

# **International Conference On Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development in Mountain Regions (Adelboden, Switzerland, 16-20 June 2002)**

**Statement by Mr. Jacques Diouf, Director-General  
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delivered by Mr. Jacques Paul Ekebil, Assistant Director-General  
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Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations  
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**Ladies and gentlemen,**

On behalf of the Director-General of FAO, it is my pleasure to be here with you today for this special conference on sustainable agriculture and rural development in mountain regions.

This conference is one of a series of major global events associated with the World Summit on Sustainable Development and the International Year of Mountains.

As many of you know, FAO is the lead agency for the International Year of Mountains. FAO is also the task manager for Chapter 13 of Agenda 21, which is dedicated to mountains, and for Chapter 14, which promotes sustainable agriculture and rural development. It is an honour to do this essential work - work that will help us achieve FAO's goal of alleviating hunger and poverty so that all people at all times have access to the food they need for active healthy lives.

Each day, as the world's population increases, no single endeavour could be more important than working to ensure there is enough food for everyone.

Creating the conditions for sustainable agriculture and rural development in mountain regions, as well as lowlands, will bring us closer to achieving this crucial goal.

To all of you who have contributed so much time, energy and thought to making this conference a reality, I offer my sincere thanks. In particular, I wish to thank Switzerland, our host government. Today we begin our journey, but it is with your commitment and continued leadership that our path will become increasingly clear. My thanks as well to representatives of International Year of Mountains national committees and governments. Your observance of the Year is crucial in raising awareness of the need for laws and policies that address the unique concerns of your mountain communities. It gives me great hope to know that today more than 67 countries around the world have national committees that are leading observance of the International Year of Mountains as well as national efforts in years to come.

To representatives of non-governmental organizations and civil society, thank you for attending today and for your commitment to mountain people and to supporting those agricultural practices that help to ensure food security and sustainable development in mountain regions.

And finally, I would like to extend a special welcome and thanks to our largest group in attendance - the people whose lives and livelihoods directly depend on mountains. We look to you for your ideas, your experience and expertise. It is with your guidance that we hope to make great strides in addressing the problems before us.

Which is why we are all here - to focus our collective will.

Over the next few days, we have an unprecedented opportunity to forge new alliances and to develop deeper understanding. But more importantly, we have an opportunity to influence the future - to consider how life in many of the world's mountain regions can and should be better, and to carry those ideas forward into concrete proposals for action. This work is crucial to all life on earth. Whether we dwell at sea level or in the highest altitudes - we all depend on mountains for life. More than half of humanity - three billion people - depend on mountains for safe, fresh water - to grow food, to produce electricity, to sustain industries and, most importantly, to drink. Farming, fishing, forestry and pastoral activities in mountains provide food, employment, and income to millions of people.

Mountains too are host to more biodiversity than any other single ecoregion on the planet, including lowland rainforests. Not simply steeper or higher versions of ecosystems found in lowland areas, these unique landscapes harbour much of the world's remaining biological heritage, including many species of plants and animals found nowhere else. Mountain people, the stewards of mountain environments, have also created ethnically diverse cultures and landscapes, havens for escaping persecution over the centuries.

Yet as diverse as mountain ecosystems are, and as strong and powerful the image we hold of mountains may be, in reality, mountains are exceedingly fragile. Each day, climate change, pollution, as well as exploitative mining and unsound agriculture practices, take a toll on mountain environments. Exploring sustainable methods of producing food and using mountain resources is important to us all. It is our job - indeed our duty - to keep this essential fact in mind as our discussions continue throughout the week.

Our conclusions, recommendations and proposals will set the stage for a declaration to be presented at the Earth Summit in Johannesburg in August, as well as the Bishkek Global Mountain Summit in October. The declaration will state our priorities and intentions. It will also represent a promise. A promise that all of us here today, through an emerging global partnership, will help to create the conditions for sustainable agriculture and rural development in mountain regions around the world.

It is through global partnerships, I believe, that we will achieve continued success. During the preparations for the World Summit for Sustainable Development and the International Year of Mountains we began a process of collaboration - of bringing people together, as we have today, with mutual interest in sustainable development and concern for mountain communities. Now we must ensure that these partnerships - the seeds of hope - continue to grow and flourish. One way we can do this is by establishing clear goals and making concrete plans for action. But to do this, we must also take steps to establish formal commitments to each other and to develop the systems that will ensure our work continues into the future. During the Earth Summit in Johannesburg, we must tell the world how these partnerships will take shape, as well as the means and mechanisms that will be employed to reach our goals.

We at FAO will pledge our work in agriculture, forestry, fisheries and rural development and, most importantly, in alleviating hunger and chronic malnutrition around the world. This very issue was discussed in Rome just last week when Heads of State and

Government met at the World Food Summit: Five Years Later, as well as at a special side event dedicated to food security in mountains. It is a sobering fact that many of the world's almost 800 million chronically undernourished people live in mountains. There are many reasons why so many in mountain regions suffer, but none more formidable than armed conflict.

Most of the world's armed conflicts are being fought in mountain regions. As many of you know all too well, it is impossible to produce food in conditions of war. Just as it is impossible to take the necessary steps to improve your life or even dream of a better future, when chaos grows around you.

Ultimately, our hopes for many mountain regions rest on resolving these conflicts and bringing about peace. We can help to do this by encouraging sustainable mountain development and mountain-friendly policy and law. All our efforts must be built on the wisdom, knowledge and experience of mountain people. And they must be supported by research. At FAO, our work on food security in mountains is helping us to better understand the nature and extent of poverty and hunger in mountains and to develop more effective programmes.

Studies completed and others soon to be released during the International Year of Mountains tell us that while mountain people represent about 12 percent of the world's population, in reality they make up a much higher percentage of the world's hungry and chronically malnourished. The reason for this has much to do with the inaccessibility of mountains, the complexity and fragility of mountain environments, and the extent to which mountain people, particularly women, are often socially, politically and economically marginalized. As a result, food insecurity and malnutrition in mountain communities play out in many different ways around the world:

- in the disease and disability that evolve from micronutrient deficiencies;
- in the exodus of thousands fleeing natural disasters, drought and famine;
- in the unemployed youth who flock to lowland cities; and
- in the heartbreak of infant mortality rates that are among the highest in the world.

As we begin to understand the nature and extent of poverty in mountains, we are learning, above all, that there are no universal solutions. Policies and laws, indeed, all our plans and programmes, must be tailored to meet the unique needs, priorities and conditions of mountain communities.

Ladies and gentlemen,

There are immense opportunities in mountains - immense opportunities to save the world's biological heritage and cultural heritage, as well as for sustainable development. After all, mountain environments are exceedingly rich in natural resources. They are also the places that many seek out for rest, renewal and recreation. As guardians of this wealth, mountain people need not be poor, or hungry.

It is true that we have a mountain to climb before we reach all our goals. But together we can make a difference. The evidence is here in this room. Just look around you - so many people, from so many parts of the world, ready to work together to implement lasting solutions to mountain problems - how can we not succeed!

Thank you.