

**Statement delivered by
The Honourable Losaline Ma'asi
Minister for Agriculture, Food and Forests of the Kingdom of Tonga
on the occasion of the
41st Session of the FAO Conference, Rome, Italy (22-29 June 2019)
26 June 2019**

Mr. Chairman,
Excellencies,
Heads of Delegations,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am honoured to be here and to address the assembly on the status of agriculture development in Tonga.

The Kingdom of Tonga is an archipelago comprising 169 islands, of which 36 are inhabited with land area of 750 km² scattered over 700,000 km² of the southern Pacific Ocean. Tonga has a population of 100,600 people.

Tonga is surrounded by Fiji and Wallis and Futuna to the northwest, Samoa to the northeast, Niue to the east, Kermadec (part of New Zealand) to the southwest, and New Caledonia and Vanuatu to the farther west. Tonga lies 1,800 km north of New Zealand.

Agriculture is the predominant economic activity in Tonga. About 75 percent of Tonga's population lives in rural areas, with agriculture and fisheries as their main source of livelihoods.

Agriculture, the primary sector, is significant to the Tongan Economy.

1. Agriculture contributes 17 percent to Tonga's GDP.
2. Agriculture provides 44 percent of total exports, with agriculture on average contributing 83 percent, Forestry 3 percent Fisheries 15 percent to the Primary Sector.
3. Agriculture's contribution to GDP is based on agricultural exports and the domestic market sales.

Agriculture Development in Tonga faces many challenges:

Climate change

Tonga is second to Vanuatu in the world as most vulnerable to cyclones and disasters with increased intensity of category 5 cyclones. Climate change is reality – days are hotter; rainfall decreased; and sea level rise increased. Developing climate resilience agriculture is a real challenge in Tonga.

Developing nutrient and carbon smart, water smart, seed smart, livestock smart, forestry smart, and market smart technologies will be vital for agriculture production in Tonga.

Tonga will welcome joining the Global Alliance for Climate Smart Agriculture

Soil management

Tonga is blessed naturally very fertile soils but the reliance on fallow to regenerate fertility is becoming a problem since fallow period is now shortened because of pressure on land and as a consequence productivity is declining in most places in Tonga.

The decline in productivity is associated with soil organic matter depletion which is also associated with a cascade of secondary problems like increasing pests and diseases incidences, soil structural degradation, declining soil water holding capacity and increasing soil loss.

The increasing use of pesticides is quite alarming raising concerns of soil, ground water and air pollution.

GSP ITPS is helping our region and Tonga will welcome FAO assistance in this area.

Pests and diseases

With agriculture in Tonga becoming more mono-cropping – it resulted in increasing pests and diseases (including weeds). This has resulted in reliance on the use of pesticides (insecticides, fungicides, nematicides and herbicides). Tonga is involved in the Rotterdam and Stockholm Convention but we need support in these areas.

Loss of biodiversity

Agriculture development and demands for higher productivity has resulted in promotion of a few resilient varieties of each major crops with the consequence of loss of many of the traditional varieties of traditional root crops.

Land clearance for development, including agriculture, has also resulted in loss of some of the forestry and traditional ornamental and medicinal plants.

Unsustainable land preparation has also resulted in loss of soil biodiversity. Some of the microbes responsible for good soil and nutrient management are being affected.

This is a vital area for resilience agriculture and Tonga will welcome FAO assistance.

Water management

For higher production – good water management is needed. Most of Tonga's agriculture is rain dependant, thus is very susceptible to long droughts which are increasing in frequency.

Tonga will welcome assistance in water management for commercial crops.

Value chain

Identifying marketable crops and developing a viable value chain. Value chain analysis will help determine market systems in terms of their improved competitiveness, efficiency and reliability. Tonga will welcome assistance in value chain analysis.

Food and nutrition security

The challenges on food and nutrition security which we have strived to sustainably improve and to combat the impact of NCDs which is commonly occurred. NCDs have become one of the greatest challenges for Tonga's health system, where food is a main contributor to these challenges. The population relies on food imports for consumption especially on meat and we work on locally produced programmes with the farming communities for fruits, food and home-gardening, livestock production to strengthen import substitutions initiatives.

With women development programmes to mobilize the inclusion of the healthy eating nutrition programmes in home-gardening activities throughout the community development programmes.

Infrastructure

This is also a challenge that required immediate attention especially for exports facilities and for biosecurity requirements. Food safety is paramount for the wellbeing of our peoples but there is urgent need to have infrastructure in place, such as diagnostic laboratory.

Capacity Building needs strengthening and up-skilling of staff and farming communities to be capable in implementation of climate smart agriculture systems.

Talking about Migration – seasonal workers and Semi-skilled Labour Scheme. This is currently implemented to earn incomes by working in New Zealand or Australia for at least 6 months and return the following year. The majority are youths and could be a threat to the sector however, their time back at home can be focused on agricultural production programmes to sustainably maintain their interest in agriculture as source of livelihood within this period and in the long run with availability of the land for them.

Your Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Despite these challenges that we face, Tonga and the ministry has implemented strategies to reduce their impacts, as a small isolated island in the vast Pacific Ocean, we cannot do this alone. We have received the assistance of FAO and we need the strengthening of the partnership with FAO in alleviation of these challenges in order to be able to contribute in achieving the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda.

Once again, Tonga wants to thank Mr José Graziano da Silva for the 8 years serving FAO member countries including Tonga. We are looking forward to work and support the new Director-General Dr Qu Dongyu in years to come in his leadership.