



**HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE CONFERENCE ON
THE MULTIFUNCTIONAL CHARACTER OF
AGRICULTURE AND LAND
SUNDAY, 12 SEPTEMBER 1999**

On the opening day of the Conference on the Multifunctional Character of Agriculture and Land (MFCAL), participants met in a Plenary session to hear opening remarks and keynote addresses, enjoy a cultural and musical performance and elect the Chair of the conference.

OPENING PLENARY

Geke Faber, State Secretary of Agriculture, Nature Management and Fisheries of the Netherlands, welcomed participants to the conference. She stated that the conference would not only review progress in addressing the Agenda 21 themes of sustainable agriculture and land use and food security but also seek to discover new ways to achieve these goals. She noted that the context of the conference was the preparation for the eighth session of the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD-8) in April 2000, which will consider the Agenda 21 chapters addressing integrated land management and sustainable agriculture and rural development. She emphasized that land use and sustainable agriculture offer excellent opportunities for an integrated policy approach to make an important contribution to sustainable development.

She recalled that goals and targets in the areas of sustainable agriculture and land use were established and agreed in Agenda 21 and the Plan of Action of the 1996 World Food Summit (WFS). She said the main challenge of this conference would be to identify policy options, practical means of implementation and enabling environments to make progress in achieving these goals and targets and to seek innovative ways and appropriate institutional frameworks to integrate public, private and cooperative initiatives, taking into account local and regional conditions.

She noted an increasing awareness that agriculture has functions beyond producing food and fiber, such as fostering food security in terms of the availability, access and nutritional content of food at household, national and international levels; encouraging rural development and viability of the rural economy; and supporting the environment and natural resource management. She stressed that the MFCAL concept offers a much-needed analytical framework. Description and analysis of the multiple functions of agriculture and land use everywhere can provide answers as to how these multiple functions can contribute to implementation of the agreed goals and targets set out in Agenda 21 and the WFS Plan of Action.

Faber noted that the use of the phrase "multifunctional character of agriculture and land" had led to some misunderstanding and explained that it was agreed language from the WFS. She urged participants to make their discussions on sustainable agriculture and land distinct from discussion in the WTO and not to engage in dogmatic debate on the understanding of the term.

She reiterated that the purpose of the conference is to further progress in implementation of programmes and actions formulated in Agenda 21 and the WFS Plan of Action and to learn from successes and failures in implementation thus far. The conference should lay the basis for the formulation of policy options and practical guidelines to achieve the goals and targets of sustainable agriculture and food security. She emphasized that an overall approach to these policy options and practical guidelines should be integral, taking into account the interdependencies between local, national and international levels and between all economic, social and environmental factors at these different levels. She underscored the importance of dialogue with all relevant stakeholders at local and national levels.

Jacques Diouf, Director-General of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), noted that for the first time in history the majority of people live in urban settings. A direct link to nature, one of the foundations of cultures and historical traditions, is no longer a part of daily life for most people, and fewer numbers are involved in cultivation. Increases in world population mean that solutions to the challenge of food security will have to be found. He recalled that governments at the WFS recognized the unacceptability of the fact that more than 800 million people cannot meet their basic food needs. He said adequate measures to increase food production and tackle poverty are imperative.

He quoted from the WFS Plan of Action commitments on food security, including a reference to the need to consider the multifunctional character of agriculture. He said the FAO had readily accepted the offer from the Government of the Netherlands to organize this conference to help create a better understanding of MFCAL. In spite of technological progress, the earth continues to provide the essential raw material for human survival and quality of life. The challenge for the future is to balance the demands on land, taking into account increases in world population, the limitations of land already under cultivation and long-term environmental conservation.

Diouf reviewed some of the FAO's work before and since UNCED in 1992, including research links and advice and inputs into international agreements. He said the conference on MFCAL would provide a good opportunity for experts to share their knowl-

edge and experience and to transmit their ideas more effectively. He stressed that farmers remain the guardians of the basic resources of life. He noted, however, that sources of revenue and agricultural practice had changed over time. Rural regions' economies have become more diversified with the processing and marketing of foods, crafts, tourism, conservation and the regeneration of natural resources. The links created at national and international levels are both deep and numerous. The impact of globalization and market mechanisms, communications and transport networks now reach far-flung corners of the planet, with immediate effects on rural and urban populations.

Regarding preparations for CSD-8, Diouf stated that the FAO had been given a remit to help with preparations on agriculture, land management and sustainable rural development. The direct input of all partners at the national level was a vital starting point for the sustainability of agriculture and land use. He called for international support through complementarity with other initiatives and appealed for increased cooperation between various partners in agriculture and sustainable rural and agricultural development. He said the results of this conference's deliberations would be as fruitful as those from the Den Bosch conference, which took place nearly ten years ago.

Fawzi H. Al-Sultan, President of the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), noted that this conference would contribute to CSD-8, which will focus on integrated planning and management of land resources. He stated that, as part of its support for this conference, IFAD helped organize a Partners' Seminar in South Africa in July 1999, where policy makers, development practitioners and agriculture experts developed the concept and application of MFCAL. He underscored the Seminar's conclusion that MFCAL could play a role in supporting Agenda 21 targets by providing a holistic framework for planning sustainable development initiatives at the local and national levels, and assisting in the development of improved indicators for monitoring relevant Agenda 21 target achievements. Emphasizing the relevance of the multi-functionality concept to agro-ecosystems in all countries, he noted its critical importance for the drylands of the developing world, especially in Africa. He said IFAD's experience in helping small-scale farmers in sub-Saharan Africa to take advantage of the multi-functional character of agriculture required the full participation of intended beneficiaries, for instance through users' associations or self-help groups.

He highlighted the pivotal role MFCAL can play in reducing global poverty, given that many people living in poverty reside in rural areas. He called for priority to be given to creating access for poor rural groups to productive assets such as land and productive services such as credit extension. He noted the establishment in 1995 of a Popular Coalition to Eradicate Hunger and Poverty, which involves a variety of inter-governmental and civil society organizations and has taken up land tenure as a priority issue. He said the MFCAL framework needs to be made easy to understand and needs to evolve further if it is to mobilize successfully the synergies in agriculture's multiple functions and direct them towards eradicating rural poverty.

Gerard Doornbos, President of the International Federation of Agricultural Producers (IFAP), underscored the opportunity provided by the conference to establish a policy framework to allow agriculture, by virtue of its multiple functions, to make a major contribution to promoting equitable development at a global level. He supported MFCAL as providing a useful methodology for building national and international agricultural policies. He underscored the need for a participatory approach in achieving sustainable development of agriculture and called for farmers' participation to be supported at local, provincial, national and international levels. Noting the move towards global economic liberalization and privatization, he stated that market forces alone cannot deliver the multiple functions expected from agriculture, and underscored the role that governments could play in relation to issues such as landscape, animal welfare and rural heritage. He stressed that farmers want to play a multifunctional role and that most are not against trade liberalization. He said farmers should be rewarded for taking a multifunctional approach and governments must be prepared to provide the policy framework and funds to make this approach successful.

Regarding food production, Doornbos noted IFAP's support for, *inter alia*: a multilateral framework of rules and disciplines for agricultural trade that applies equally to all countries; access for farmers to resources, such as infrastructure, credit and secure land tenure arrangements, on reasonable terms; and market-oriented policies that apply to all relevant sectors, both upstream and downstream of production agriculture. He said land conservation programmes, such as the Australian Landcare Initiative, should be supported, and stressed that farmers should be rewarded for providing environmental services that go beyond normal good farming practices.

Conference participants elected by acclamation Hans Alders, Queen's Commissioner of the province of Groningen, the Netherlands, as Chair of the conference.

THINGS TO LOOK FOR TODAY

PLENARY SESSION: Participants will convene in a morning Plenary session at 9:00 am in the Expo Foyer for a general introduction to the conference and the conference papers. Participants will discuss the main issues arising from the conference documents in an afternoon Plenary session from 2:00-6:00 pm.

PRESENTATION OF NGO REPORT: An informal gathering with the Dutch NGOs, agricultural and environmental organizations involved in the preparation of the conference will be held from 6:00-8:00 pm in the Trajectum. The gathering will include briefings by several NGOs, including a presentation of the NGO report prepared for this conference, entitled "New Functions, New Partnerships."

FAO/NL VIRTUAL MAASTRICHT CONFERENCE: A virtual conference is taking place on the WebForum section of the conference web site at <http://www.fao.org/mfcal>. Views, ideas and insights on the daily reports of the conference are encouraged. These inputs will be summarized and fed back to conference participants in Maastricht. Please direct messages to <agr99-Conference@fao.org>.