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9th Forum for the Future of Agriculture

A Mountain of Opportunity

Speech by UNEP Executive Director Achim Steiner

Ministers, ladies and gentlemen, as the Secretary General just pointed out, the 17 goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development are effectively a Declaration of Interdependence.

Agriculture has emerged as one of the key sectors that highlight the integrated nature of this approach and how it can help drive many of the solutions for a healthy planet with healthy people. However, agriculture probably also highlights more than most the way in which our fates are inextricably linked and the hard questions that must be asked: a third of the world's economically active labour force works in agriculture, which uses 70 per cent of water and antibiotics, while accounting for 70 per cent of biodiversity loss; a third of the world's arable land has been lost to erosion in the last 40 years, just as the number of people to be fed from that land almost doubled and as land degradation and desertification are being made worse by climate change and poor management of agricultural exports; a third of the world's food is never actually eaten, so although we produce enough for the entire population to be adequately fed, 800 million people are chronically undernourished and nearly half of all infant deaths are due to hunger, while two billion people are overweight and 600 million obese. Which is a cruel irony, given that ending hunger by 2025 requires an additional \$44 billion per year, yet we're losing production and ecosystem services worth \$40 billion a year. And all of that is even before you start to consider the contribution of waste, emissions or chemicals from the fertilisation, packaging, transportation and disposal of agriculture products can make to the nine million deaths a year related to air, ground and water pollution.

If all that sounds like a mountain to climb, then it is, because to top it off, soil is the ultimate carbon safety deposit box - it stores more carbon than the atmosphere and all plant life combined - yet 40 billion tonnes of topsoil are washed away each year. That's about 40 times the weight of Mount Everest and it can take hundreds of years to regenerate just a single centimeter of it.

That's a very potted take on the world of agriculture, but it illustrates how this sector touches on every single one of the goals and it highlights why rapid action is needed if we are to climb this particular mountain before we lose the very foundation of our food producing economy.

First, we need a more integrated approach to landscape management and policy development at both European and Member State level, because when talking about agriculture it is no longer possible to take the relatively limited acts of farming, livestock or fishing in isolation. When looking at the return on investment for a particular product, it's unrealistic to consider only the availability or ticket price on a supermarket shelf. That means we also need to look upstream - literally. Only three per cent of all water on our planet is freshwater and just 0.3 per cent of that is available for humans, yet our consumption has tripled in the last 50 years. So, we need to ask whether the forest based ecosystem services that support 1.6 billion jobs and supply an estimated 75 per cent of useable water around the world are being properly maintained. Then we need to look at the transport for employees, goods and customers in 2050, when nine billion people may have with three times as

many cars. So, we need ask whether we can scale up the fuel efficient technologies already available that could save \$2 trillion in a decade, while halving carbon dioxide emissions from light vehicles. And we need to look food demand that is expected to increase by nearly two thirds to feed our growing population. We need to ask how the water scarcity that will affect 54 countries - 40 per cent of the population - will impact national security, resources and policies already struggling to cope with the 60 million displaced people fleeing conflict and disaster today? Yet how many people here today are actively involved in shaping policies for security, transport or urbanization? That is the kind of fundamental shift in thinking that we need to deliver the 2030 Agenda.

Second, we need the EU and the European governments to lead by example. And it goes beyond the EU Common Agricultural Policy. Economies of scale mean that government expenditure has enough power to trigger shifts in the market and it's important not to underestimate the global impact of purchasing decisions in Europe. For example, how many government purchases for staff canteens, schools, winter food trucks or support services use products that contain palm oil? The Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil, which works with 2,500 businesses to make nearly 3.5 million hectares of landscapes more sustainable. If Europe and its member states were to agree legislation that all palm oil products must be sustainably sourced, then such initiatives would have a profound impact on the markets for palm oil and, by extension, on the producers in far corners of Borneo or Ghana. And, of course, if I'm going to stand here and talk about leading by example, then I can't overlook the need for the UN to do the same. We have a long way to go to be better aligned across our own activities and agencies. But thanks to the 2030 Agenda, there is a sense of willingness and urgency to make this happen. This is particularly evident when we are working with the private sector on issues like the inclusive green economy, on which both the 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement depend. If we can't demonstrate the same transparency and efficiency that our partners in the financial institutions are pushing for then we simply have no credibility.

Which brings me to my third and final point - the need to encourage and accelerate the shift in private sector practices. Since 2009, there has already been a steady trend towards sustainable sourcing, with almost 400 new private sector companies pledging a move to zero-net deforestation. However, shifts in government policy that encourage wider uptake would enhance the scope and speed of that change. Take something as basic as rice. If I tell you that Rong Hom in Cambodia grows it on her family smallholding then you probably have some kind of postcard image in your head - a picturesque paddy field but no obvious connection to European policy development. But what if I tell you that Rong is one of 140 million smallholders who depend on rice farming and one of 3.5 billion people for whom it is a daily staple? Then that postcard has to include 160 million hectares of land, a third of the world's irrigation water and up to a tenth of the emissions of the greenhouse gas, methane. Suddenly the drought, pollution and fertilizer issues that affect Rong also affect the future health, wellbeing and security of every single person in Europe. That's why having global giants like Mars voluntarily join other industry leaders in initiatives like the Sustainable Rice Platform is to be welcomed.

By the end of this decade, one hundred per cent of their rice will be sustainably sourced. But the key word there is voluntary. And rice is just one example. What about all the staples we take for granted - such as coffee, sugar, wheat or corn? Given that land restoration could reduce a quarter of the predicted gap in the Paris climate change targets, then policies, incentives and legislation that rewards or, even better, ensures sustainable sourcing across these items could dramatically

transform land, water and waste management in the short term, while pre-empting issues like health, security and climate change in the longer term. But even that is small scale thinking. Think about the amount of private sector resources that are allocated to science, research and technology, or that benefit from the results. That means we need to amplify our thinking across all of the areas where the private sector has something to offer from R&D of seed, fertilizers, energy and chemicals, to understanding and adapting land use as custodians of our ecological assets, and helping to integrate ecosystem and land management approaches across a much wider range of applications. We need to get better at working together to understand how the new practices and possibilities that will reduce our footprint and allow us to work with nature rather than deplete or replace it.

Ladies and gentlemen, the 2030 Agenda is one of the greatest expeditions humanity has undertaken. But integrated policies, leading by example and encouraging the private sector will do a lot more than just chip away at that mountain we have to climb. It has to, because this is about the challenge of managing complexity against a backdrop of rapidly escalating problems. It is about rethinking agriculture in a world of nine billion consumers, with climate change and resource constraints becoming more present. And the need for agriculture to be an integral part of the solutions for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which requires a systems approach. By ensuring that the EU's Common Agricultural Policy is fully aligned with this new global sustainable development agenda, and by supporting initiatives such as the Sustainable Rice Platform in other parts of the world, Europe can lead by example and pull its weight towards sustainable agriculture. The facts and figures I have presented illustrate very clearly that the answer cannot just be "we need to produce more food."

Thank you.