

**FOOD AND AGRICULTURE ORGANIZATION (FAO)
OF
THE UNITED NATIONS**

WELCOMING REMARKS

**Regional Expert Consultation on Scoping, Prioritizing and
Mapping of Neglected and Underutilized Crop Species in Asia**

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Excellency, distinguished Participants, Colleagues,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good morning to you all!

I would like to give my appreciation to the Special Ambassador for the International Year of Pulses for FAO and also Dr Mahmoud Solh. This is a real pleasure to have you with us – and also all the experts and senior officials from various governments here in the region as well as from other parts of the world. This is absolutely a special event. Unfortunately, it is on a long weekend, otherwise you would have had a lot more people from FAO as well as other senior officials from the Government here in Thailand as well.

I want to take this opportunity to first warmly welcome all of you, and I would also like to thank you for your participation in the Regional Expert Consultation on Scoping, Prioritizing and Mapping Neglected and Underutilized Crop Species in Asia. This is a very important area that we, in the FAO Regional Office, have started to focus on. A lot of it had been owed to our work in the region. It has in fact really shown that a lot more needs to be done in the area of hunger and malnutrition.

As we look around the countries in this diverse region, we see a lot of good results and a region that has, overall, reduced hunger by half in just 25 years. But at the same time, when we try to dig deeper, we also see that hunger and poor nutrition continue to exist in a serious way in the region. As we speak, we have close to 490 million hungry people in this region, perhaps close to 60 percent globally hungry and malnourished in this part of the world. So we have a lot of work to do. There is no time for complacency.

But what can we do more? We can observe high levels of stunting and micronutrient deficiency, while at the same time there is also growing incidence of obesity in many countries. That's alarming and another area of concern that we need to watch carefully. Particularly in the Pacific Islands, it is starting to show and in some countries in the region as well. So overall, when we talk about malnutrition, it is not just about not having enough to eat. Whenever I travel to countries in the region, the governments and ministers are asking: Are they eating the right food and is there a good balanced diet? Because the issues arising, such as high blood pressure and diabetes, are showing up among the population, which is a serious concern to governments as well.

So, in order to achieve Zero Hunger, which stands at the core of the SDGs, we need to improve dietary patterns and food systems. We need to realize that many people are consuming too little of nutritious foods that are good for us, and that too much food is being produced without offering enough choice – and often because of the policies that governments pursue. We need to recognize that stakeholders along the agriculture and food value chain are affected by a disconnect between production and consumption pattern, and knowledge about nutrition, which results in a poor overall nutritional status among too many people.

Now what has gone wrong? There is something that this group can actually help with, not only trying to understand what the issues are, but also try to find

meaningful solutions. One factor is a lack of diversification and overconcentration on a few staple crops. In Asia, this is rice, in Africa, it is maize, which dominates our diets in particular. Just look at some of the numbers: Rice accounts for 67 percent of the total daily food consumption in Myanmar, 72 percent in Nepal, more than 75 percent in Cambodia and in Lao PDR 81 percent. These are real numbers coming from our countries in the region. While rice fills the stomach, a rice-dominated diet provides for only low to no amounts of protein, amino acids and essential micronutrients, which can be, for instance, found in pulses, fruits, nuts, tubers, vegetables, fish, meat, and edible insects. What most of the people in the bottom ladder see, is rice.

So in some sense, we really need to pay a lot of attention in terms of understanding, what are the reasons for this focus on one or two food items. A heavy reliance on rice can also contribute to vitamin A, iron, and zinc deficiencies, resulting in serious illnesses in the population. I don't need to explain, you are all the experts! **Therefore:** If we are to achieve the SDG target, business-as-usual is NOT the way to go in managing our food systems.

What could be solutions? Neglected and underutilized crops offer high potential and that is the main theme of the next three days. Apart from their superior nutritional qualities, many of these crops do not require high inputs, and can be grown in marginal lands and easily intercropped or rotated with staple crops. We all talk about the climate agenda very much these days and often, it is these crops which increase agrobiodiversity and improve soil quality, thus contributing to a better environment. Rediscovering their value, providing tailor-made policies and technical support for their wider application, post-harvest and value chain development, will help to alleviate malnutrition and bring back diversity to the diets of millions.

Building on previous knowledge on neglected crops generated by FAO and in light of celebrating the 2016 International Year of Pulses, I would like to highlight the outstanding potential of underutilized pulse crops on agriculture, nutrition, ecological and socio-economic contributions. Pulses are hardy crops and show wide adaptation to diverse climates and cropping systems. I am sure, we will hear more from our Special Ambassador on the International Year of Pulses later. What I want to emphasize is that neglected crops are a hidden treasure. They offer not only potential, but also real solutions for more nutrition-sensitive, climate-resilient and social-economically sustainable agriculture.

Traditional food systems in Asia have developed over hundreds of years, featuring a wide abundance of crops. But: their importance in modern society has been declining and is now considered neglected. We need to recognize that preference and policy support provided for cash crops or mono-cropping have driven that transition. It has led to the situation today that many of the region's neglected species are no longer found in the agricultural sphere, but in the region's forests and wetlands. The disconnect within the current agriculture and food systems is a systematic and multidimensional problem – often not an easy one to solve, right? It requires interdisciplinary solutions which start with identification of right Neglected and Underutilized Crop Species for prioritization in the country.

Distinguished guests and colleagues.

As we can see, we have our work cut out for us. This event in the next three days should not just focus on the issues, but actually on how we move forward to better vary the diets of millions across this region. And as I said, rice is actually an obsession in this region. Everyone follows the direction of the politicians, especially the farmers, who respond to the policies of governments. If you put more subsidy in a particular crop – which is rice, most often – everybody grows rice. If you consider rice fertilization policies of the Government, everybody grows rice. In the countries, people talked with so much passion about those staple crops.

So in some sense, it is not only talk about the political and technical dimensions of it. As experts, you are also coming from your own country, weighing the socio-cultural aspects of it. Why do these things happen? What is your good advice how to break the cycle? To break the cycle is never easy. We often need to get to the heart of the politicians and it is the most difficult part, is it not? But at the same time, we can also find ways: Who are the leaders in their country, who can actually reach out to the larger majority of the population?

I also have to say that people are not just needing rice. When you look at the dietary pattern and at the other types of food that are being consumed, you see that people are starting to consume vegetables and fruits, and that mixing actually has increased. But again, is it happening across the population, particularly the poorest of the poor? Because they are the ones who need to be addressed by not only policies and programmes. We also need to have data awareness as well as access and the ability to buy, for instance, vegetables or fruits. Are these foods available to them at reasonable prices, so that they can actually consume them?

What is more important than anything else are knowledge and awareness. Especially when feeding infants, we need a good mix of carbohydrates, proteins, fats and essential micronutrients, so that children, when they are growing up, have that. Awareness needs to be build. That does not have to be just left to the politicians. Even though the policies may be secured, we can still influence cultural practices and social habits that are, more often than not, trying to emphasize on balanced diets in the countries. Maybe you can also help us to try and find good interventions in the scaling. I very much look forward to your recommendations and a set of suggestions for us to move forward.

First, I would like to give credit to the governments on Zero Hunger and national research institutes on the preparation of national scoping studies that were conducted well in advance of the Consultation. We got a series of things planned under this regional programme. First, preparing the scoping study: Now you have all come here to give us some good country-specific and regional understanding, and hopefully prioritize what kind of policies and programmes we should pursue.

Secondly, I am very impressed by the long list of international partners on board with shared vision in this noble mission. Neglected and Underutilized Crop Species is a multi-disciplinary subject. Without your strong and continuous commitments and dedications, rediscovering the hidden treasure of the Neglected and Underutilized Crop Species would not be possible. I would like to give special thanks and acknowledgement to the FAO Special Ambassador for the

International Year of Pulses, Professor Kadambot Siddique, who has been providing intellectual support to the Consultation. I also want to acknowledge the strong commitment and engagements from ICARDA and Dr Mahmoud Solh who emphasized on the shared vision between ICARDA and FAO and common challenges of countries on Zero Hunger in the region. I also want to thank the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research for your financial contribution to this event.

Thirdly, I hope this Consultation will not only help countries to identify priority Neglected and Underutilized Crop Species candidates that are nutrition-sensitive and climate-smart, but also to be able to identify policy and technical constraints – and not only technical constraints, but also socio-cultural habits – that prevent a comeback of neglected crops in farmers’ fields and on our tables. I look forward to further evidence-based studies, such as using the latest technologies to advise governments. Let’s work together, building a strong network and to support governments to formulate national crop diversification strategies that are nutrition-sensitive and climate-smart!

I will keep a close eye in terms of the key recommendations coming from this event, and I will be also having a launch of FAO’s State of Food Insecurity in the Asia and Pacific region next week on Tuesday. I hope some of you, if you are still staying here, will attend. I want to really make sure that the brainstorming you are going to have within the next three days, and the recommendations coming from this, would actually help us to share with the participants in that larger event. More than anything else, we, as FAO need to take this forward in a very practical and strong way, not just talking about the issues, but how we really help governments and other stakeholders in the policies and programmes to make a difference.

I wish you all a successful meeting and look forward to the outcomes of the Consultation. I hope, this is just the beginning of a further collaboration with you all in the regional work that we plan to do in the next twelve to eighteen months.

I thank you all. Please also have a good time in Thailand. It is such a beautiful country, and it is also a good time of the year.

Thank you all!