

**Statement delivered by  
Mr Jose Alpuche, Executive Director, Ministry of Agriculture of Belize  
on the occasion of the  
41<sup>st</sup> Session of the FAO Conference, Rome, Italy (22-29 June 2019)  
25 June 2019**

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, a pleasant good afternoon to you all.

Mr Vice Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to address this august body and let me congratulate you, and the Chairman, for your election to the Chairmanship of this 41st Session of the Conference.

I must start by paying tribute to the sterling work of our outgoing Director-General Dr José Graziano da Silva. His tireless work to reform the FAO and at the same time refine the delivery of service to member states must be commended. We wish him well in his future endeavours.

We must also congratulate Dr Qu Dongyu on his resounding mandate and welcome him as our new Director-General. We listened keenly to his vision for the FAO and we look forward to an increased presence of the FAO in the Caribbean Region as we confront and overcome the challenges facing our countries.

Mr Chairman,

In the past my country received and absorbed one fifth of our population as refugees from sister countries of Central America. We still have a steady stream and of course we are watching very closely the developing crisis in the region.

We agree with the notion that migration should be a choice, not a necessity. We would therefore like to focus our brief remarks on a few critical elements required to create an environment where people want to remain and can earn an honest living. Agriculture and food production have pivotal roles to play in this. Our primary job must therefore be to create an environment where farmers can conduct business in a sustainable and profitable manner. To do this we must help to mitigate the risks and improve their chance of success. Climate variability and climate change, agriculture health and fair market access, are key areas we believe requires special attention.

Our region is very susceptible to devastating hurricanes that set our economies back every time we are hit. Of course, agriculture and food production are most vulnerable to these weather events.

In addition, the unpredictability of weather patterns now means it is not uncommon for us to experience drought and flooding in the same year. We have been working closely with the FAO, IFAD and many other agencies and International Financial Institutions (IFI's) to implement climate smart agriculture policies and practices. One critical area requiring much more work, is to convince the IFI's to help us develop sustainable funding instruments for disaster recovery. These should allow our small farmers the access to direct financial assistance to recover from catastrophic events. Commercial agriculture insurance is too expensive and at the moment, no entity in a small country like Belize, can afford the premiums. It is an urgent matter requiring immediate attention as there as many other countries in a similar situation to us.

Avian influenza, Early Mortality Syndrome in aquaculture, Panama Race 4 disease in bananas and African swine flu are only a few of the many serious agriculture health challenges we are all facing today. As a result of increased trade and passenger travel, these challenges are global. We have strong support from the OIE and our own regional and national agencies, but this issue still requires more support. We believe the FAO can play an enhanced role especially as it relates to mainstreaming biosecurity awareness and education. Like climate events, these agriculture health events can literally wipe out production overnight. However, with health events, even after production returns, regaining market access is challenging as countries remain wary of importation.

What is the point of producing if we can't sell our product at a viable price? We all hear this refrain from our farmers and food processors. While we have advanced tremendously in reforming our domestic markets, the production and international trade in agriculture products is still heavily subsidized and, in many cases, dumped into our open markets. This corresponds with increasing non-tariff barriers to export trade especially through private standards being applied. We should all avoid using market access as leverage in migration issues as it runs counter to the spirit of this 41st Conference. We need fair trade terms that will allow our small producers to stay where they are and produce to earn an honest living. From this perspective we call on the FAO to reinsert itself in the trade agenda.

Mr Chairman,

These are only three of many areas where we could see the FAO leverage its tremendous influence to help us bring about meaningful change that will translate to increased socio/economic security for our rural population, increased rural development and the eventual lessening of forced migration. Let us work tirelessly together to make migration a choice, not a necessity. Belize is ready to play its part. I thank you.