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Thirty-second FAO Regional Conference for Latin America and the Caribbean

Buenos Aires, Argentina, 26 to 30 March 2012

STATEMENT BY THE DIRECTOR-GENERAL

*Honourable Minister of Agriculture, Livestock and Fisheries of Argentina,
Honourable Deputy Foreign Affairs Minister of Argentina,
Chairperson of the Regional Conference,
Chairperson of the Regional Conference during the 2010–2012 period,
Vice-Chairpersons of the Regional Conference,
Independent Chairperson of the FAO Council,
Chairperson of the Committee on World Food Security,
Distinguished Ministers and Delegates,
OIE Regional Representatives, on whose behalf I greet all representatives of international and
regional technical cooperation organizations present today,
Civil society representatives,
FAO Regional Representative for Latin America and the Caribbean,
FAO Representative in Argentina,
Secretary of the Regional Conference, on whose behalf I greet all FAO staff present at this
Conference,
Ladies, Gentlemen and esteemed colleagues and friends,*

On behalf of FAO and all those attending this Thirty-second FAO Regional Conference for Latin America and the Caribbean, I wish to extend my deepest gratitude to the Government and people of Argentina for their hospitality and support for the organization of this Conference.

I have the great honour of participating in the FAO Regional Conference for Latin America and the Caribbean for the fourth time, and for the first time as Director-General of FAO, a post to which I owe the trust you have placed in me.

Since the war, we have made great strides forward in agriculture and there is more food available per person today than in 1945 when FAO was founded.

However, we have had less success in eradicating hunger. Nearly 925 million people are still undernourished and more than half the global population suffers from some form of malnutrition, in a world that produces enough food for all but that, historically, has distributed it very unequally. With 50 million of its citizens suffering from hunger, Latin America and the Caribbean is no exception.

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Until the day when every citizen has an assured right to a healthy and adequate diet, FAO should continue to focus on promoting food security and creating a world free from shortages – two principles that underpinned FAO's foundation in 1945.

To support countries in this aim, the Organization must adapt to a world that has undergone profound changes, where the challenges of food and agriculture are combining and interconnecting with other energy, climate and financial challenges.

To position ourselves in this changed world and define the global challenges we must meet, in January 2012 I launched a participatory strategic planning process, led by prominent Argentine economist, Dr Martín Piñeiro. This will contribute to the review and development of FAO's main strategy and planning documents, and to adjustments to its Programme of Work and Budget, as proposed for this Conference.

This cycle of FAO Regional Conferences, which began in Vietnam in mid-March with the Regional Conference for Asia and the Pacific, has launched formal talks on the seven global challenges that we have identified in the areas of food security and agriculture.

The first challenge is to switch to more sustainable patterns of production and consumption, in a context of climate change. At present we use excessive resources for production. Let me give you an example: it takes 1 500 litres of water to produce one kilogram of grain but 15 000 litres to produce one kilogram of meat. We possess the technology to make production more sustainable, including direct seeding and integrated production management to reduce the use of fertilizers and pesticides.

At the same time, our second challenge is to reduce losses and waste, and to improve the quality of our food. Nearly 1.3 billion tonnes of food – approximately one-third of annual production – is lost or wasted every year. Consumers in rich countries throw away around 222 million tonnes of food, equivalent to the annual net production of sub-Saharan Africa. We must also improve nutrition and nutrition education because, alongside the large number of hungry people, there is a growing band of obese people. Such changes will make it possible to provide the world's population with a healthy diet while increasing production by less than current estimates.

With the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) just months away, we have both the opportunity and obligation to explore convergence between food security and climate change agendas and to choose a more sustainable and inclusive development path.

The third challenge is to promote food security and I am confident that we will be able to make up lost ground quickly in the fight against hunger. On my instructions, FAO is implementing a plan of action to integrate emergency response and development programmes, scaling up successful initiatives and working in concert with other partners under the leadership of governments. Our immediate focus is the Horn of Africa and the Sahel region. However, it is an approach that could work in other countries with severe food insecurity that seek our support. Haiti, in the Caribbean region, and Guatemala in Central America are two clear examples.

The fourth challenge is to improve the livelihoods and living conditions of the rural population, including smallholder farmers, foresters and fisher folk. In this International Year of Cooperatives, it is useful to highlight the cooperative sector's role in organizing producers and helping to fight hunger. Overcoming rural poverty and promoting regional development remain the greatest challenges to preventing our fields from becoming barren and our cities paralysed.

We also face challenges in ensuring fairer and more inclusive food and agriculture systems and strengthening global governance mechanisms. May I congratulate governments, civil society and the private sector for successfully concluding the negotiations for voluntary guidelines on responsible

governance of tenure of land, fisheries and forests in the context of countries' food security, which will be submitted to the Committee on Food Security for final adoption in May 2012.

The seventh and final challenge is to increase the resilience of households to agriculture and food security threats and shocks. As Josué de Castro taught us, hunger is not an invention of nature but of humans. The Horn of Africa is a clear example: while we cannot prevent drought, we can stop it from turning into famine. This calls for the implementation of risk management programmes and actions to meet the specific needs of countries and regions, such as the Caribbean islands, Central America and the Andean countries, which are more vulnerable to extreme weather events.

Ladies and gentlemen, during this Conference we look forward to receiving your comments regarding these challenges from a Latin American and Caribbean perspective, for subsequent inclusion in FAO's strategic planning.

This Regional Conference will also define FAO's work priorities in Latin America and the Caribbean, a region that is experiencing the paradox of living with hunger despite having plenty of food.

Our region's food insecurity stems from a problem of access to food, which is still our Achilles heel: while Latin America has a surplus of food, many do not have the money to buy it. Sadly, this arises from the social and economic inequalities that still characterize the region. Unfortunately, Latin America and the Caribbean remains the world's most unequal region, especially in terms of access to land and water.

As more than half of extremely poor Latin American and Caribbean people live in rural areas, and many are family farmers and peasants producing most of the region's food, we look to them to solve our problem of food insecurity.

We do so in a context of rising and volatile food prices. On the positive side, high prices may spur investment and innovation to intensify production sustainably, increase exports and encourage local production, including by recovering traditional foods. In this respect, I wish to emphasize that 2013 has been declared International Year of Quinoa, and to seek your support for implementing it.

As we have seen, Latin American and Caribbean countries have strengthened their social safety nets, with the inclusion of income-transfer and school feeding programmes, and supported local small-scale production in response to the recent crisis. This strategy has worked well but its impact is even greater when production and social aspects are linked, creating local food supply and consumption chains. For instance, programmes to procure produce from family farms for school feeding programmes create markets for producers and provide schoolchildren with fresh, high-quality food. This is the type of win-win solution we should promote.

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is because we believe that hunger can and should be eradicated that ours was the first region to adopt this goal. I now call upon you to reaffirm your commitment to the Latin America and the Caribbean without Hunger 2025 initiative (ALCSH 2025).

This initiative is country-owned and should be embraced by all – governments, parliaments, private sector, civil society and academia – because the fight against hunger should not be simply a government commitment, it should be the decision of society as a whole.

The commitment to food security has now cut across national borders and been made a priority in the economic and political integration agendas of regional bodies such as the Central American Integration System (SICA), Caribbean Community (CARICOM), Andean Community (CAN),

Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR), Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) and Organization of American States (OAS), as well as in the work programmes of agencies such as the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture (IICA), International Labour Organization (ILO) and other partners. It is FAO's belief that we need to work together, and the Organization is contributing to this goal by sharing its own experience and that of other countries in the world on food security and rural development.

Ladies and gentlemen,

FAO also expects its discussions to help identify any necessary adjustments to the Organization's regional presence to enable it to address the specificities of the Latin American and Caribbean region, which are contingent upon the availability of resources and approval by the FAO Council and Conference.

This is crucial to FAO decentralization, which is a priority of my administration. Decentralization means a new focus on delivering results at country level. I can assure you that FAO decentralization will not be at the expense of weakening FAO's technical or normative capacity. FAO's field and normative programmes complement and strengthen one another.

To facilitate the necessary changes, I would like to reiterate my invitation to middle-income countries at last December's FAO Council to consider bearing a larger share of FAO programme costs in order to release resources for countries with lower levels of development.

I also wish to encourage countries in the region to step up their exchanges of experience through South-South cooperation. FAO can help by facilitating cooperation and providing technical training opportunities for young professionals. I shall be pleased to provide further information to interested governments in bilateral discussions.

May I conclude by thanking you for attending this Regional Conference and reiterating my gratitude to the Government and people of Argentina for hosting this meeting, which I am certain will be a great success.

Thank you very much.