

FAO DG outlines 'Four Betters' approach in transforming agri-food systems

FAO director-general Qu Dongyu recently delivered the keynote lecture at Italy's Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, saying a holistic redesign of the world's agri-food systems can make outsized contributions to achieving global pledges, such as ending hunger by 2030.



FAO director-general Qu Dongyu. Image source: [FAO](#)

"Agri-food systems are the world's largest economic system, measured in terms of employment, livelihoods and planetary impact," Qu said, noting that four billion people are employed directly or indirectly in food systems, in which poverty and hunger are nonetheless endemic.

"Transforming our food systems is among the most powerful ways to change course and make progress towards all 17 SDGs and 'build back better' from Covid-19," Qu told the audience.

After his presentation, Qu also participated in a round-table on science diplomacy with Joachim von Braun, president of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, director of Germany's Center for Development Research (ZEF) and chair of the Scientific Group for the 2021 Food Systems Summit, and Lincei president Giorgio Parisi, a theoretical physicist who has done pioneering work in statistics and complexity, "disordered systems" and the dynamics of Rome's whirling storms of starlings.



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Thando Vilakazi and Namhla Landani 16 Feb 2021



More 'system thinking' needed

The director-general's presentation called for more "system thinking", in a broad spectrum of areas including policies, business models and even culture.

Focusing on the need to move from strategy to action, he outlined how today's agri-food systems are "not delivering", noting that as many as 690 million people are chronically undernourished, with the Covid-19 pandemic projected to add more than 100 million; one in five children are stunted; three billion people cannot afford healthy diets; and one in 10 people are affected by unsafe food supplies. He also pointed to the scale of global food loss and waste and the fact that 80% of the world's extreme poor live in rural areas and work in agriculture.

Dramatic improvements are needed in these areas, including reducing both undernourishment and obesity to below 5% of the population in all countries, substantially reducing inequalities, and progress towards a host of environment and climate-related targets.

Qu's lectio magistralis was part of a series of high-profile speeches at the Lincei, a scientific institute dating back to the early 17th century that once counted Galileo as a member. Among those invited to the series, which focuses on global challenges needing multilateral solutions, are Monsignor Paul Richard Gallagher, the Vatican's secretary for relations with states; European Central Bank president Christine Lagarde; and International Atomic Energy Agency director-general Rafael Mariano Grossi.



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Anja Gassner, Philip Dobie and Terry Sunderland 4 Feb 2021



The 'Four Betters'

Qu elaborated a strategic approach framed by what he calls the "Four Betters".

1. Better Production requires ensuring efficient sustainable consumption and production patterns, inclusive food and agriculture supply chains at local, regional and global levels. Digital agriculture, attention to small-scale producers and green innovation are all key parts of the path forward.

2. Better Nutrition means ending hunger, promoting nutritious foods and increasing access to healthy diets, which can be buoyed by tackling food loss and waste and making sure that markets and trade are accessible and open.

3. Better Environment involves protecting, restoring and promoting sustainable use of terrestrial and marine ecosystems, promoting a good environment for farming systems, and combating climate change through reduction, reutilisation, recycling and residual management approaches. Conserving biodiversity, including agrobiodiversity and dietary diversity, is a critical spur to action on this front.

4. Better Life can be achieved by reducing inequalities - between urban and rural areas, rich and poor, and men and women - and promoting inclusive economic growth.

The director-general added that FAO's signature Hand-in-Hand Initiative is aimed at boosting rural transformation, urban food systems and resilient agri-food systems by scaling up appropriate investments. Currently 34 countries have joined the

programme, which is based on matchmaking between suitable partners and an overarching targeting of the world's poorest.

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