High Excellency Mr. John Mutorwa, Minister for Agriculture, Water and Forestry of Namibia; Mr. Petteri Taalas, Secretary-General of the World Meteorological Organization (WMO); Mr. Gilbert Houngbo, President of the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD); Ambassador Mr. Johannes Hoogeven, Permanent Representative of the Netherlands to FAO; Mr. Seyed Shariatmadar, Advisor of the Minister for Agriculture of Iran;

It is a pleasure to address you at the opening of this International Seminar.

Let me start by offering my condolences to the people of Portugal due to the horrible forest fires that have killed more than 60 people. Heat waves in southern Europe are presenting increasing challenges.

I thank the Governments of Iran and the Netherlands for co-organizing this timely meeting together with FAO.

Droughts have become more and more frequent. Since the 1970s, the land area in the world affected by situations of drought has doubled. And this tendency will probably continue and even intensify due to climate change. The impacts of a drought can be devastating.

What happened in Somalia just six years ago, in 2011, is still fresh in our memories. Soil and pastures were depleted. Animals were dead. Local food production was ruined. Markets were disrupted.

When famine was declared in Somalia, more than 250,000 (two hundred and fifty thousand) people had already died. But when people die in a context of drought, it is not just because they are suffering from a harmful climatic event.

People die because they are not prepared to face the impacts of the drought. Because their livelihoods are not resilient enough. It is a structural problem that combines economic, socio and environmental vulnerabilities.

Most of the time, poor rural communities of developing countries don’t even know that a drought is about to strike. They are not informed. They have no knowledge.

So, building the resilience of farmers is fundamental to face drought situations and to maintain local food production. We cannot stop a drought from happening. But we can avoid a drought from becoming famine.

And the impacts of a drought can go much beyond human costs. They can generate social instability, and also perpetuate a cycle of poverty and aid dependency that may endure for decades.

Ladies and gentlemen, For years, the focus has been responding to droughts when they happen, rushing to provide emergency assistance and to keep people alive.
This is important, of course.

But it is essential to invest in preparedness and in anticipating action by providing farmers and rural communities with knowledge and tools. This concept is at the heart of FAO’s work to increase the resilience of livelihoods to threats and crises.

We have worked with partners to develop early warning systems, such as the FAO Global Information and Early Warning System on Food and Agriculture (GIEWS). Today, FAO and the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) will sign a Memorandum of Understanding to better support countries and rural communities to face natural hazards. FAO also assists farmers in choosing crops and livestock that are better adapted to dry regions.

We also help to increase the efficient use of rainfall by building water reservoirs that can store rainfalls for a longer period. This simple and cost-effective action can generate great impact.

Let me give the example of Brazil. In 2003, the Brazilian Government started a programme to build 1 million cisterns in the northeast region of the country. The installation costs of each small cistern are less than USD 1,000, and it allows a family of five people to have access to water during 8 months of drought. This has changed the lives of many poor people.

And when rural communities are hit by drought, it is absolutely fundamental to ensure they have conditions to continue producing food locally. This includes cash transfers mechanisms, the distribution of quality and appropriate seeds, fertilizers, as well livestock treatment and vaccination.

People need to have the capacity to live on their own, even under the most extreme situations. Protecting local food production and improving rural livelihoods should be at the centre of any drought management strategy.

Many developing countries have difficulties to implement programmes in this regard. But there is international funding available for this purpose, such as the Green Climate Fund.

FAO has recently created a new department on climate, biodiversity, land and water. We want to be in a better position to support countries in the formulation of projects to be presented to the Green Climate Fund.

Ladies and gentlemen, Just last week, the Executive Board of the World Food Programme discussed famine during a High Level Event.

Four points emerged as a consensus on dealing with famine or the possibility of famine.

Let me mention them:

The first one is that saving livelihoods mean saving lives. This is what building resilience is about.

Second, timely funding is essential, those who are hungry cannot wait.

Third, humanitarian and development actors must have access to affected and at-risk populations.

And fourth, peace is fundamental to achieve lasting food security for all.

Ladies and gentlemen, This meeting today will help all of us to discuss, develop and implement integrated approaches that include drought preparedness and drought management.
There is no shortage of knowledge, technologies and good practices for addressing drought.

Improving resilience of poor rural people is key to achieving many of the Sustainable Development Goals, especially SDGs number 1 and 2 on eradicating extreme poverty and hunger.

And the 2030 Agenda clearly sets out that collective action is critical. We have to work together to face the huge challenges ahead. I wish you all a very productive meeting, and I look forward to seeing the results of your deliberations. Thank you very much for your attention.