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Food and Agriculture
Organization of the
United Nations

Organisation des Nations
Unies pour l'alimentation
et l'agriculture

Продовольственная и
сельскохозяйственная организация
Объединенных Наций

Organización de las
Naciones Unidas para la
Alimentación y la Agricultura

منظمة
الأغذية والزراعة
للأمم المتحدة

CONFERENCE

Forty-second Session

2021

Statement of the Director-General

*His Excellency Sergio Mattarella, President of the Republic of Italy,
Honourable Chair of the 42nd Session of the FAO Conference,
Distinguished Independent Chairperson of the Council, Mr Khalid Mehboob,
Honourable Ministers and Heads of Delegations,
Ladies and Gentlemen,*

I welcome you to the 42nd Session of the FAO Conference.

I highly appreciate all the support and solidarity from the Holy Pope Francis during the past two years.

This first virtual Session of the Conference in history starts with a record-breaking 1332 participants from around the world. The Conference is honoured by the presence of 119 Ministers and Vice-Ministers.

Honourable Guests,

We are at a critical moment in time. We see a convergence of factors that if ignored, threaten to prevent us from ending global hunger and malnutrition in all its forms. The number of hungry people in the world increased by 10 million in 2019. The pandemic continues to deliver a severe blow with another 132 million of chronically hungry people in the world by the end of 2020. The map shows the significant impact in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

In addition, 155 million people in 55 countries manifested crisis-level acute food insecurity. This map displays the latest Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) and Cadre Harmonisé (CH) Acute Food Insecurity classifications across the world. Countries in IPC 3 or above, labelled in orange, are in crises that could end in IPC 4 or above if actions are not taken immediately. This is the case for countries in conflict, or those that suffered substantial climate shocks.

When looking into other forms of malnutrition, child stunting remains unacceptably high. Overweight and obesity continue to increase in rich and poor countries alike. The number of people living with obesity exceeded that of people in hunger in 2012 and more than three billion people in the world cannot afford even the cheapest healthy diets.

Documents can be consulted at www.fao.org

Understanding our present allows us to determine the future we want to reach.

We know where we need to be by 2030: Undernourishment has to be reduced everywhere to a maximum of 5 percent; healthy diets have to be affordable for all! Overweight has to be reduced everywhere to levels of 15 percent, similar to what it was in the 1980s. Obesity needs to be reduced to no more than 5 percent in any country. Child stunting needs to decrease significantly. Inequalities need to be reduced substantially for a sustainable reduction of rural poverty.

We need to achieve land degradation neutrality, increase the efficiency of water use in agriculture and reach the Paris Agreement targets.

Distinguished Participants,

The agri-food system covers the journey of food from farm to table. This includes growing, harvesting and processing it, distributing, trading and consuming it. It also encompasses non-food products. These also constitute livelihoods and all of the people as well as the activities, investments and choices that play a part in getting us these foods and agricultural products.

To get to where we need to be by 2030, we must perceive the challenges facing us through an agri-food systems lens and act holistically.

Our agri-food systems are not delivering the food security and nutrition outcomes we want to achieve; poverty and inequality are endemic in them. They are the largest economic system, measured in terms of employment, livelihoods and planetary impact.

Worldwide one billion people are employed in the agri-food system. Another 3.5 billion people earn their livelihoods from the extended systems.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The global food security is facing multiple challenges.

The number of hungry people has been rising since 2014 and the pandemic is aggravating this situation. Conflict, climate extremes; economic downturns; all these undermine efforts to end hunger, food insecurity and inequalities.

The growing world population increases the pressure on our natural resources and we need to ensure access by all people not only to basic food, but to nutritious foods.

All of the above has to be faced under immense challenges: more than 30 percent of total global land is degraded, more than 20 percent of the world's aquifers are overexploited, and our agrobiodiversity is under threat.

There are circular, interconnected impacts across agri-food systems and other systems, including environmental and health systems. This includes more virulent outbreaks of plant and animals' pests and diseases. COVID-19 and other diseases are rooted in environmental change.

Our agri-food systems are not only victims in this interconnected loop, but they are closely involved in the degradation of natural resources and health, including pandemics and other diseases.

FAO's comprehensive assessment of the world's forests last year shows that forests cover an area of just over 4 billion hectares or around 31 percent of the total global land area.

It also tells us that the proportion of land covered by forests – one of the Sustainable Development Goal indicators – is decreasing. In the last 30 years, the world had a net loss of 178 million hectares of forest.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

More than a year into the pandemic, we are witnessing the scale of its long-term effects on the agri-food systems, and how it has worsened the food security and nutrition situation around the world and specially in food crises countries.

The pandemic and related containment measures have: intensified pre-existing drivers of fragility as shown in the slide for food crises countries; widened inequalities; exposed structural vulnerabilities of local and global agri-food systems; hit the most vulnerable groups particularly hard.

Hunger has increased in rural areas and in cities - not only in the poorest nations but also in upper middle-income countries, and even in developed nations. Across all developing regions, incomes of rural households have been negatively affected, due to reductions in farm and off-farm sources of income.

Despite all this, global food production held up well throughout the pandemic. At the aggregate level, food production continues to rise in line with past trends.

For 2021, aggregate food production is even expected to rise above former rates.

The slide shows how resilient the agri-food systems are, despite the pandemic and its containment measures affecting agricultural trade worldwide. Trade, specifically imports, in food and agricultural products have held up remarkably well so far. Measured in 2015 US dollars, agricultural trade continued to expand at a pace slightly above the longer-term trend. The faster expansion of values versus quantities implies rising prices for traded food products.

This is captured by the next slide, depicting the FAO food price index.

For many developing countries, this resulted in record levels of food import bills. Despite the resilience of the agri-food systems, the FAO Food Price Index averaged 127.1 points in May 2021. That is 40 percent higher than at the same period last year.

Rising for 12 months in a row, the Index is now only 7.8 percent below its peak value of 137.6 points registered in February 2011. The surge of last month reflected the recovery from the pandemic.

This brought an increase in demand for oils, sugar and cereals along with firmer prices of meat and dairy products.

In very general terms, over the past year tighter supplies amidst strong international demand pushed up prices of most food commodities.

At the same time, this reflects some vulnerabilities: any climate shock that reduces global production and any increase in demand by big importing countries would put pressure on prices. Trade restrictions could also impact prices. Shrinking global reserves reduce the buffering capacity.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

From day one as your Director-General, I worked entirely to forge world-class internal governance and organizational culture. Indeed, in the past 22 months, FAO underwent the deepest transformative action since its creation.

We established a modular and flexible structure that allows for optimal cross-sectoral collaboration. This answers our Members' priorities and responds best to emerging needs. Our Offices now play a vital cross-cutting function and our Divisions house FAO's expertise and provide support.

The aim is a stronger and coordinated focus of FAO on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The new Office for Small Island Developing States (SIDS), Least Developed Countries (LDCs) and Land-Locked Developing Countries (LLDCs) ensures that the special needs of these vulnerable populations and countries are met.

The Office of Sustainable Development Goals (OSG) coordinates the corporate engagement in the 2030 Agenda follow-up and review.

The Office of Emergencies and Resilience (OER) provides support for threats, emergencies and resilience aspect.

The Office of Climate Change, Biodiversity and Environment (OCB) supports Members response to the challenges of climate change, biodiversity loss, and environmental degradation.

I established the first ever post of Chief Economist at FAO, pushing among other priorities Big Data, Geospatial analysis and digital innovation.

FAO's first-ever Chief Scientist is ensuring the robustness, breadth and independence of scientific approaches in our work.

The new Office for Innovation consolidates and strengthens FAO's innovative spirit.

We strengthened existing offices and teams. Combining Partnerships and UN collaboration into one Division, establishing new Divisions for Project Support, for Logistics Services, and for Food Systems and Food Safety.

We created new posts, like the stand-alone Ethics Officer and the Ombudsman.

We put special focus on our Centres and their strong collaborative function: we strengthened the FAO Investment Centre, the Joint FAO/WHO Centre. We strengthened our cooperation with the IAEA and established Joint FAO/IAEA Centre.

Our reform went even further, by modernizing our methods of work and improving transparency. Like revamping our web presence, where all my meetings, interactions and speeches are publicly available.

I established the Core Leadership Team, comprised of the three Deputy Directors-General, Chief Scientist, Chief Economist, and the Director of Cabinet.

This dynamic team supports me in all areas of the Organization's mandate and exemplifies the new collaborative approach of FAO.

No more small kingdoms – we broke down the silos!

We empowered the various levels of management.

Another innovative first, the dual reporting system, ensures transparency and teamwork! There is a primary role ("A") and a secondary role ("B") within the reporting line, with the "B" role playing a complementary function and with mutual regular support and update.

We focused on creating a healthy and productive work environment.

Another first in FAO's history was establishing the Women and Youth Committees. They drive career enrichment and engagement within FAO and are a platform for Members' engagement. They also played a very positive role in creating a sense of togetherness and belonging in the past year. Especially during the pandemic and difficult times.

We built a big family here. This is the new FAO that is welcoming you today!

An Organization setting three dimension-transparency and teamwork! A new FAO with a flat, accountable and cohesive structure that becomes more efficient and effective by reducing exchange costs and minimizing bureaucracy. An agile, inclusive and innovative Organization that is focused on better serving its Members. An FAO that expands its collaboration with partners across the world.

With globally recognized knowledge and expertise, and by being at the forefront of providing support and making a difference. This is the new FAO – strongly rooted in 75 years of history, guided by the Basic Texts and focused on its original mandate.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Analysing the changes and developments around us begs the question: How can FAO become even more ‘Fit for Purpose’? I believe that has to be a dynamic organization, which supports its Members in the transformational changes needed to achieve the SDGs.

An FAO that opens the door to the fascinating world of digital food and agriculture. Because, the future of agriculture needs to be built on science, innovations and digital applications. Innovations in technologies, policies, business models and mind-sets will be by people and for people.

Digital applications can produce significant gains in terms of increased efficiency, facilitate the good functioning of supply chains and enhance sustainability.

FAO needs to lead global efforts to make this future of agri-food systems a reality. In the last 22 months we have established a digital FAO that connects all employees and overcomes distances and time zones.

The Organization has shown an extraordinary capacity to move to the new working modalities during difficult times.

The new web presence reflects the central role of our mandate and accessibility of platform to Members, farmers, consumers and partners.

We are continuing to spearhead the holistic concept of a digital organization within the UN family, being well ahead of the curve.

FAO needs to get our Members on board with our flagship Hand-in-Hand Initiative that is evidence-based and country-owned. The Initiative is gaining strength as a mechanism for bringing diverse actors together to help the least advantaged countries and people to: eradicate poverty, end hunger and malnutrition, and to reduce inequalities within and among nations.

In the 39 Members that have joined the Initiative so far, key support is provided to identify and channel funding to the areas where the biggest economic opportunities can be unlocked.

The Initiative’s Geospatial Platform with Big Data analysis and advanced geo-spatial modelling has over 38 000 users from nearly all FAO Members.

We launched the 1000 Digital Villages programme. The programme focuses on digital technologies to improve production and agri-business management, and related market-oriented and social services of agricultural processes.

With “e-Agriculture”, to improve productivity using information and communication technologies (ICT) and relevant digital solutions.

With “Digital Farmer Services” to enhance farmers’ accessibility to social and economic services.

Digital Services for “Rural transformation” to enhance the delivery of public services in health, education, jobs, welfare, eco-tourism and agri-tourism.

This holistic approach brings all the digital elements needed to support agri-food systems transformation and the rural development needed to achieve the SDGs.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

To respond to the global challenges and opportunities, and to continue building an organization that is fit for purpose, we are proudly proposing: the Strategic Framework 2022-31, the Medium-Term Plan 2022-25, and the Programme of Work and Budget 2022-23.

An unprecedented and impressive process has taken place to develop the Strategic Framework.

For nearly 18 months, we held extensive, inclusive and transparent consultations with Members, and other key partners, both formal and informal, we backed this with an intensive internal process drawing on the breadth and depth of FAO's knowledge and expertise.

We launched a foresight exercise to delve further into the global challenges and opportunities.

A top-down and bottom-up approach ensured that the needs coming from Members and FAO's global mandates and normative strengths were well embedded to allow FAO to provide maximum support in transforming agri-food systems at country level.

All three documents build on and complement the organizational structure and management changes already put in place to make FAO a more modular, flexible and agile organization.

We have presented a concise and clear strategic narrative: Supporting the 2030 Agenda through the transformation to MORE efficient, inclusive, resilient and sustainable agri-food systems for better production, better nutrition, a better environment, and a better life (four betters), leaving no one behind.

All aspects of FAO's focus for the next period that I have been talking about since my manifesto are contained in this narrative: the SDGs, efficiency, inclusiveness, resilience, sustainability; the overarching importance of agri-food systems, the four betters, and of course, the focus on leaving no one behind.

The three dimensions of sustainable development - economic, social and environmental, are reflected in the four betters and in the agri-food systems approach.

Four cross-cutting "accelerators" of progress will be applied in all our programmatic interventions to maximize efforts and facilitate the management of trade-offs, according to national priorities. These accelerators are technology, innovation, data and complements (governance, human capital, and institutions).

The 20 Programme Priority Areas identified are inter-disciplinary, issue-based technical themes and represent FAO's strategic contribution to specific SDG targets. They are framed around the four betters and embed themes where FAO has a comparative advantage, track record and ability to act in our major initiatives.

The Programme of Work and Budget 2022-23 translates the strategic narrative into the biennial programme of work.

It has been developed around three core principles: maintaining a flat nominal budget (namely USD 1 005.6 million); covering all increased costs without negatively impacting the technical work; and keeping the organizational structure currently in place.

Within the flat nominal budget, resources are reallocated to high priority areas including the new Programme Priority Areas, the Office of the Inspector-General, and multilingualism. You can see that for the first time I present the slides in all six FAO official languages.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

When everybody adds firewood, the flames of a bonfire rise high.

No Member or organization can tackle the global challenges in food and agriculture alone.

The Strategic Framework highlights FAO's role as a facilitator and enabler of change. It encourages us to be more innovative, bold and open.

Our mission is to build transformative partnerships that address systemic change in a sustained manner.

The key is regional integration and multilateral cooperation with FAO Members being the drivers of change.

FAO already plays a major facilitating role, but we aim to do more through our various initiatives and the reinvigorated South-South and Triangular Cooperation.

Multilateralism is the way to address global challenges, including the prevention of future pandemics.

FAO is active in scaling-up joint UN activities on the ground, formulating the collective UN assistance and aligning it with national priorities.

I highly appreciate all host countries of our offices around the world, who have kept our employees safe during the pandemic and here, I especially thank Italy for providing vaccination within its national program to all UN colleagues and their dependents who were interested.

FAO's engagement with the private sector is vital to strengthening and accelerating support to its Members. We have launched the digital FAO CONNECT Portal, a 'one-stop shop' for private sector engagement aimed at agri-food systems transformation.

We are establishing productive and result-oriented partnerships with indigenous peoples, civil society organizations and parliamentarians; producer organizations and cooperatives; and academia and research institutions.

We are energized to scale-up existing cooperation in support of our mission under the new Strategic Framework.

Honourable Ministers, Delegates,

Strengthening the impact of FAO's work at country level has been a focus of mine since day one.

For the first time we started a comprehensive review of the Country Offices' business model. To rethink and change the way we work to achieve greater impact. By introducing digital administrative processes, improved human resources management and strengthened employee engagement, the Country Office Transformation aims to achieve more empowerment and streamlined processes.

Across the globe, we see a democratization of FAO's workspace with greater internal communication, teamwork and participation.

We are fostering collaboration and 'breaking down the silos' between regional, sub-regional and national offices and teams.

We are creating multidisciplinary technical groups to improve the quality, efficiency and effectiveness of technical assistance and coordination with Members.

We strengthened the internal control framework for field activities to the highest standards of accountability and transparency.

We want our Representatives to stand shoulder to shoulder with the farmers and policy makers, to be the trusted partner of national authorities.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Since March of 2020 the situation has been unlike any other in living memory. The pandemic is a powerful wake-up call on the fragility and short-comings of our agri-food systems. It is also an opportunity to re-evaluate how we address the root causes of poverty, hunger and inequalities.

A chance to build resilience against threats and to start-afew and more importantly, the pandemic reminded us of the fundamental importance of solidarity!

We have seen the value and potential of multilateral cooperation, the courage and resilience of food heroes around the world.

I am proud that FAO was at the forefront of this battle to rise to the biggest challenge of our lives. We reinvented the way we work, communicate and deliver. We adapted our approaches, strengthened our partnerships and sharpened our focus. We put the people and their needs at the centre of our work. We designed and provided game-changing solutions by combination of cutting-edge technology with the expertise and determination of our teams around the world.

All these were done thanks to our loyal employees, my senior teams and your trust with solid supports, and we need your consistent commitment!

Together – and only together, we can turn the tide and achieve a sustainable and equitable future with zero hunger for all.

In my manifesto, I wrote that we are what we think and that the innovative thinking will lead us to a different journey.

Just over 75 years ago, the thinking of our founding Members started the path to eradicate poverty and nourish the world through the power of food and agriculture.

I cherish this history that teaches us: of the idea that was born at the Allied Food and Agriculture Conference 1943, in Hot Springs, Virginia, USA. Of the Organization that was established in 1945, in Quebec City, Canada by 42 nations. Of FAO finding its first home in Washington, DC, before moving to Rome just 70 years ago. Of all the outstanding pioneer work done by FAO over the last decades.

With both pride and humility, I am carrying forward this noble mission,

We are ready to continue the hard work with you, fully aware that history is made by, recorded by, and evaluated by the people.

I invite you, dear Brothers and Sisters, to walk with us on a path that will lead to a dynamic FAO for a better world - through better production, better nutrition and a better environment, so that all humankind can have a better life.

Thank you!