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Eleventh Regular Session

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OPENING STATEMENTS

At the Commission's request, the statements given on the occasion of the opening of the Commission's Eleventh Regular Session, by Mr. Alexander Müller, Assistant Director-General, Natural Resources Management and Environment Department, and by Mr. Eng Siang Lim, Chairman of the Tenth Regular Session of the Commission, are herewith made available on the Commissions' website.

For reasons of economy, the statements are given only in the language in which they were prepared.

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OPENING STATEMENT
BY
MR. ALEXANDER MÜLLER
ASSISTANT DIRECTOR-GENERAL
NATURAL RESOURCES MANAGEMENT AND ENVIRONMENT DEPARTMENT

Distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure to greet you all, at the opening of this Eleventh Regular Session of the Commission on Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture. That so many of you have come to contribute to our work is a sign of the importance of this meeting, and of this Commission.

You are meeting at a time both of opportunity and of crisis.

The opportunity arises from the fact that, for the first time, you – the largest committee of FAO – are adopting a Multi-year Programme of Work – a "MYPOW" – with a long-term strategy for the conservation and sustainable use of all biodiversity for food and agriculture, including forestry and fisheries. If you are successful, this could become a model for change in FAO. The adoption of the MYPOW would set us on the road towards true cross-sectorial approaches and effective policy cooperation with our international partners. It would improve both global governance for food and agriculture, and FAO's way of working.

The crisis arises from the conjuncture of continuing genetic erosion with rapid climate change, coupled with a burgeoning world population and a globalizing economy. This threatens the biodiversity on which food security and poverty reduction depend. Rising sea levels, global warming, desertification and more extreme weather patterns cannot be ignored.
They are important drivers of the loss of biodiversity. At the same time, we will need precisely this biodiversity, as a main tool in adapting to climate change.

We must also never forget that extreme poverty remains the daily reality of over a billion people, that poverty in poor countries is still largely a rural issue, and that over 850 million people are hungry and malnourished. In the next 40 years, the world's population will rise from today's 6.2 billion to 9 billion, with all the growth occurring in the developing countries. Managing biodiversity for food and agriculture effectively, in order to improve the lives of the poor and the hungry, is therefore a major contribution to achieving the Millennium Development Goals.

Your challenge in this meeting is to seize the opportunity, and to address the crisis. We need to increase the resilience of our food supply, by maintaining and deploying the widest possible portfolio of genetic resources, which are vital and irreplaceable.

This Commission has achieved much. It brought the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture into existence, a major achievement. I think we all agree that work on plant genetic resources for food and agriculture is now well-established. At this meeting, you will be putting the finishing touches to preparations for the Interlaken International Technical Conference on Animal Genetic Resources. This is – I am certain – a second major achievement in the making, but it is again a conjuncture of opportunity and crisis. Animal genetic resources are particularly susceptible to loss, because of the cost of conserving them outside production systems. In the past 15 years, 200 of 7,000 animal breeds that FAO has followed have gone extinct, one a month on average. We hope that, in adopting the Interlaken Global Plan of Action, the international community will foresee the additional resources that will be needed to manage

the sector efficiently, particularly in support of the developing countries where the resources are most at risk.

Your next task must be a globally agreed strategy for *all* components of biological diversity, implemented through a well-planned MYPOW. The overall goal is a global food system that works, that is sustainable, and provides nutritionally diverse and rich diets.

We must, for example, urgently address fisheries genetic resources. Aquaculture's part in world fish production has grown from 3.9% in 1970 to about 35% today, particularly in developing countries. The graph is rising rapidly. Capture fisheries are in dire straits in many seas. International management of the aquatic genetic resources must be strengthened. The FAO Committee on Fisheries (COFI) has "welcomed the proposed work on genetic resources management in fisheries and aquaculture" in the draft MYPOW which is before you. Such cross-sectorial cooperation between FAO's governing bodies is another model for responding to our Members' demands for real cross-sectorial programmes. Other sectors have much to learn from fisheries, which has blazed the trail for the application of the ecosystem approach in food and agriculture.

A global strategy must also address forests, which not only provide 1.6 billion people with their livelihoods, but perform key economic and ecological functions. They also protect soils, regulate water and absorb carbon, and shelter much of the world's biodiversity. But forest habitats and ecosystems are eroding at a 0.2 percent annual rate, through deforestation. Forests are being degraded by pest damage, diseases, fire, pollution, climatic change, and non-sustainable management. This will have deeply negative effects on forest genetic resources.

A further challenge is microbial genetic resources. In the very extensive consultations through which we drew up the draft MYPOW, we found a very widespread conviction that better management and use of these resources is overdue. We also found a diversity of opinions as to how to do this. You will probably need to begin with a scoping exercise, to give a clearer vision of needs.

The consultative process for the preparation of the MYPOW benefited from much input from governments, through the Commission's Working Groups and consultations with the FAO Regional Groups. The process has itself improved coordination and inter-sectorial cooperation within FAO. It has attracted the interest of experts and international organizations in all sectors, who are willing to be associated with its implementation.

As I reviewed your draft agenda, I realized how wide-ranging your task is, and how much needs to be done this week. I should like to make an appeal to you, which is that you focus on the main questions. You will need to avoid being bogged down in small, technical detail. This Commission is not a technical body, but a policy body. It is the only inter-governmental institution that deals specifically with all genetic resources that are relevant for food and agriculture. It guides FAO and its activities on biodiversity for food and agriculture. It is the international forum for debate and decisions on these matters, and for structured cooperation with other international processes, where it is the voice of the food and agriculture sector. It works to promote synergy with the trade and environment sectors, and ensures that their debates move in a direction supportive of the special needs of the agricultural sector. You cannot afford to get lost in detail: the technical work, which is, of course the bedrock of success, will follow in the implementation of your programme of work, and be guided by you in future meetings.

Finally, a personal note. The recent re-shaping of the Sustainable Development Department into the Natural Resources Management and Environment Department – which now houses your Commission – is an opportunity to develop a coherent policy framework on agriculture and the environment, including strengthening our capacity to address global environmental challenges crucial for the performance of the agriculture and food sectors. I wish to ensure you that, in moving your agenda forward, I will seek an effective and mutually supportive partnership with

the other departments involved. Together, we can contribute to improving the efficiency of our Organization, internally, and in cooperation with other international bodies, as our Members have asked.

I wish you a fruitful session.

OPENING STATEMENT
BY
MR. ENG SIANG LIM
CHAIR OF THE TENTH REGULAR SESSION OF THE COMMISSION ON GENETIC RESOURCES FOR FOOD AND AGRICULTURE

As the outgoing Chair of the Commission, let me welcome delegates and observers to the Eleven Session of the Commission on Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture.

Your meeting comes at especially important time, when international policies for management of biodiversity for food and agriculture must take into account rapidly changing dynamic factors, including economic growth, human population dynamics, changing consumption patterns, and rapid market development coupled with continuing poverty, and inequality. These will alter all ecosystems, including agricultural eco-systems, and the resources and services they provide to each other and to society.

The "Book of Life", or Biodiversity, is a strategic resource for the continued progress and socio-economic development of human society. This book has provided humanity with goods and services since the beginning of civilization. It will provide the biological language of DNA for the life science economy. This book must be properly conserved for future generations, sustainably managed and wisely utilized today and tomorrow. It is the responsibility of this Commission, at this critical moment, to respond to these dynamic challenges. Let me mention some of the most important.

Climate change is a reality. It has the potential to radically alter all ecosystems, including agricultural systems (including aquaculture), forests and the many resources and services they provide. There is much uncertainty as to how they will be able to cope with new biotic and abiotic stresses arising from climate change.

In this context, the last three years have seen a growing awareness of the importance of bio-energy. The demand for bio-fuel is increasing. At a recent international conference on bio-energy in Singapore, it was predicted that modern biomass will contribute some 30 percent of the total global primary energy needs by the year 2100. This will result in greater competition between food and biomass production for land, water and other scarce resources.

In many developing countries, unprecedented high economic growth has significantly altered lifestyles and attitudes. This impacts on the use of genetic resources through standardization in the value chain; market concentration and integration; and expansion of fast-food chains, supermarkets and pre-packed convenience foods. There are increasing concerns for food safety. This impacts on the development of the supply chain management, to increase traceability. There are also concerns of species extinction, through the intensive commercial harvesting of particular species from the forests and the seas.

Dietary changes also impact on the use of genetic resources. There is an increasing consumption of vegetables, fruits, meat, diary products and fish: this has put greater pressure on land for the production of cereals, vegetables, fruits, animal feeds, pasture and aquaculture. At the same time, dietary changes are also exposing populations to higher risk of modern diseases, such as obesity, high blood pressure and hypertension.

The rapid development of information and communication technologies and of the global mass media has globalized consumer demand for standardized food items, and greater consumer sophistication in food purchases, as well as the development of niche markets for diverse foods.

There are concerns that national legislation on access and benefits-sharing is proving to be cumbersome, time-consuming and costly and in most developing countries, and there is a lack of the resources and expertise to implement, monitor and enforce such regulations.

At the same time, governments are promoting private sector investment in research and development, including the development of innovation parks, tax incentives, venture capital funds, strengthened intellectual property protection and the easy employment of foreign researchers. There are concerns about: the brain-drain of experts from developing to developed countries; access to intellectual property protected technologies, resources, products and services for research; equitable benefit-sharing arising from the use of genetic resources, and the decline in the generation of public goods and services.

Rapid infrastructural development in some developing countries has allowed greater accessibility to land, modern agricultural inputs and markets, and opened new land to agriculture, in particular mono-cropping (including aquaculture and livestock farming) of export commodities, as well as increased harvesting of particular forests species for urban markets. Pollution of the water and rivers is also becoming a major threat to biodiversity.

New cheap technological tools in molecular genetics, bioinformatics and genomics provide an ever faster reading of the book of life, and its use in creating new goods and services. There are also concerns regarding the risks of these tools and products.

The development process in most developing countries is to support technological innovation in more diverse agricultural systems and create higher value chain industries. However, will rural producers be able to capture a larger share of the gains? The inequitable distribution of additional value can widen the income gap between rich and poor. Furthermore, a more diverse agricultural system may not coincide with globalized consumer demand for standardized foods, mono-cropping of export commodities, and the development of dedicated supply chains.

As the World Conservation Union's (IUCN's) programme for 2005 – 2008 recognizes, "wealth, poverty, and inequity" make up one of the four major underlying threats to biodiversity and sustainability. The United Nations Development Programme states that biodiversity loss exacerbates poverty, and likewise, that poverty is a major threat to biodiversity.

How will all these factors affect the conservation and sustainable use of genetic resources, food security and the livelihoods? Overall, it is thought that they will erode biodiversity, particularly through more intensive land-use, the opening of new land for development, and the associated destruction of natural or semi-natural habitats.

What will be the impacts on rural farming communities, especially those who are the conservers of agro-biodiversity and the dynamic innovators of farmers' varieties? In many regions, rural communities have suffered as the consequence of the unprecedented urban economic development. The massive rural-urban migration of young people, and the ageing populations in rural areas, are a real worry. Who will conserve and sustainable use the important wild crop relatives, landraces and farmers' varieties presently important to marginalized populations practicing subsistence agriculture? Will present efforts to better understand farmer's management of agro-biodiversity – the processes of planning production; conserving, selecting, planting and exchanging planting materials; and the maintenance of knowledge systems – lead to better and more effective conservation and development of the genetic resources that constitute the basis of food and agriculture production throughout the world?

How will climate change affect biodiversity? What will be the impact on the resource-poor small farmers in developing countries? There is an urgent need for this Commission to look into the development and implementation of global strategies for the conservation and use of genetics to increase the robustness of the agriculture and food supply, in the context of climate change. Consideration has to be given to the creation of an adaptive genepool to mitigate climate change,

and to creating the conditions for facilitated access, in a timely fashion, to the totality of genetic resources needed to develop and use new cultivars, adapted animal breeds and aquaculture for food security.

Can the globalization of consumer demand for standardized food items go hand-in-hand with biodiversity? This would be difficult. Yes, there is a growing market for diverse food items in high-end niche segments of the market, especially through specialty shops and specialty corners of supermarkets. However, the market-share is small, and there are only few successes of poor farmers producing for this segment of the market. This Commission may wish to support the sustainability of on-farm conservation of agrobiodiversity, by promoting policies to aid poor farmers in producing agro-diverse, nutrient-rich food products for the urban rich - the strategy of "Think Globally and Act Locally". Equally important is how to sustain on-farm conservation of agrobiodiversity by policies that aid poor farmers in producing agro-diverse, nutrient-rich food products for the rural poor – the strategy of "Think Locally and Act Locally".

This meeting of the Commission will benefit from a special event which was held on Saturday and attended by more than 100 partcipants. The meeting identified a number of global threats and opportunities and participants agreed that there are many challenges in front of us.

In conclusion, I would like to say that the pathway forward that we will chart in the Multi-Year Programme of Work will help determine how we can conserve and use the "Book of Life" to provide human society with goods and services we need to face an uncertain future. The strategies of "Think Globally and Act Locally" and "Think Locally and Act Locally" can be made more effective if we have more strategic initiatives where we can also Act Globally. Last but not least, I want to thank the Commission on Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture for the opportunity to serve as its Chair for the last two years.