

FFA2019 – Closing Speech
Janez Potočnik, Chairman

Ladies and gentlemen,

Even though this is my fourth time as your chairman, I still do not find it easy to close the Forum for the Future of Agriculture. We have had many constructive discussions and thoughts that I do not think it is possible to summarise all in these 15 minutes. In fact, I will not even try.

First, let me begin by thanking everyone here, whatever your age or generation, for being here today. I hope it has showed you some of what is possible, and that you had a chance to not just talk to those who agree with you, but also with some who do not.

If I could ask you to do one thing, it is to not just think of this as a pleasant day and go back home. I hope that tomorrow morning you will ask yourself what is possible in your life and your job, and then to make the transition real. You owe it to the next generation.

I would also like to thank all of our speakers for sharing their thoughts with us. They have come from all over the world to join us, and they deserve our appreciation.

Before I begin my closing remarks, I would finally like to extend a special thank-you to the organisers and staff of the FFA. You may not have seen all of them today, but they have worked for the last year to make sure we can all be here. This event is not possible without their hard work and commitment. Thank you!

Ladies and gentlemen,

The major challenges we face in the transition to a sustainable food system and the negative trends that have led us to this point can be summarised in three points; first, our political focus on short-term goals and election cycles; second, our economic dependency on consumerism and GDP fuelled growth; and third, our failure to deliver a just and equitable transition and society. That is just one horseman short of the apocalypse.

Together, these three trends are not just leading us off the cliff edge, they are preventing us from engaging honestly with reality and shaping the world we need.

As our speakers have shown today, and as we can read in the newspapers everywhere, the systems that have governed us since the end of the Cold War are falling apart before our eyes. It is clear to me that we need to seriously rethink how we govern our societies, and the systemic changes we need to ensure any future for this planet and the next generation.

Right now, we are at the eve of the next European elections, a new Commission and Council. Unfortunately, all public and financial institutions, have a short-term logic built into them, a logic that runs counter to our ability to transform ourselves.

We must remind ourselves that politics is not about desperately trying to keep and protect the world we are used to. You cannot do this in the face of history, climate change and environmental breakdown. The tragedy is that so many of our leaders have embraced this false notion of stability, of a

static world. I understand why; it sells very well. It will get you elected, especially by Europe's aging electorate.

Change is difficult, change is scary, but it is also vital if we are to leave this planet in any shape for the next generation. The only way to embrace this as a politician, is if you offer a new kind of future, based on a positive disruption. Our leaders, all of us, we must inspire voters, citizens and consumers to embrace this longer-term vision. In the 21st century we can simply not afford any more short-term based logic and approach. I do repeat frequently that changes are unavoidable, and humans are supposed to be intelligent. It is really high time to prove it.

Second, we must reform our production and consumption systems. We need more creative destruction instead of destructive creation. There is no serious identification of the future risks that are inherent in this way of shaping our economy, and no real understanding of what really matters for a safe future.

When we follow the money today, we reveal our true priorities. Our commitments to the Sustainable Development Goals are underfunded, our investments in natural capital are far from needed, and stand in black contrast to the unproductive investments and speculation in our stock markets.

If we are to deliver a sustainable future and hand it to the next generation, we must embrace the circular economy. Waste, in essence, should be a word not known to any one born today. Every plastic bottle that ends up in the ocean, every litre of manure that flow into our rivers, every bag of salad that is

thrown out, should be seen as our individual, economic and policy failure.

Make no mistake, reforming our food and economic systems to a circular model represents probably the most profound shift since the Industrial Revolution. But that is also its promise; in remaking our world we will create the jobs and prosperity we need.

However, this transition, and the prosperity it can bring, must be widely shared and embraced. It is not possible to achieve sustainability unless it is just, fair and inclusive. In nearly every country we are seeing increased social unrest. It is growing even in the high-income countries and it is high time to hear the echo of the streets and the voice of frustrated young generation. The first generation that is predicted to be worse off than their parents.

If we do not do this, if we do not build a cross-generational coalition that recognises and addresses poverty, inequality and powerlessness that many experience, then others will, and they will be unjust, unfair, and exclusive. These groups are already here, telling a frustrated people that their suffering is the fault of immigrants, those of different faiths, or the European Union. We should raise our voice against loudly and not let them lead us off the cliff. We should offer hope and a vision of a true sustainable world instead.

Rebuilding our civic institutions and food systems around a long-term, multi-decade vision is not easy. Reshaping our economics is hard. Delivering a just transition may be the hardest, but it must be done.

However, I feel myself profoundly moved and encouraged by the next generation. Many of them have no vote yet, but they are on the street demanding action. They know the poisoned cup we are leaving them, and they are not accepting it. They have my full respect and support.

Why should they sit quietly in school and learn lessons about how a dysfunctional political system should work, or economic theories that do not deliver sustainability? Why should they go to school when their future is at risk? They are right to ask, and they are also right to strike.

But we cannot leave it to them alone. This is our burden to bear, and our change to deliver. We must, or it will be forced upon us. If those of us who lead today are either incapable or unwilling to respond to the challenge, then they must step aside and let the next generation to take over. Now.

Let me therefore make three proposals to capture this moment and make it real;

One. We should immediately lower the voting age. This generation is the best educated we ever raised, and we should give them a chance to elect those who look after their interests. The face of Europe is changing, and it should be reflected in the makeup of its highest bodies including the European Parliament.

Two. If our European leadership was happy to sign a fiscal stability compact to protect the current economic system, then they should also sign a Sustainability Compact. This should demand action on climate change, on our food system, and the

full implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. And it should have force of law and penalties for those who do not deliver.

And three. Europe's citizens – most of you in this room are one – need to play their part. You cannot wait for political parties or corporations to lead. In this election season, do not ask yourself what Europe should do for you, but what it can do for the next generation. Do not just trust those who talk about sustainability, rather interrogate the essence of their promise, and what their past promises have been worth.

Ladies and gentlemen,

For the first time in a human history we face the emergence of a single, tightly coupled human social-ecological system of planetary scope. We are more interconnected and interdependent than ever. Our individual and collective responsibility has enormously increased.

It is a time for a profound change; the clock has been set for twelve years. That is very little time to transform our farms, our factories, our homes, our politics and our lives.

I understand that this is, for most people, a frightening, difficult prospect. It will require all of us to demonstrate leadership, to show up and be counted, and to take our responsibility.

But it should also be exciting – it is about delivering a new world with new chances for so many of us. I am still encouraged by what we heard today, and I hope you were too.

The value of the FFA, I hope, is that we inspire a real change. That we do more than just provide you with a comfortable and inspiring space to talk. It is, after all, about the action and changes in real life that it delivers.

Now, let us all go out and shape a world that is a fit and proper home for the next generation.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Dear friends,

Thank you again for coming, thank you for staying till the end and for listening so carefully and finally, thank you for being active agents of change.

I wish you a safe way back home.