



Address by the Director-General
on the occasion of the Khalifa International Date Palm Award,
United Arab Emirates, 7 April 2008

Your Highness Sheikh Nahayan Mubarak Al Nahyan,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I should like to begin by thanking you very sincerely for your invitation to this important event. It is an honour and a privilege to address your assembly.

I also wish to evoke, with all the respect that is due to him, the memory of His Highness Sheikh Zayid bin Sultan al Nahyan whose vision led to sustainable date palm production in the United Arab Emirates.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As you know, the date palm, cited in the Koran, is the most important tree for all the populations of the region. For centuries it has represented a remarkable source of survival. It is an integral part of the regional culture.

Thanks to His Highness Sheikh Zayid bin Sultan al Nahyan, there are now 40 million date palms in the United Arab Emirates. This is the largest production capacity in the whole region. The untiring efforts of this great Statesman will, I am sure, succeed in converting a dream into reality: that of transforming desert into oasis while safeguarding the environment.

In your region, FAO is promoting a network of exchange and dissemination of information. In this connection, I have the pleasure to announce the imminent opening of an FAO subregional office in the United Arab Emirates which will be tasked with coordinating and acting promptly in response to requests for technical assistance. I should also like to thank the member countries of the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf (GCC) for the support they have given to the opening of this office.

The vision of His Highness Sheikh Khalifa Bin Zayed Al Nahayan, President of the United Arab Emirates, founder and patron of Khalifa International Date Palm Award, remains an FAO priority in its work in your region, whether conserving the environment, safeguarding mangroves and promoting Organic Agriculture in Abu Dhabi or developing fish farming in the communities of Fujairah is key to establishing a sustainable approach to a cleaner environment in the UAE.

We are already very active in the neighbouring countries and, working together with the member countries of the GCC and Yemen, we are convinced that we can further enhance cooperation and development for the benefit of the populations concerned.

In the words of His Highness Sheikh Zayid bin Sultan al Nahyan: *“Present me agriculture and I will give you civilization”*.

As you know, Ladies and Gentlemen, agriculture today faces new challenges.

The impact of climate change on food security, the focus on biofuels and higher food prices are moving agriculture back to the centre of global concerns. As I said at the Conference on Climate Change in Bali, in December 2007, *“It is of*

the utmost importance to incorporate the dimension of food security when dealing with the challenges of climate change. If we do not act immediately, climate change will increase the number of hungry in the world. That is a momentous challenge for world food security”.

It is in this context that FAO is organizing, together with the other United Nations agencies based in Rome – the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), the World Food Programme (WFP), Bioversity International and, through that, the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) – a “*High-Level Conference on World Food Security and the Challenges of Climate Change and Bioenergy*”, which will be held from 3 to 5 June 2008 at FAO Headquarters in Rome. Besides addressing the specific challenges that climate change and biofuels pose for the food, agriculture, forestry and fisheries sectors, this Conference, which coincides with soaring food prices, will be looking at ways and means of producing sufficient food to feed a growing world population: there are now 6 billion of us but there will be 9 billion in 2050.

The Twenty-ninth FAO Regional Conference for the Near East, which was held from 1 to 5 March 2008 in Cairo, Egypt, has already addressed these issues at a roundtable on “*the implications of climate change for agriculture in the Near East*”. That meeting enabled us to exchange views with several Member Nations on the impact of climate change on agriculture and food security in the region. One aspect to be stressed was the need for further study on impact and challenges at regional and national level.

Those, Ladies and Gentlemen, are some thoughts on the changing global agricultural situation.

But, in concluding, I should like to return to the importance of the date palm in the fight against hunger and poverty. The value of its production and development extends beyond your region. This tree is an integral part of the culture and agrobiological diversity of the desert regions. That is why FAO is doing all it can to publicize and redeploy in the countries of the Sahel the successes of the United Arab Emirates University. May you be thanked and congratulated for your exemplary action, which is making a very tangible contribution to the development of this region and tomorrow, I hope, to the development of all the countries of the Sahel.

Thank you for your kind attention.