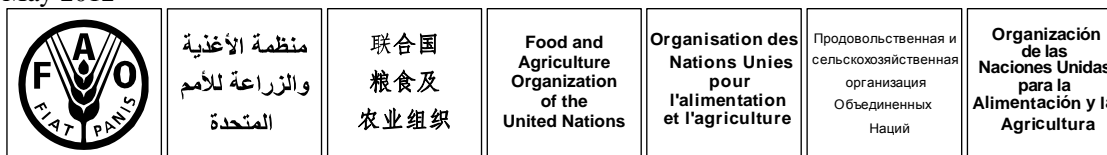


May 2012



FAO Regional Conference for the Near East

Thirty-first Session

Rome, 14-18 May 2012

STATEMENT OF THE DIRECTOR-GENERAL OF FAO

Honourable Minister for Agriculture of the Republic of Iraq, Mr. Ezzulddin Al-Dawla,

Independent Chairperson of the FAO Council, Mr. Luc Guyau,

Chairman of the Committee of World Food Security, Mr. Yaya Olaniran,

Her Excellency Permanent Representative of Sudan to FAO, Ms. Ambassador Amira Daoud Hassan Gornass, in representation of the Former Chairperson of the Regional Conference for the Near East

His Excellency Permanent Representative of the Islamic Republic of Iran to FAO, Mr Ambassador Taghavi Motlagh, Chairperson of the Near East Group,

Distinguished Delegates, Ministers, Ambassadors

Civil society representatives,

Colleagues from FAO and other agencies of the UN System,

Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

1. It's a pleasure to welcome you to Rome for the Thirty-First FAO Regional Conference for the Near East. Initially, this meeting was meant to be held in Baghdad, and I wish to thank the Government of Iraq for kindly accepting to host it at FAO Headquarters.

2. *Ladies and Gentlemen,* in recent decades we have successfully increased the food production but haven't been able to end hunger. Although there is enough food to feed every single human being, over 900 million people still do not have enough to eat.

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3. While this situation persists, FAO needs to keep pursuing its goal to eradicate hunger.
4. It's a complex challenge, but not an impossible one. FAO and its partners can and should play an important role in building the world we want.
5. What makes it complex is that the hunger crisis coexists with climate, financial, economic and energy crises. These are crises that affect and are affected by each other and that cannot be tackled separately. This interconnection makes these challenges different from the ones we faced in the past.
6. This means that we need a different set of tools and a different focus to overcome them. That is why, in January 2012, I launched a Strategic Thinking Process: to identify the global trends and emerging challenges related to food security and agriculture and then reorganize FAO to effectively respond to them.
7. The process is based on a broad and participative consultation with staff across the Organization, discussions with members and inputs from an external Strategy Experts Panel.
8. The Regional Conferences are part of these consultations and I look forward to receiving your comments on the global challenges, in particular as they relate to the Near East region.
9. During the next FAO Council session in June, I will present the latest results of this process. It will inform further adjustments to our Current Program of Work and Budget and support the review and development of FAO's main strategy and programming documents.
10. Let me elaborate on the global challenges that have been identified so far in the strategic thinking process.
11. The first and most urgent challenge is to end hunger and assure food security for all.
12. Food security and peace are directly linked. Conflicts can result in hunger; and food insecurity can spark or fuel conflicts that can affect countries close by. The Minister of Agriculture and Yemen for instance, has called to my attention significant migratory movements from Africa, which is putting additional pressure on food security in his country.
13. This is an example of why fighting hunger needs to combine national, regional and global efforts. FAO is working at all levels and with different partners to advance together in these fronts.
14. At my request, FAO is adopting a new approach to quickly gain ground in the fight against hunger. It consists of the integration between emergency and development activities, and the scaling up of successful initiatives that stimulate local production and consumption circuits and builds resilience. There are many win-win solutions that can have positive impacts in the short-term and set the tone for longer-term development.
15. A related challenge is to increase the resilience of poor families to threats and shocks to agriculture and food security, a growing risk with climate change.
16. Then there is the challenge to shift to more sustainable production and consumption patterns. Agricultural increase in recent decades has taken a huge toll on our environment and natural resources base. We already have the technologies to produce more with less impact. We must adopt them in the needed scale and make sure that they are accessible to smallholder producers throughout the world.

17. And we need to eat healthier food. Some countries in the Near East region are among the countries with the highest obesity rates in the world. Healthier diets will help respond to the problem of obesity and reduce the pressure on our natural resources: it takes one thousand five hundred (1 500) liters of water to produce a kilogram of cereals and fifteen thousand (15 000) to produce one kilogram of meat. The countries of the Near East know as well as anyone else how precious water is and how we must use it with care.

18. Sustainable consumption also means reducing food loss and waste. In industrialized countries, consumers throw away about two hundred and twenty-two (222) million tons of food every year, the equivalent of the net food production in Sub-Saharan Africa.

19. Sustainability is a challenge today and in the future: FAO estimates that we need to increase food production by sixty percent to feed the world forty years from now. That estimate is true if we keep our current production and consumption models. But we can feed the world with less if we reduce food loss and waste and change to healthier diets. That should be our goal.

20. The United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, Rio+20, a little over one month away, gives us the opportunity to explore the convergence between the agendas of food security and climate change, choosing the path of a more sustainable, and inclusive, development.

21. Our next challenge is to improve the livelihoods of rural people. This is particularly important for the Near East region. Many countries are seeing unemployment rise among the younger generation and poverty rates increase in urban areas. Providing rural youth with decent jobs and better opportunities can reduce the pressure on urban areas.

22. We also face challenges related to strengthening global food security governance and ensuring fairer and more inclusive food and agricultural systems from the local to the international level.

23. The Voluntary Guidelines for the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries, and Forests, in the Context of National Food Security, endorsed last week by the Committee of World Food Security, is an important step in this direction. It is the first time that governments, private sector and civil society have reached an international consensus on what we need to guarantee the responsible governance of tenure.

24. It provides a shared vision to build on, reaffirms the unique role of the Committee of World Food Security in the food governance system and shows how global debates relate to local realities.

25. I thank you Ambassador Yaya Olaniran for leading this process.

26. *Ladies and gentlemen*, water scarcity and desertification are common agricultural challenges that all countries in the Near East region face. They become even more relevant with climate change.

27. To respond to these challenges, FAO's focus in the region is to assist Member Countries in building resilient agriculture, pastoralist and food systems. To do so, we need to increase investments in sustainable production methods, link productive support with safety nets to boost local markets, as well as to improve the governance and management of water and other natural resources, and introduce best practices to maximize water saving and productivity.

28. In this regard, I look forward to receiving the Conference's guidance and comments regarding these regional priorities.

29. *Ladies and gentlemen*, I would also like to discuss FAO's assistance to the countries of the Near East.

30. Our Near East Regional Office, located in Egypt, covers 19 countries, three of which - Mauritania, Sudan and Yemen - are classified as low-income countries. Six countries in the Gulf are high-income countries. The other countries of the region are considered middle-income countries, according to international standards.

- The FAO Decentralized Offices network in the region also includes Sub-regional Offices for North Africa, located in Tunisia, and for the Gulf Cooperation Council States and Yemen, located in Abu Dhabi; and country presence in fifteen (15) countries through different arrangements: nine countries benefit from fully fledged FAO Representations (three of which are co-located with the Regional and Sub-regional Offices), four countries are covered through Technical Officers/FAO Representatives out posted from the Regional or Sub-regional Offices, and two countries have FAO program coordination units.

31. This Conference is invited to discuss how FAO should be better structured in the region to respond to its challenges. This may imply a different distribution of the current resources, so we have the correct mix of expertise to respond to the needs of our Members.

32. In your discussions, I would like you to take into consideration the financial constraints that all of us are facing. If proposals result in additional costs, it is important that they be accompanied by additional funding.

33. I wish to appeal to the generosity of those countries in a better economic situation to find innovative ways to increase their contribution to FAO and to support FAO's work, particularly in the less developed countries in the region.

34. Recently, at the African Regional Conference, countries of that continent voiced their willingness to increase their cooperation to fight hunger in neighboring countries. This includes complementing their political commitment with additional funding to promote food security. At the Conference's request, FAO is preparing a trust fund to give shape to this interest. Civil society organizations and private sector companies have also manifested their intention to participate in the trust fund for the Near East.

35. A similar effort could exist in the Near East. In this regard, I want to call your attention to a side event which will take place tomorrow morning to discuss the proposal for a regional trust fund.

36. This follows the debates held at your previous Regional Conference, in Khartoum, Sudan in December 2010. At that meeting, Member Countries endorsed the Regional Priority Framework for the Near East and expressed their readiness to support its implementation, urging the adequate mobilization of resources to tackle the regional challenges for agriculture and food security.

37. Most of the countries of the region are already increasing their international cooperation. This is a positive development and makes me believe that there is room to take this next step, by committing to additional funding and sharing agricultural and rural development experiences among one another other.

38. This is very important because, as we all know, the world faces a challenging financial and economic situation. The OECD has just released a report showing that aid to developing countries fell because of the global recession.

39. That is why the African Food Security Trust Fund I mentioned is important. That is why I am urging developing countries to step up their international and intra-regional cooperation, by providing additional funds or sharing their experience in agriculture and rural development.

40. *Ladies and gentlemen*, Once again, thank you for attending this Thirty-First (31st) Session of the FAO Regional Conference here in Rome. I wish you all fruitful deliberations.
