

Statement delivered by
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President of the International Commission on Irrigation and Drainage
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Dear Chairperson, Excellencies, Distinguished Guests, Esteemed Colleagues, Dear Friends, Ladies and Gentlemen.

It is a real pleasure and a great privilege for me, on behalf of ICID, International Commission on Irrigation and Drainage, to convey my address to you in this very important event, excellently organized and hosted by the Food and Agriculture Organization of United Nations. On this respect, I would like to thank Director-General of FAO, Dr. Qu Dongyu for inviting me and giving me this opportunity. We are here, celebrating the 44th Ministerial Conference in the beautiful city of Rome, and I believe that there could be no better place to resume and symbolize all the issues underlying this Conference.

With the major SDGs intrinsic to FAO's overall theory of change, the Strategic Framework adopted in 2021 sought to support the 2030 Agenda through the transformation to more efficient, inclusive, resilient and sustainable agri-food systems. This approach has been synthesized in the Four Betters slogan: a better production, a better nutrition, a better environment, and a better life, leaving no one behind.

So, what is the role that Irrigation can play in achieving these goals?

A better production.

Yes, irrigation. Modern irrigation can indeed lead to a better crop production. It allows farmers to cultivate land where rainfall is insufficient or unreliable, and it can also increase yields and crop quality even in areas with adequate rainfall, by providing a more consistent and controllable water supply. Moreover, irrigation can enable multiple crop cycles per year, and allow for the cultivation of crops that wouldn't otherwise be possible in a particular region. As a matter of fact, it can operate as a buffer against the impacts of climate change, such as droughts and erratic rainfall patterns.

A better nutrition, we also said.

Yes, modern irrigation can significantly improve nutrition by increasing the availability and diversity of food, particularly nutritious crops like fruits and vegetables, at the heart of the Mediterranean diet, declared World Heritage by UNESCO as an intangible cultural heritage. I would like on this purpose to stress your attention on the fact that the Mediterranean diet is not only a diet, but it is a lifestyle that includes practices, knowledge, rituals and traditions related to nutrition, cultivation, fishing, and sharing of food. There is no doubt that irrigation, increasing the supply of water, can enable farmers to grow crops with higher nutritional value, improving both the quantity and the quality of food available for household consumption and for sale in the markets. Besides, it can help reduce the risk of malnutrition, and as many studies have shown that modern irrigation can improve diversity in children's diet especially, a key indicator of micronutrient intake and overall development.

A better environment.

While modern irrigation can raise agricultural productivity, improve quality of nutrition and ensure food security, it is crucial in order to minimize negative impacts on the environment. But in order to maximize its environmental benefits, while minimizing its potential harms, adequate strategies need to be adopted.

On the one hand, over-extraction of water for irrigation can deplete groundwater and surface water

resources, impacting ecosystems and water users. When misused, it can lead to soil salinization and waterlogging, if not managed properly. Moreover, diverting water for irrigation in an unsustainable manner can disrupt the natural flow of rivers, streams, and wetlands, impacting aquatic life and other species that depend on these water bodies, as happened in the Aral Sea. This is why it is essential to develop comprehensive water management plans.

On the other hand, modern approaches such as those provided by subterranean and ultra-low drip irrigation systems, capable of delivering water directly to plant roots, can greatly minimize water waste compared to traditional methods. Whereas excessive irrigation can lead to nutrient runoff (e.g., nitrogen and phosphorus from fertilizers) into water bodies, causing pollution and harming aquatic ecosystems. Also, efficient irrigation can reduce energy consumption for pumping water, leading to lower greenhouse gas emissions and potentially reducing human pressure on natural ecosystems for agriculture, especially in arid and semi-arid regions.

By prioritizing water use efficiency, implementing sound water management plans, and promoting sustainable agriculture practices, we can harness the positive potential of irrigation, while protecting our natural resources.

And last but not least, a better life, leaving no one behind.

There's no doubt that modern irrigation can guarantee better incomes for farmers, allowing them to cultivate a greater variety of crops, better adapting them to the volatility of markets and enabling them to purchase a wider variety of foods, improving their life conditions. Also, in many different areas of the world, it can greatly ameliorate the social condition of women, empowering them by assigning new responsibilities, allowing them to undertake new commercial activities out of their in some cases long lifetime lived villages and rural communities, reducing their overall workload, freeing up time for them for food preparation and household management.

This is why I strongly believe that modern irrigation, following principles of Interregional and International Cooperation, allowing for an easy and constant access to water, can ensure food security and meet the growing demand coming from the population, at the same time keeping a sustainable balance between demand and supply, preserving ecological and environmental requirements of the water environments.

And this is also why, I would like to leave from you with this strong message: I think that there can be no improvement or resilience of Agrifood systems, without the support of modern irrigation...

Dear Chairperson, Excellencies, Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

As President of ICID, I can say we will not leave any stone unturned. In the full awareness that we have a difficult task ahead of us, along with FAO of course, knowing that the trail might be a long and a difficult one, but never forgetting that "The journey of a thousand miles begins with one step..." And the first step, as we all know, has to be a good one. Let us venture for this journey, let us take this first step together.