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**Secretary of Agriculture, Nature Management and Fisheries of the Netherlands,
Opening Address
FAO/Netherlands Conference on the Multifunctional Conference on
Agriculture and Land**

Excellencies

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me first of all welcome you to the beautiful city of Maastricht to attend the conference *CULTIVATING OUR FUTURES. THE FAO/NETHERLANDS CONFERENCE ON THE MULTIFUNCTIONAL CHARACTER OF AGRICULTURE AND LAND.*

We are all gathered here to discuss the important Agenda 21 themes of sustainable agriculture and land-use and food security.

Not only by reviewing the progress made since Agenda 21 was agreed in 1992.

But also and more important to try to discover new ways to get nearer to the ultimate goals of sustainable agriculture and land-use and food security for all.

With a new millenium ahead we must start here in Maastricht to cultivate our futures, as the title of the conference says.

As most of you are aware, cultivating the land is a typical agricultural activity by which the land is made ready to produce food and other amenities as non-food products, biodiversity, landscape and so forth.

By creating the circumstances that people all over the world are able to cultivate the land in a sustainable manner, we are at the same time shaping the futures of our children and grandchildren.

Futures in plural taking into consideration the different circumstances everywhere in the world.
Those futures must have at least in common sustainability and food security.

In that way we can take up the challenges put to us by a number of developments that are transforming agriculture and rural economics throughout the world.

I recall the continued growth of the world population, the growing needs for food and quality of life, the use of new technologies like biotechnology and the globalisation of the world economy.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As you all know the context of this conference is the preparation of the eighth session of the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) in April 2000.

On the agenda of that meeting are the chapters 10 (Integrated landmanagement) and 14 (sustainable agriculture and rural development) of Agenda 21.

Agenda 21 included the premise that the earth's resources are finite and have to be managed and used in such a way that future generations will still be able to use them.

In that sense the abovementioned topics of Agenda 21 cover an essential part of sustainable development in the world.

Sustainable development encompasses a combination of economic development, social development and conservation of nature and the environment.

Land use and sustainable agriculture are themes that offer excellent opportunities for an integrated policy approach to make an important contribution to sustainable development.

Thus far, with the agreement on Agenda 21 during the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 and the World Food Summit Plan of Action goals and targets in these fields have been set.

Moreover, in our days about 800 million people do not have enough to eat.

Even more people suffer from malnutrition.

At the World Food Summit in 1996 we agreed to halve the number of people who do not have enough to eat in the year 2015.

Again, to reach the common goal of food for all is a tremendous task for the world community.

Sustainable agriculture and land-use are important instruments to reach this goal.

In my view the main challenge of this conference is to identify policy options and practical ways as well as the enabling environments in order to make progress in reaching the mentioned goals and targets.

We should seek innovative ways and appropriate institutional frameworks to integrate public, private and co-operative initiatives, taking into account the different local and regional conditions.

This will not be an easy task because the reality in agricultural pattern and land-use systems and their relations with other economic sectors and with society are diverse and complex.

Just read the Stock-taking Paper and you will be surprised by the diversity and complexity of the relations between the different functions in the presented cases.

How to come to grips with these complexities in order to develop the policy options and practical ways to reach the agreed goals and targets?

More and more it is understood, that agriculture has more functions than producing food and fibre.

Other important functions are:

fostering food security in terms of availability, access and nutritional content of food at household, national and international level; fostering of rural development and viability of rural economy, including issues related to social development, equity and gender; fostering the environment and natural resources management.

By analyzing these functions of agriculture and land-use one can better understand the different contributions of all these functions in reaching sustainable agriculture and land-use.

So, the concept of the multifunctional character of agriculture and land that recognizes the different circumstances in for example resources potential and institutional development offers in my view the needed analytical framework.

Description and analysis of the multiple functions of agriculture and land-use everywhere can answer the question how these multiple functions can contribute to the implementation of the already agreed goals and targets in the framework of Agenda 21 and the World Food Summit.

The concept takes into account the always varying character of agriculture and land through time and space.

In the beginning of my speech I was referring to the importance of an integrated policy approach in the field of sustainable development.

Well, the concept of sustainable agriculture and land pre-eminently offers an opportunity for an integrated policy approach.

The outcome of the analysis of the multiple functions of agriculture and land-use will differ on country, regional and community level.

Even in a small country as the Netherlands there are regional differences which we have to take in consideration when formulating our policies.

You will get an impression of these differences when travelling to the excursion-sites on the informal field day next Wednesday.

For our rural areas we are developing policies in which economic, social, cultural, environmental and spatial aspects are integrated with the renewal of our rural areas as a focal point.

An important characteristic in the process of formulating the policy is the involvement of all stakeholders in the region.

In the framework of that approach framers are encouraged to apply innovative ideas for integrating agricultural and environmental objectives in their farming practices.

The use of the phrase multifunctional character of agriculture and land in the subtitle of the conference has given rise to misunderstanding.

That was not the intention of the organizers of the conference.

We all know that the new round of negotiations on world trade liberalisation will start this year.

For that discussion we have the framework of the WTO.

Let us not mix both international fora.

Let us distinct our discussion on sustainable agriculture and land from discussions in the WTO.

We are preparing the 8th session of the Commission on Sustainable Development.

The multifunctional character of agriculture and land is agreed language of the World Food Summit. If the terminology in the subtitle of the conference gives so much uneasiness I would like to say: let us forget those words.

We will not reach our goals of sustainable agriculture and food security when dogmatically discussing the understanding of the phraseology in the subtitle.

Moreover, people who do not have enough to eat and suffer from malnutrition will not gain anything by a dogmatic discussion on the multifunctional character of agriculture and land.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let us start our work.

We are here to further the progress in implementation of programmes and actions formulated in Agenda 21 and the World Food Summit Plan of Action.

We should learn from successes and failures in the daily practise of implementation.
Progress is made, but slowly.

This conference should lay the basis for the formulation of policy options and practical guidelines to achieve the goals and targets of sustainable agriculture and food security.

Today, during its opening session it is hard for me to anticipate on the outcome of the conference.
But I want to say something on the characteristics of an overall approach to the much needed policy options and practical guidelines.

Such an approach has to be integral in terms of taking into account the interdependencies between the different levels (local, national and international) and between all economic, social and environmental factors at the different levels.

The approach should take into account all social factors, including information, communication and research and education factors; the policy and institutional factors at local and national level and the suitable planning and management factors.

Very important is also the way in which the policy-making process is organized.
That must be a process of open-minded exchange of knowledge and opinion.

A key-element is the dialogue with all involved stakeholders at local and national level.
They can include farmers, the private sector, local environmental groups, indigenous people and all other involved groups.

Another key-element is in my opinion the establishment of an agricultural infrastructure in which research, extension services and training are essential.

That could take the form of a joint effort between countries to develop local centres where also the use of local knowledge has an important place.

Very important for rural development is also the integrated approach to the market.
That means development of a chain from the farmer to the consumer.

I convey these elements to you as a contribution to the formulation of an overall approach to the concrete practical guidelines.

It is in your hands to use your experience in formulating a suitable outcome of the conference.
At CSD-8 politicians will have to show vision, leadership, commitment and courage to take the necessary steps to guide agriculture and land-use in the next millenium.

Not only in a sustainable way, but also ensuring food-security for all.

Thank you very much.