

Director-General's Closing Speech

at the International Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (ICARRD)
Porto Alegre (Brazil) 7-10 March 2006

*Your Excellency Luiz Inazio Lula da Silva, President of the Federative Republic of Brazil
Honourable Heads of States and Governments*

*Distinguished Ministers and Delegates
Excellencies
Ladies and Gentlemen*

It is an honour for me to be here with you today, to conclude an important week of discussions on agrarian reform and rural development, two delicate issues of global importance today.

During this conference, you had the opportunity to review agrarian reform and rural development issues worldwide, and to identify sustainable rural development options to combat rural poverty and reduce hunger. Indeed, if the objective is to reduce hunger and poverty in the world, then its root causes are to be sought. Hence, the past week of deliberations of the “International Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development: New challenges and opportunities to revitalize rural communities” provides a sound basis for planning future work, priorities and actions in the field of agrarian reform and rural development. The outcomes of this conference and the recognition of the continuing critical importance of agrarian reform and rural development are crucial for the fulfilment of the commitments of the 1996 World Food Summit, the World Food Summit: 5 years later, the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The international conference has brought together 800 delegates from 69 countries in an innovative forum which has been underwritten by the vital cross-fertilisation of ideas between stakeholders: governments and civil society; technical specialists, farmers, fisherfolk and forest users.

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Ladies and Gentlemen*

The battle to achieve the Millennium Development Goals, in particular MDGI on poverty and hunger reduction, will be won or lost in the rural areas of developing countries.

Despite the increase in urbanization, extreme poverty continues to be mainly a rural phenomenon. Of the 852 million hungry, 95 percent are concentrated in developing countries, and mostly in rural areas. Of the 1.1 billion extremely poor people in the world today, 75 percent live in rural areas and depend largely on agriculture, forestry, fisheries and related activities, and on natural resources such as land and water, for survival. The majority of them, and especially women and indigenous populations, do not have secure and continued access to such resources today.

This conference has sought the answers to the two urgent questions posed at the outset.

Faced with the trends of globalisation, trade distorting policies, climate change, declining investment in the rural sector and progressively limited opportunities for rural populations: what can be done to revitalize rural communities and rural areas?

What are the lessons and good practices from agrarian reform that need to drive the process of rural transformation and the fight against poverty and hunger?

This international conference has provided a timely opportunity to direct the world's attention to the rural face of hunger and poverty. Recognising that agrarian reform has two key dimensions is critical for successful outcomes in the battle against rural hunger and poverty. The first dimension of agrarian reform is related to improving access by the poor to land and natural resources. The second dimension has to do with improving rural capacities for development and rural access to services. Secure access to land and natural resources is an essential, but not a sufficient, condition to address the challenges of poverty and hunger.

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This international conference has sounded a call for action. It is a call for understanding, learning and constructive dialogue to address agrarian reform, sustainable rural development and rural poverty through the creation of a lasting platform to monitor and evaluate best policies and practices, and progress in agrarian reform and rural development. Furthermore, it is a call for the recognition, the political will, and the experiences, resources, and concrete actions needed by all actors to enhance international cooperation and promote more equitable, transparent and accountable access to land and other livelihood assets.

The issues papers, national case studies, and electronic fora have pointed to some of the critical elements for action. They have identified the policies, practices and capacities needed for securing and improving access to land, water and agrarian inputs and services. They reveal some of the new opportunities to strengthen rural producers and communities and facilitate people's choices in rural development. The challenges of social justice, food sovereignty, the right to food and cultural diversity are hereby highlighted.

Your deliberations during this conference, along with the Civil Society Forum and side events, have helped to round out and complete this picture. They strongly affirm that agrarian reform and rural development are necessary to fight hunger. They have identified ways to make this happen and, thus, have helped to renew global and national commitments and accelerate progress. Securing rights and access to land and other livelihood assets by the poor requires good practices and policies, as well as the political will and financial investment of national governments to revitalize the rural sector, and the commitment of the developed nations to fulfil their pledge to increase their development assistance.

When FAO agreed to undertake the organization of this conference last year, the Organization was under no illusion that dialogue would be easy on a subject as delicate as agrarian reform. The fact that governments and civil society organizations attending this conference have reached a consensus based on the vision and set of principles outlined in the Declaration, is a very significant step forward. Even more significant are the pledges that have been made here for the implementation of these principles in order to achieve the new vision of agrarian reform and rural development, which has emerged here in Porto Alegre.

Convinced that open communication is essential for peace, FAO welcomes the agreement on a Lasting Platform for social dialogue and cooperation at the international and national levels. In particular, the resolutions for instituting the Lasting Platform will enable us to promote, monitor and assess follow-up and progress in agrarian reform and rural development at the national and international levels.

This platform will be all the more valuable if it succeeds in enabling us to move beyond dialogue, to more informed, gender-sensitive, and environmentally sustainable agrarian reform and rural development action, biased in favour of the poor. FAO, including through its current reform, is committed to such action. The Organization is committed to work with its member governments to provide for a more equitable access by both women and men to natural resources (particularly land, water, fisheries and forest) and the related economic and social resources. Voluntary guidelines on the right to food and the right to land, that enable governments to uphold the UN Charter of Human Rights, are one important means for doing so.

Furthermore, another important achievement which is promising with a view to improving the living conditions of the poor, is the agreement reached on the creation of partnerships and initiatives, launched by governments, civil society and others during the course of this week. Commitments have been made to build national and local capacities and to globally achieve SARD. FAO and WAD have also agreed to work together to raise awareness on the rural face of poverty and, jointly, to develop the urgently needed capacities, institutions and policies for successful agrarian reform and rural development to the benefit the rural poor.

In short, it is my pleasure to witness that this conference has succeeded in renewing global commitments, in providing a clearer vision of the needs for action, of how such commitments can be accomplished, and in catalyzing actors to work together to fight hunger and poverty through agrarian reform and rural development.

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In closing, I would like to thank the Federative Republic of Brazil, and in particular His Excellency President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, for hosting this international conference and for welcoming us to Porto Alegre. I would also like to reiterate my appreciation to the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), the Governments of Switzerland, Spain, Norway and the EU, the International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty (IPC), Action Aid International, and the many other organizations that have provided financial or in kind support for the preparations of the conference. I am also very grateful to the conference Steering Committee for its diligent work in preparing this conference over the last year.

Finally, may I confirm my pledge and the commitment of FAO to participate actively in the follow-up of this international conference.

I look forward to bringing the results of this conference to the attention of the governing bodies of FAO and to seeking their guidance and support for strengthening the Organization's work in this field.

Thank you.