



## FAO Statements UNECE Regional Forum 2-3 April 2025

### Statement for the Closing

FAO plays a key role in advancing the SDGs by promoting sustainable agrifood systems focusing on the “Four Betters”: better production, better nutrition, better environment, and better life for all.

Let me highlight a few aspects related to the five SDGs under focus.

Achieving **SDG 3** requires a cross-sectoral approach, recognizing the link between human, animal, plant, and environmental health. FAO’s One Health approach works with governments and partners to improve food safety, reduce zoonotic disease risks, and promote sustainable agricultural practices.

Unhealthy diets are a leading cause of early death. In 2021, 10 percent of all deaths were linked to poor diets, and 30 percent of cardiovascular disease deaths were attributed to dietary risks. FAO, together with WHO, has outlined principles of healthy diets to help reduce diet-related diseases. FAO also supports countries in developing Food System-Based Dietary Guidelines to promote better nutrition and public health.

Turning to **SDG 5**, gender equality in agrifood systems is essential for sustainable development. While women in the region have relatively high education levels, they are overrepresented in informal, unpaid. From 60 to 87 percent of women working in agriculture are informal or family workers and only 6.5 to 31 per cent of agricultural holdings are managed by women.

FAO works to close the gender gap by promoting women’s land rights, advocating for gender-responsive policies, and addressing climate-induced inequalities. Empowering women is not only a matter of fairness but is also key to food security and economic growth, as closing the gender gap could lift millions out of food insecurity.

On **SDG 8**, investing in youth is vital for transforming agrifood systems. Many young people, especially in rural areas, lack access to decent jobs, training, and resources. FAO supports inclusive policies, agricultural education modernization, and youth-led agribusinesses to create opportunities. FAO calls for greater investments in youth-centered policies, skills development, and inclusive financial systems.

The digital divide remains a significant challenge for smallholder farmers and rural communities across the region. Ensuring an inclusive and effective digital transition is not just an opportunity—it is a necessity for sustainable agriculture and rural development.

The FAO Digital Villages Initiative aims to digitally transform rural areas by fostering adoption of smart farming by farmers, increasing access to services digitally, and holistically providing new opportunities for rural livelihoods.

I would like to also recognize the vital role of migrant workers in agrifood systems. Ensuring their rights, including occupational safety and access to justice, is fundamental to just and sustainable food systems.

On **SDG 14**, seas provide essential food and livelihoods, supporting 600 million people directly or indirectly and providing essential nutrition for 4.3 billion people worldwide. Aquatic foods are rich in protein and micronutrients, reducing the risk of major diseases. Small-scale fisheries play an essential, but - unfortunately - still undervalued role in food security and rural economies.

FAO's Blue Transformation supports science-based, ecosystem-driven fisheries management, promotes sustainable aquaculture, and ensures inclusive aquatic food value chains.

FAO calls for stronger public-private partnerships to scale up innovation and sustainable practices in aquatic food systems, ensuring a resilient and food-secure future for all.

Lastly, on **SDG 17** I would like to emphasize the importance of data-driven decision-making, and strengthening multistakeholder partnerships, to ensure that global commitments lead to concrete results.

The time for action is now. With regional and global collaboration and commitment, we can build a healthier, more sustainable, and inclusive ECA region.

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## Key messages for the SDG roundtables

### SDG 3

Achieving SDG 3 requires an integrated, cross-sectoral approach recognizing the interdependence of human, animal, plant, and environmental health. FAO leads this effort through the One Health approach, working with governments and partners to enhance food safety, reduce zoonotic disease risks, and promote sustainable agricultural practices.

Food safety is a critical pillar of public health. Contaminated food and water contribute to a significant burden of disease worldwide. FAO works with countries to strengthen food safety systems, ensuring safe, nutritious food reaches consumers, reducing foodborne diseases and supporting food security and nutrition.

Unhealthy diets are a leading cause of early death. In 2021, 10 percent of all deaths were linked to poor diets, and 30 percent of cardiovascular disease deaths were attributed to dietary risks. FAO, together with WHO, has outlined principles of healthy diets—adequate, diverse, balanced, and

moderate—to help reduce diet-related diseases. In Europe and Central Asia, FAO supports countries in developing Food System-Based Dietary Guidelines to promote better nutrition and public health.

Environmental health is indivisible from human health. FAO, under the One Health approach, supports integrated pest management to reduce pesticide use and strengthen policies for their application, while building capacity for responsible veterinary drug use to combat antimicrobial resistance.

Environmental pollution causes over 9 million deaths annually, yet the impact of foodborne diseases linked to agricultural water and soil pollution remains underestimated due to a lack of comprehensive data. FAO emphasizes the need to monitor soil and water pollution to better understand its role in foodborne illnesses and health risks. This is crucial for achieving SDG target 3.9, which aims to reduce deaths from hazardous chemicals and pollution but lacks key indicators for water and soil pollution.

A sustainable, healthier future depends on integrated action. Therefore, FAO advocates for embedding the One Health approach into policies, strengthening governance, and fostering global collaboration to build resilient food systems, safeguard human health, and protect our planet.

## **SDG 5**

Women are the backbone of agrifood systems in Europe and Central Asia, yet they face deep-rooted structural inequalities. While women in the region have relatively high education levels, they are overrepresented in informal, unpaid, and manual labor, with only 6.5 to 31 per cent of agricultural holdings managed by women. Their contributions are vital to food security, biodiversity, and rural economies, yet they remain largely invisible in decision-making and resource allocation.

FAO's research shows that women in the region have limited access also to land, water, financial services, advisory support, and technology. Only 10 percent of rural women benefit from advisory services, and just 5 percent own agricultural machinery. These disparities undermine economic growth and food security. The recent FAO Report on the Status of Women in Agrifood Systems found that closing the gender gap in farm productivity could increase global GDP by nearly USD 1 trillion and lift 45 million people out of food insecurity.

Despite legal frameworks supporting women's land rights, implementation remains a challenge. FAO is helping translate statutory rights into practice by raising awareness, providing legal aid, and strengthening women's leadership in land institutions.

Financial exclusion is another barrier. Women in agrifood systems face discriminatory norms, lack of collateral, and limited training, restricting their ability to invest and build economic security. FAO is advocating for gender-responsive financial policies and business models that ensure women's inclusion in agrifood systems.

Climate change deepens these inequalities. FAO's report highlights that female-headed households lose more income from heat stress and from floods than male-headed households. Climate policies must prioritize gender equality and provide targeted support for women.

Finally, data gaps remain a challenge. Without sex-disaggregated, policy-relevant data, effective action is impossible. FAO is committed to improving data collection and analysis to inform better policies and investments.

To break down these barriers, FAO is scaling up gender-transformative approaches, addressing legal, financial, and social constraints, and working with governments to change discriminatory social norms, policies, and laws.

Ensuring women's full and equal participation in agrifood systems is essential for a resilient, food-secure, and sustainable future.

## SDG 8

Investing in youth is key to transforming agrifood systems and ensuring sustainable economic growth. Agrifood systems provide employment opportunities across farming, processing, distribution, and marketing, particularly in low- and middle-income countries.

However, many young people, particularly in rural areas, continue to face barriers to decent employment. FAO is committed to fostering inclusive policies and partnerships that address these challenges, ensuring that rural youth—especially young women and marginalized groups—have access to training, resources, social protection and financial services.

FAO is also actively working to modernize agricultural education, promote work-based learning, and support youth-led agribusinesses, ensuring that young people have access to decent jobs. Targeted strategies such as mentorship programs, cooperatives, and market access initiatives are essential for unlocking their potential and achieving SDG 8.

A major priority is ending child labor in agrifood systems. FAO is working with governments to transform agricultural practices, promote safe working conditions, and ensure children can access education rather than being trapped in exploitative labour.

In addition, while digital financial services have expanded, rural youth—especially young women—continue to face challenges in accessing credit and financial tools. FAO is supporting initiatives to strengthen financial regulations, fintech solutions, and literacy programmes, ensuring young entrepreneurs can thrive in agrifood systems.

FAO calls for greater investments in youth-centered policies, skills development, and inclusive financial systems to drive agrifood transformation. By empowering young people, we can build more resilient rural economies and create a sustainable future for all.

We must also recognize the vital role of migrant workers in agrifood systems. FAO is advocating for fair recruitment, safe migration pathways, and stronger protections for migrant workers. Ensuring their rights, including occupational safety and access to justice, is fundamental to a just and sustainable food system.

The digital divide remains a significant challenge for smallholder farmers and rural communities across the region. While digitalization offers numerous benefits—including higher productivity, improved resource efficiency, climate resilience, and better market access—many farmers are still unable to leverage these opportunities due to several barriers:

- Gaps in the rural digital Infrastructure and the availability of meaningful internet connectivity in rural areas persist
- Smallholder farmers and especially women cannot afford smart farming equipment, or precision agriculture solutions, even when available. These solutions are essential for the green transition.

- Many smallholder farmers either lack awareness of the benefits of digitalization, lack the skills to use digital tools effectively, or do not believe that digital solutions will bring tangible improvements to their farming operations.

The digitalization of agriculture is a complex and multifaceted process, influenced by several factors. Yet, it is absolutely essential for the future of farming. Without digitalization, smallholder farmers risk being left behind, unable to compete in modern markets, adapt to climate challenges, or access critical resources and services.

Ensuring an inclusive and effective digital transition also in agriculture is not just an opportunity—it is a necessity for sustainable agriculture and rural development.

The FAO Regional Office in Europe and Central Asia is implementing an integrated programme for the digitalization of agriculture in the region, targeted at developing the enabling environment through policies and skills, while supporting Governments' digitalizing their systems and offering digital public services to farmers. In addition, the FAO Digital Villages Initiative aims to digitally transform rural areas by fostering adoption of smart farming by farmers, increasing access to services digitally, and holistically providing new opportunities for rural livelihoods.

## **SDG 14**

Seas are a critical source of food and livelihoods, supporting 600 million people directly or indirectly and providing essential nutrition for 4.3 billion people worldwide. Aquatic foods are rich in protein and micronutrients, enhancing cognitive development, improving birth outcomes, and reducing the risk of major diseases. However, to maximize their contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals, we must transform our aquatic food systems.

FAO's Blue Transformation is a comprehensive framework guiding this transformation. It supports science-based, ecosystem-driven fisheries management, promotes sustainable aquaculture, and ensures inclusive aquatic food value chains.

However, as overfishing threatens marine ecosystems and food security, urgent action is required. Evidence shows that when fisheries are effectively managed, stocks can recover. FAO is working with countries to implement the Port State Measures Agreement and combat illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing. Strengthening fisheries reporting and management is critical for safeguarding seas biodiversity and coastal livelihoods.

Small-scale fisheries play an essential but undervalued role in food security and rural economies. Through the FAO Small-Scale Fisheries Guidelines, we are supporting countries in developing National Plans of Action that empower small-scale fishers, ensuring fair access to resources and decision-making.

Aquaculture holds immense potential for food security and economic development, particularly for women and youth. FAO's Guidelines for Sustainable Aquaculture help countries expand production while ensuring environmental and social sustainability.

Building sustainable fish value chains is another priority. FAO is working with partners to minimize food loss and waste, enhance traceability and biosecurity, and improve working conditions across the supply chain.

Finally, achieving Blue Transformation requires targeted investments. FAO calls for stronger public-private partnerships to scale up innovation and sustainable practices in aquatic food systems, ensuring a resilient and food-secure future for all.

The time for action is now. With global collaboration and commitment, we can harness the power of our seas to build a healthier, more sustainable, and inclusive Europe and Central Asia region.

## SDG 17

The Food and Agriculture Organization is committed to enhancing food security and nutrition across Europe and Central Asia, where diverse economic and agricultural landscapes demand tailored approaches.

To increase aid development flows, FAO emphasizes clear targets for financial support, especially for agrifood system transformation aligned with the 2030 Agenda. In high-income EU countries, frameworks like the European Green Deal and the Common Agricultural Policy offer pathways for aligning financial flows with sustainable agriculture. Conversely, economies in transition, particularly those grappling with *post-Soviet* infrastructure challenges, require targeted support, including capacity building and food safety measures.

Technological solutions are essential to boosting resilience and mitigating climate impacts in the agrifood sector. FAO promotes technology transfer to narrow the productivity gap between high-income countries and low- and middle-income countries where institutional weaknesses and land tenure complexities slow progress.

Enhancing global coordination is key, particularly in stabilizing food imports in net food-importing countries like landlocked developing countries. Financial instruments, including food stock mechanisms and climate finance, are necessary to address shocks exacerbated by the *war in Ukraine*. FAO's collaboration with institutions like the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development is vital in financing rural infrastructure and private sector growth.

FAO advocates for strengthened market transparency through data and information, reducing uncertainty in food markets. It supports a fair, rules-based trading system, essential for food security. FAO plays a key role in initiatives like the G20 Agricultural Market Information System (AMIS), improving market transparency and policy coordination.

Strengthening multistakeholder partnerships and investing in data and science-based decision-making are integral to driving sustainable agrifood system transformation and achieving the 2030 Agenda. FAO connects science, technology, and innovation to drive inclusive and resilient agrifood systems. With shared vision and collective action, we can turn commitments into results, making sustainable development a reality.