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FAO REGIONAL CONFERENCE FOR LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

Thirty-fourth Session

Mexico City (Mexico), 29 February - 3 March 2016

Statement by the Director-General

Esteemed Ministers,

Excellencies,

Distinguished delegates and guests,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am honoured to address you at this session of the FAO Regional Conference for Latin America and the Caribbean.

First of all, I would like once again to thank President Enrique Peña Nieto and the Mexican government as a whole for their support.

The FAO Regional Conferences in 2016 coincide with the start of a new era in the international domain: the era of the Sustainable Development Goals, the SDGs.

Since 1 January this year, United Nations Member States have officially started to implement the 2030 Agenda.

There are 17 universal goals. We are all in a race against time: we have less than 15 years to fulfill them!

The first two sustainable development goals of eradicating extreme poverty and hunger by 2030 are the most important and most ambitious commitments ever made in the history of the United Nations.

And in the case of Latin America and the Caribbean, there is even less time available, owing to the political commitment made by the Heads of State and Government to eradicate hunger by 2025, in other words within 10 years.

The challenge is daunting, but the statistics show that the region is on the right path to meet it.

In 1990, the Latin America and Caribbean region had 14.7% of its population suffering from hunger and over 66 million people were unable to obtain the food needed for a healthy life.

Today the situation is different.

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The proportion of people suffering from hunger has fallen to 5%, and the absolute number has dropped to 34 million, even though the population has grown by about 130 million people since 1990.

Latin America and the Caribbean is the only region on the planet to have achieved the hunger reduction targets of both the Millennium Development Goals and the World Food Summit.

Apart from reflecting political commitment at the highest level, those numbers are the result of progress made in implementing more inclusive social, economic and productive policies.

The countries have also taken major steps to strengthen institutions, legal frameworks and the governance systems needed to promote food security.

We now need to continue moving towards the target of the 2025 Hunger Free Latin America and the Caribbean Initiative and the SDGs.

FAO will continue to provide resolute support to the region's countries in overcoming those challenges.

Our Organization's Strategic Objectives are related to at least 14 of the 17 sustainable development goals.

I want to take this opportunity to affirm FAO's commitment to do its utmost to collaborate with all member countries in implementing the SDGs.

We know that we cannot do everything, particularly considering that the 17 goals are broken down into some 130 indicators and 169 different targets. And they are all very important, aside from being related to each other.

So, each country will have to choose its priorities; and FAO will provide support, above all in fulfilling the first two SDGs, which relate to the eradication of poverty and hunger, and also SDG 13 which concerns climate change, since this has a major impact on food security.

That does not mean that we will not help countries to conserve their forests, or put their fisheries on a sustainable footing. The pursuit of sustainable agriculture is at the heart of the FAO mandate, so we will continue doing everything possible to support them, within the limits of our human and financial resources. But I can tell you now that it will be impossible to do everything necessary unless the countries define their priorities.

We can also collaborate on statistics, because it is essential to establish the baselines from which each country sets out, to facilitate later monitoring work. This is a very useful and practical type of support that we can offer.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to highlight the three areas in which we believe FAO should focus its efforts in the coming two years.

The first is the need to keep the fight against hunger and malnutrition as the main priority.

In that connection, we need to focus more on the countries with higher rates of undernourishment.

In South America the prevalence of undernourishment is below 5%, and in Central America hunger affects 6.6% of the population; but in the Caribbean the proportion rises to nearly 20%. Moreover, in each subregion, most of the hungry are concentrated in just a few countries.

A similar situation exists in the case of chronic child malnutrition, the rate of which fell by 12.9 points in the last 25 years, but is still over 20% in several countries of the region.

In addition to these problems, we are seeing a rapid increase in excess weight and obesity, which already affects 7.1% of the region's under-fives and 22% of its adults. This is particularly worrying in the case of women, whose average obesity rate is 29%, compared to 18% in the case of men. This means that in Latin America and the Caribbean nearly one in every three women and one in five men are obese.

We must therefore continue our efforts to generate a virtuous circle that connects sustainable agriculture with better nutrition.

A good example involves forging links between school meals, nutritional education and family farming, as is being done in several of the region's countries.

We need to revive indigenous products and access to quality food that makes it possible to address the two faces of malnutrition — nutritional deficit and excess.

Distinguished guests:

The second priority issue concerns the integrated strengthening of family farming and the development of more efficient agrifood systems.

The idea is to articulate agricultural development policies with policies on social protection, to contribute to rural poverty reduction and underpin sustainable rural development.

The close links that exist between rural poverty and food insecurity in Latin America and the Caribbean require a new approach to socioeconomic and environmental development.

The third and last priority issue for the next two years should be the sustainable use of natural resources, disaster risk management and climate change adaptation.

The recent Paris Agreement represents a milestone. It can be used to frame the actions the region needs to take to build livelihood resilience to the impacts of climate change.

Given the increasing frequency, intensity and complexity of natural disasters, which are intensified by climate change, disaster risk management needs to be addressed on a comprehensive basis.

The region's agriculture sector alone lost US\$11 billion in 10 years as a result of natural disasters between 2003 and 2013. It is worth noting that one third of the region's population lives in zones with a high risk of natural disasters.

Rural dwellers are hurt the worst, because their lives are heavily dependent on the climate and they have very low resilience to cope with and recover from natural disasters.

To meet these huge challenges, FAO proposes creating a new regional initiative. The main objectives will be to promote the sustainable management of natural resources, livelihood adaptation to climate change, and integrated actions of disaster risk prevention, mitigation, readiness and response.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Another very important point on the Conference agenda is the Review of the Decentralized Offices Network.

FAO is working to update the coverage of its Offices, with the aim of making them more effective and thus be better placed to support countries in implementing the 2030 Agenda.

The document on this topic sets out the general principles and criteria proposed for conducting that review process.

As you know, the issue has been discussed by the Governing Bodies in Rome. The inputs from the Regional Conferences will be added to the document presented at the most recent Session of Council in December, for decision at the next Session to be held on 30 May this year.

It is the first time that this issue has been addressed; and I want to draw your attention to it, not only from the country standpoint, but in terms of the need to improve FAO work in the region.

Esteemed friends,

I would like to close by stressing the importance of sustainable development, so that we can live in a safer, fairer, and more peaceful world.

In fact, sustainable development and peace are interdependent. There is neither sustainable development without peace; nor peace without sustainable development. This is acknowledged in the preamble to the 2030 Agenda.

Eradicating hunger is fundamental, both for achieving sustainable development and for ensuring peace.

On 28 March this year I will be speaking on the subject at the United Nations Security Council in New York, to highlight the close relationship that exists between conflict and hunger.

The FAO message is that where there is conflict, there is hunger; and where there is hunger, there cannot be peace. The right to adequate food is a human right, both of and for everyone. The United Nations Security Council must take action on this issue.

In less than 10 years we can achieve the dream of a region that is free from the tyranny of hunger. Ours can be the first hunger-free generation.

Thank you very much for your attention.