

FAO SOFA 2020: OVERCOMING WATER CHALLENGES IN AGRICULTURE

Panel Discussion

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Dear colleagues panelists

Dear participants,

1. I am grateful for the opportunity to participate in this Round Table. Before sharing few initial thoughts let me thank His Excellency Dr Qu, Director General, for his kind invitation. I would like also to commend FAO for the high quality of the SOFAs in general (over 73 years) and this one we are discussing today on “overcoming water challenges in agriculture” in particular.
2. This timely, engaging and highly authoritative SOFA explores water use and conservation challenges in the agricultural sector and enlightens readers on the changes needed.
3. Indeed, the size of today’s water security challenge should not be underestimated. The environmental, social, economic, and political consequences of water shortages are real as are the effects of water related disasters – both floods and droughts.
4. The message that emerged from the ongoing debates on sustainable Development Goals is one of urgency with respect to how the world might prepare for, and act, to prevent a potential water crisis in terms of supply and quality.
5. Trends are not destiny. Changing contexts must be explored; opportunities identified in order to pave the road for better water resources stewardship, more food security for all and per drop of water, and improved livelihoods for producers as well as the consumers.
6. The water for food challenge, as highlighted in the SOFA, is to reliably produce increasing supplies and more varieties of food, mainly through higher yields using less water and other resources inputs in an

environmentally friendly manner and at reasonable and affordable prices for consumers. This challenge can only be met by mobilizing technology in all kinds of agriculture including smallholders, using all sources of water (including non conventional waters) and achieving much better coordination, cooperation and partnerships among the major stakeholders involved: farmers, market operators, regulators, and consumers. We need a holistic food system approach. We also need an approach that integrates the relevant parts of macroeconomic policies, water supply and sanitation policies, trade policies, agriculture and rural development policies and environmental policies leading to institutional and governance changes and investments in agriculture water savings programs.

7. Despite tangible progress many water issues remain unsolved. The SOFA calls for major shifts in conceptual approaches to water governance in order to reach a more desirable future. This is particularly relevant as many countries are currently facing socio-economic transformation processes which need to be reflected in changes of the respective water governance system.
8. The challenges of water governance are more acute in developing countries. Poor countries in Africa often suffer from the curse of variability in their hydrology with higher levels of uncertainties, more frequent floods and droughts, rapid growth in water demand, small endowments of water infrastructure, fragile institutions and limited capacities to adapt to climate change. The result is more water insecurity and higher political and social instability.
9. In this context, putting effective water governance into practice is a very large and complex agenda. Tackling this agenda must start with new institutional mindsets and mechanisms that can develop more coordinated approach to the challenge of water resources development and management reflecting stronger interconnectedness of water systems. It calls for the creation of an enabling environment based on an adequate set of mutually supportive policies and a comprehensive legal framework with a coherent set of incentives and regulatory measures to support these policies.
10. The SOFA emphasizes also the need for accounting and auditing. Indeed to bring about change in water governance, people need knowledge to understand the state of water resources and the tools needed to sustainably develop and manage them. Knowledge can stimulate

behavioral change towards a new 'water culture'. We must engage in a learning process. We must monitor continuously and learn as we act in order to promote a real evolution in thinking not just a change in emphasis of current activities.

11. Given the huge diversity of agricultural systems and hydrological situations there is no "blueprint" approach and no straightforward solution valid for all our countries under all circumstances. Success will come from deploying the right tools and approaches in a way that is sensitive to local circumstances. Major shifts in approaches are called for, shifts that have a high degree of flexibility in order to embrace the unique economic, social and environmental circumstances that will determine a nation pathway towards water and food security and inclusive agricultural growth. This adaptation process will require, in my view, the engagement of FAO to promote the structured approach presented in the SOFA and provide support that guide our countries in designing their own development paths for improving water management in agriculture.
12. The economic consequences of the COVID19 pandemic and concerns about water resources are coming together in a way that is creating unprecedented opportunities to build forward (not back) better through fundamental economic, institutional, social, political and technological changes. We have to grab this opportunity to fully link it with actions and to develop solutions for conserving and protecting water resources in the agricultural sector. This is not just an opportunistic move as in the long run, the water crisis, the ecological crisis and the economic crisis are intrinsically part of the same global crisis.
13. So in conclusion, what we now need is to look at the future, not in fear with scenarios of doom, but with optimism understanding and community action. We are gratified by the work that FAO is undertaking with its member States in helping them effectively manage their water resources in the agricultural sector. And I take this opportunity to acknowledge FAO's Representation in Rabat for accompanying the Kingdom of Morocco in its journey towards sustainable agricultural water management.

Thank you for your kind attention!