Statement on Rio +20
From Bioversity, FAO, IFAD and WFP

No sustainable development without eradication of hunger and extreme poverty

We stand at a crossroads: it lies within our reach to eliminate hunger and poverty, using methods that do not compromise the future of life on this planet. That is the essence of sustainability. It will require not just universal acceptance of the right of every person to be free from hunger, but also profound changes in the way we produce and consume food and manage the earth's resources.

Rio+20 gives us a golden opportunity to bring together the agendas of food security and sustainable development to build the future we want. Increasingly, we know how to eliminate hunger and poverty in ways that also promote sound management of natural resources, encourage social inclusion and drive economic growth.

There are 1.3 billion people living in extreme poverty, and close to 900 million chronically undernourished. An additional 1 billion suffer from “hidden hunger”, a lack of vitamins and minerals. Undernourishment in children prevents them from ever reaching their full physical and cognitive potential, costing lives, livelihoods and economic growth. We must all understand that the Rio vision of sustainable development cannot be achieved as long as hunger and extreme poverty persist.

We can and we must help poor people worldwide access the food they need, and we must support their efforts to escape the poverty trap for good. But the world's ecosystems and biodiversity are already under extreme pressure from overexploitation, degradation and the effects of climate change. We now face the challenge of raising global food production by 60 per cent by 2050 while managing the natural resource base so that we are not robbing future generations.

It can be done. We can reach our goal of eliminating hunger while promoting sustainable food production. We know what the right tools and policies are. What we need most are the governance systems and institutions that promote accountability and ensure that the right tools and policies are scaled up and applied.

Rio+20 must demonstrate the political will to improve governance, reform policy and, above all, take action. All our efforts toward "sustainable development" will be in vain if we cannot feed humanity and also safeguard the resources upon which life depends.

This is a shared challenge, involving actions that must be undertaken by government, the private sector and civil society, and producers and consumers of food. It is everyone’s responsibility. We must unlock the power of partnerships, working across sectors and tearing down barriers that have sometimes made development efforts uncoordinated and inefficient. The principles of inclusiveness, equity, gender equality and a rights-based approach must be upheld both in the
consultative process and the actions undertaken. We can also build upon existing institutions such as the inclusive Committee on World Food Security (CFS).

We must recognize that individuals and the private sector make the bulk of investments in our food systems. The people who work the world's 500 million small farms are the backbone of many rural economies, and are the largest investors in agriculture in the developing world. They are also custodians of a large part of the world's natural resources and biodiversity. They have enormous potential as entrepreneurs, but all too often lack the resources they need to thrive, feed their families and contribute to the food and nutrition security of others.

Women are drivers of change. The majority of small farmers are women. Giving them the same access as men to assets, services and other resources could make a powerful contribution to poverty reduction and food security. Let us not waste this potential, nor exclude their voices.

We must scale up safety nets and build resilient livelihoods and landscapes. To ensure access to adequate and nutritious food at all times, the poorest and most vulnerable people in both rural and urban areas need to be supported through research, education, assistance, and social protection programmes, or safety nets. Disaster risk management and resilience-building need to be adopted by food-insecure countries and communities exposed to increasing land degradation and resource scarcity, changing rainfall patterns and extreme weather events, as well as market downturns, food price spikes and other shocks.

Responsible tenure systems* are needed to secure access rights to land, fisheries and forests for poor people. Agricultural methods and technologies that work with and not against nature can help them produce more, and more sustainably. Promotion of crop diversification can ensure that agriculture produces a variety of foods suitable for health and nutrition, and also provide the necessary resilience to cope with climate change.

Action also must be taken to deal with the fact that one third of food produced globally is wasted or lost to spoilage, damage and other causes. Making the most of what we already produce and harvest would reduce the increase in production required to feed a growing population, raise the incomes and food security of poor farmers, and also minimize the impact of food production on global ecosystems.

The future we want is within our grasp. Together, the Rome-based food and agriculture agencies commit to working with international organizations, governments, research institutions, civil society and non-governmental organizations, cooperatives, small farmers’ organizations, communities and the private sector, at all levels. We must all rise together to meet this challenge.

Let us seize this historic opportunity. Let us dedicate ourselves to transforming our current unsustainable food production and consumption systems, so as to ensure access to sufficient nutritious food for all people. We must act now.

* The Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the Context of National Food Security, recently endorsed by the CFS, outline principles and practices that governments can refer to when making laws and administering land, fisheries and forests rights.