

Statement of the Director-General

Special Event on Water for Agriculture in Africa, the Near East and the Small Island Developing States (SIDS)

FAO, Rome
22 November 2005

*Mr Chairperson,
Honourable Ministers,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,*

The state of hunger in the world

World food security is still dependent on the vagaries of the weather. Eighty percent of the world's food crises are linked to water and especially to drought.

Water and agriculture

There can be no reliable and productive agriculture without the control of water. Irrigated cropping currently covers 20 percent of arable land but accounts for 40 percent of total food output. By 2030, agriculture will have to feed an additional two billion people. Higher agricultural productivity will therefore become increasingly important in the next years and will rest essentially on investment in the control of water.

Several types of intervention will be required according to national and regional characteristics. The short-term priority will be small-scale water harnessing, irrigation and drainage works carried out at rural community level with local labour. Their cost is low, their technology simple and their maintenance easy. In addition, beneficiary participation in their design and realization will permit beneficiary appropriation which will in turn facilitate sustainable participatory management.

The medium-term focus will be on the rehabilitation of large existing hydro-agricultural works that have required significant investment but that are often used below capacity, for technical and economic reasons and for institutional and social reasons.

Long-term action will focus on the development of large river basins and, in some cases, on inter-basin transfers. The implementation or reinforcement of technical, financial, political and coordination mechanisms between riparian countries is an essential condition for the success of the major works to be undertaken. Such programmes extend beyond the framework of agriculture into the fields of energy and transport in particular. They will require extensive investment over several decades.

Regional outlook

The investment needed in the control of water for agriculture varies considerably between regions. **Africa** is the only continent to have experienced a reduction in agricultural output per inhabitant. Only 7 percent of Africa's arable land is irrigated (4 percent in sub-Saharan Africa) against 38 percent in Asia. Yet, Africa only uses 4 percent of its renewable water resources (1.2 percent in sub-Saharan Africa) against 14 percent in Asia. The report of the Commission

for Africa *Our Common Interest* estimated that US\$2 billion of investment were needed each year to develop water control for agriculture in Africa.

The Near East is the most arid region of the world with the highest levels of water deficit: water supply in 16 countries of the region amounts to less than 500 m³ per person per year, compared to the global average of more than 7000 m³. Irrigation has always been the cornerstone of agriculture in this region and its water resources are often exploited beyond their replenishment capacity. Moreover, growing urban and industrial demand for water associated with high population growth translates as a gradual reduction in volume of water available to agriculture.

Any increase in agricultural productivity requires an improvement in irrigation technologies and a diversification in production towards crops with high added value. Other components of good water management in this part of the world are the recycling of treated waste waters and a better control of soil drainage and salinity.

Small Island Developing States also face serious challenges in terms of water resources. Most of these small islands have limited water resources, with seasonal watercourses and vulnerable underground reserves. Their aquifers are often overexploited with the consequent intrusion of saline sea water. These countries need investment to rehabilitate and modernize their small-scale irrigation schemes and programmes to adopt appropriate irrigation technologies that will help raise the productivity of land and water resources. This is an area where farmer training is also fundamental.

FAO initiatives

*Mr Chairperson,
Honourable Ministers,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,*

For ten years, FAO's Special Programme for Food Security (SPFS) has been pursuing localized actions to strengthen agriculture and improve the living conditions of rural populations. Water control is a key component of the SPFS: through pilot projects, the programme tests water control techniques in agriculture with a view to their subsequent large-scale adoption. Since 1995, US\$800 million provided by donors and national governments have been invested in programmes designed by FAO to improve food security.

The future

However, progress is still far too slow, despite all the efforts made. Considerable investment in infrastructure, technology and the development of farmer capacity is needed in Africa, the Near East and the Small Island Developing States if we are to achieve the Millennium Development Goals. A combination of public and private investment implicating governments and their development partners will be required to achieve all these goals.

The development of rural water for human and animal consumption and for crops has been badly neglected in past decades. Yet, irrigation represents 70 percent of the world's water consumption. It is time to reconsider the crucial role of water in agricultural development programmes in the rural sector.

It is my hope that this Round Table will produce a fruitful exchange of opinions and experiences between countries sharing similar problems, reflecting the importance of water control in agriculture in national and regional, economic and social development programmes.

Thank you for your kind attention.