FAO, more agile and closer to its Members.

46. I also wish to pay tribute to his efforts to promote and strengthen regional cooperation in our region, and I look forward to the continuity and sustainability of such cooperation.

Thank you