

Opening Speech of FAO Assistant Director-General and Regional
Representative for the Near East and North Africa Region,
Abdessalam Ould Ahmed,
at the 33rd session of the Regional Conference for the Near East

Your Excellencies,

Representatives of the NENA countries,

Representatives of the observer states, international organisations, and nongovernmental organisations

Ladies and Gentlemen

In my name and on behalf of FAO Director-General José Graziano da Silva, I am pleased and honoured to welcome you all to the Senior Officers Meeting of the 33rd Regional Conference for the Near East and North Africa Region (NENA).

Please allow me first to thank the Lebanese Republic and His Excellency Lebanese Agriculture Minister Akram Cheyayeb and Agriculture Ministry Director General Engineer Louis Lahoud for the tremendous efforts they are making to ensure the success of this conference.

Your Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

2015 marked the end of an important era of international cooperation for development, as the period the international community set to achieve the Millennium Development Goals came to an end. Initial assessment shows that the impact of that period on the NENA region varied.

Fifteen countries in the region succeeded in realizing the millennium goal on hunger. These are Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, and the United Arab Emirates

Some of these countries succeeded in reducing food shortages by 50% between 1990 and 2015, while others managed to keep food shortage levels under 5%. General food indicators improved, but chronic malnutrition remains high. The level of stunted growth among children under five years of age improved, as well as the levels of anaemia and other problems related to micronutrient deficiency, but the numbers of those who are obese or overweight increased in all the countries of the region.

These results were achieved thanks to persistent efforts on several fronts. The NENA countries placed food security at the top of their priorities, increasing their agricultural production, greatly improving their food exports, and implementing social protection programmes on a large scale. Those policies resulted in the availability of more food and improved the ability to obtain food and reduce extreme poverty in rural and urban regions.

But country-level achievements do not reflect the full picture in the NENA region, where repeated crises and wars led to an unprecedented rise in the number of refugees and internally displaced persons and to the deterioration of major economies in the region.

The number of chronically undernourished in the region as a whole, thus, rose from 16.5 million to 33 million between 1990 and 2015, and those suffering from food insecurity rose by 8.2% in 2014.

Those results constituted a major setback for the war on hunger in the region. They also went completely against the global trends, as the numbers of people suffering from hunger and living below the poverty line dropped in all the other regions.

The food security challenge in the region is added to other huge and longstanding challenges, headed by water scarcity, soil degradation, and the risks of climate change, rural backwardness, higher unemployment -- especially among youths -- and gender inequality amid constant population growth.

Your Excellencies

Ladies and Gentlemen

In order to face challenges posed by food security and sustainable agricultural development, the 32nd Session of the FAO Regional Conference for the Near East has endorsed three initiatives on water scarcity; building resilience for enhanced food security and nutrition; and achieving sustainable small-scale agriculture for inclusive development. The 32nd Session has entrusted the FAO with drafting these initiatives, conducting necessary research and programmes, speeding up efforts to promote and drum up support for the initiatives, building partnerships with international and regional stakeholders, and implementing the initiatives.

These initiatives have already been launched in the past two years, starting with the water scarcity initiative, endorsed by the Arab Ministerial Water Council of the Arab League as a support programme for the Arab Water Security Strategy. In this context, several projects have been launched, mainly in water-governance and solar-powered water-harvesting and irrigation systems. Also, new technologies have been introduced to improve water-use efficiency and crop water-productivity in a number of countries in the region.

The initiative of building resilience for enhanced food security and nutrition has been launched with a focus on countries affected by crises/conflict, particularly Syria, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Yemen and Palestine.

The sustainable small-scale agriculture for inclusive development initiative was launched recently after the completion of field studies including six countries and wide-ranging consultations with experts as well as regional and international partners. It will be strengthened in the next two years.

Work continues on intensifying consultations with countries and exchanging expertise on core issues related to food security, sustainable agricultural development and natural resources. Efforts to combat agricultural pests and animal diseases have increased, particularly in the fight against the desert locust, Avian Influenza, coronavirus, and the red palm weevil.

In parallel with this fieldwork, decentralisation in the region has been enhanced. The FAO has backed up its country offices in Lebanon, Sudan, Yemen, Syria, and Iraq, and opened a new one in Jordan. The Regional Office has been reinforced with new technical capabilities.

Meanwhile, USD 154 million have been spent to support projects and programmes in the region, a 7.6-percent increase on 2012-2013 figures. I would like to highlight here the support provided by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia for humanitarian assistance programmes directed at farmers in Iraq and Yemen, which totalled USD 19.5 million.

Your Excellencies

Ladies and Gentlemen

The agenda of the 33rd Session of FAO Regional Conference has been worked out in close consultation with the group of the Near East and North Africa, which has contributed to identifying the main topics of this session. The documents on core issues presented to you have been thoroughly discussed at many meetings as well as country and regional workshops in order to ensure that these documents meet the priorities and aspirations of regional countries.

Therefore, the document on livestock resource was high on the agenda of meetings in Doha, Muscat and Cairo. And the paper discussing small-scale farmers was drafted based on the outcome of national workshops in Lebanon, Tunisia, Egypt, Sudan, Mauritania and Morocco as well as a regional meeting in Cairo. The document on fisheries was looked into at the meetings of the Regional Commission for Fisheries (RECOFI) in Oman, as well as workshops in Rome on aquaculture and a subregional workshop on the Blue Growth Initiative (BGI) in Algiers.

The conference's agenda will also examine documents and hold sideline activities related to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the climate change agreement, the Global Nutrition Agenda and the Committee of World Food Security.

The conference held consultations with civil society organisations in Lebanon to brief them on the agenda and make use of their views.

Your Excellencies

Ladies and Gentlemen

The FAO's action plan in the region is an integral part of the organisation's framework and Medium Term Plan 2014-2017. The plan is being executed in line with FAO methods that precisely determine projected results on the level of each country as well as regionally, which strengthens the processes of analysis, monitoring within FAO and accountability.

We look forward to receiving your recommendations, guidelines and remarks, which will form the first reference for setting out FAO priorities and improving its action plan in the region.

Thank you