

Statement delivered by
His Excellency Lord FOHE
Minister for Agriculture, Food and Forests of Tonga
on the occasion of the 43rd Session of the FAO Conference (1-7 July 2023)
4 July 2023

Chairperson,

Excellencies,

Director-General of FAO,

distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen, greetings from the friendly islands of Kingdom of Tonga, Southwest Pacific and congratulations to your Excellency Director-General of FAO, Dr Qu Dongyu, and also the Member countries of FAO for the vast majority re-election on Sunday and Tonga looks forward to be kept afloat during the next four years from the sinking part of the world of the Pacific Ocean.

I would like to take this opportunity to convey Tonga's huge gratitude for it is in debt to FAO for all the enabling technical and financial assistance that has been invested and provided to Tonga during the past five decades, but especially the FAO gives assistance to every emergency recoveries and preparedness from the many severe tropical cyclones, early known droughts, earthquakes, tsunamis, and recently the marine volcanic eruption of Hunga Tonga-Hunga Ha'apai last year.

To date, the intensity and the frequency of these natural disasters are increasing, which also increases the damage, the cost, the number of years to recover. In addition, the gradual impact of the rising temperatures on agriculture production and the loss of agriculture land to the rising sea levels, which demands an extra level of national preparedness and resilience.

Tonga economy is hugely dependent on aid and remittance with its huge negative trade balance of about 80 percent, 40 to 50 percent of the total value of annual export of agriculture products. As a result of unhealthy diet, obesity is about 67 percent of the population with a mortality rate due to non-communicable disease of about 80 percent. The additional impact of the COVID-19 and the rising cost of imports collectively added weighting to that burden of multiple crisis situations of Tonga.

The Ministry of Agriculture has always focused on food security and building the resilience and preparedness of the human social resource and financial capitals of the agriculture sector. These are the programmes: on increasing genetic biodiversity of plant and livestock with new imported product, a million tree planting programme, a regional rating and sustainable agriculture programme, a circular agriculture system programme, a home gardening urban farming project.

About 95 percent of farming in Tonga are rainfed and the 5 percent of the irrigation farming are responsible for the vegetable supply to the local market and also export of watermelon and squash. Agriculture sector used only about 2 percent of Tonga's underground resources. However, fortunately Tonga has established early warning system for tropical cyclones, early known drought events, earthquakes but not volcanic eruptions.

Further, the legal framework for management of the underground water resources has also been established and only left with more modern innovative technologies and climate change smart agriculture practice to be established. But in saying that, the last El Niño drought event to Tonga was in 2014 and that event has been forecast for the later part of this year, which will bring intensive drought and water

scarcity for about one to two years. The impact of the last resulted in lost production and rise in prices of local food and increased consumption of imported food, which takes about nine years to stabilize.

A few days ago Tonga, as a small island state, took part in the FAO high-level event on agrifood transformation. Tonga adopts all the guidance and the pathway solutions to transform our agrifood system and accelerate progress towards increasing resilience and achieving SDG1, 2 and 10, and hope to implement it as soon as possible.

In conclusion, Chair, Tonga hereby reaffirms its commitment to FAO and hereby acknowledge that the Excellency partnership with the FAO sub-regional office in Samoa and very grateful for their extra effort and outreach in providing many regional and national projects, key trainings and workshops, meetings to the Southwest Pacific countries, including Tonga.

With that, Chair, may I offer my sincere wish to the success of this meeting and to be in great abundance to each and every one of us here today.

Thank you.