

**BETH BECHDOL**  
**Director-General, FAO**  
October 22, 2021 | 12:45-1:00 p.m.

**Beth Bechdol**

Director-General – Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

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Good afternoon to all of you joining in person from Des Moines and a warm welcome to those of you tuning in remotely from around the world. Greetings from all of us here at the food and agriculture organization in Rome Italy. I'm Beth Bechdol, deputy director general of FAO and it is truly an honor to be with you for the close of an incredibly exciting week of events and discussions, some virtual, some in-person and some hybrid. I would have very much liked to be with you there in Iowa. It is almost home for me, as I was born and raised in nearby Indiana. So it is an even more meaningful honor and privilege to share some closing thoughts and reflections with all of you that I think will very much validate and confirm a number of the points that have been raised in this closing panel as well. I also know that there are many friends and colleagues who are there in the room today, and I would have very much liked to see you as well.

Let me start by commending Barbara Stinson, president of the World Food Prize Foundation, and her entire team on a truly outstanding 2021 Borlaug Dialogue. Barbara has jumped in enthusiastically to her role and has navigated, like many of us, a very difficult environment with COVID. And it is terrific to see the dialogues continue in full force. This hybrid approach is not easy, but, Barbara, your team has certainly made it look so.

On behalf of FAO, I would also like to congratulate the 2021 World Food Prize Laureate, Dr. Shakuntala Thilsted, for this very well-deserved recognition of your tremendous contributions in pioneering fish-based food systems to improve nutrition, health and the livelihoods for millions around the world. Your research has led to significant increases in fish production and consumption, transforming the diets and incomes of some of the world's most vulnerable communities and also vastly expanding small-scale aquaculture. The world of agriculture, food security and nutrition would not be the same without your achievements. You are a role model not only in your field but also to women, particularly young women worldwide.

The discussions this week also importantly come as all of us are considering the follow up to September's U.N. Food Systems Summit and as we prepare for other upcoming convenings, next on the list, the COP26. It has been gratifying to see the very close alignment of perspectives around our shared priorities with those that have emerged from the Food Systems Summit.

I want to also thank Secretaries Vilsack and Villalobos and Minister Bibeau for their leadership in and their visions for agriculture in their respective countries and in the North America

region. This type of cooperation is necessary if we are going to ensure that agriculture is part of the solution to many of our biggest global challenges, particularly climate change.

Let me now take a few moments just to highlight, I think, a few important themes that emerged from the week.

First is the natural importance of fisheries and aquaculture for improved nutrition. Dr. Thilsted was generous enough to participate in an event co-hosted by FAO North America and the Alliance to End Hunger, entitled “Promoting Sustainable Aquaculture in Fisheries for Global Food and Nutrition Security.” Again, we’d like to thank her for taking the time to engage with us and share her immense expertise. The importance of aquaculture, fisheries and aquatic foods in this food system’s context for improved nutrition, food security, health and livelihoods was echoed repeatedly this week and I think again is a message that we need to make sure we pay attention to.

Next is the critical role of science and innovation, and this has been highlighted, I know, by countless speakers over the course of the week. Science and innovation are foundational for agrifood systems transformation. With solutions that include but are not limited to technologies, innovation can be social innovation, it can be policy innovation, and it doesn’t always mean new investigations. Innovation also needs to be very much prioritized in a contextual aspect, and around these areas FAO is deepening its own commitment to and focus on science and innovation.

Our new strategic framework, which is our ten-year strategic plan, puts these very topics at its center. Our strategic narrative of leaving no one behind, through efficient, sustainable, inclusive and resilient agrifood systems is anchored on four aspirations for both current and future generations. These are better production, better nutrition, a better environment and a better life.

Some additional prominent examples of our efforts to bolster our own work by science and innovation include the establishment of a new chief scientist position inside FAO, along with a new Office of Innovation. We have also established the International Platform for Digital Food and Agriculture as an inclusive, multistakeholder forum to promote dialogue on the digitalization of the food, agricultural, fisheries and forestry centers. And we are in the process of developing a comprehensive science and innovation strategy aimed at ensuring that we are capable of assisting countries scale up innovations that are, as I said, appropriate to their context and also based on science.

The role of the private sector was another key theme echoed throughout discussions this week. And as the State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World Report, highlighted earlier this year, there was a dramatic worsening of global hunger in 2020. Given the magnitude and the scale of this situation, we need to mobilize an all-hands-on-deck effort if we are to achieve SDG2 by 2030. And such an effort simply cannot succeed without the private sector. Private sector can be a strategic development partner offering innovative tools, technologies, resources, knowledge that are critical to reinforcing our collective impact on ground. Earlier this year FAO launched its own strategic for a private sector engagement, and we believe this reflects a new, forward-looking vision for FAO to strengthen strategic engagement with the private sector in order to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.

And finally, let me just touch on gender equity and the empowerment of women. Women make up at least 50% of the labor force in agriculture, and we know in many countries it’s a far greater

percentage. And so we play a critical role in enhancing agricultural productivity and rural development, improving food security and eradicating world poverty. It was great to hear so many speakers at this week's dialogue emphasize that women must be empowered and positioned at the center of efforts to end global hunger and malnutrition.

Let me close with three key takeaways for me from this week. First, we must empower young people to be part of the solution. Sometimes this means showing them the way, and then other times I think it means getting out of their way. I had such a great time interacting with a number of students at a Global Youth Institute roundtable discussion just on Monday. This was a group of dynamic and enormously impressive young students who are determined to help end global hunger and malnutrition.

Throughout this week, I was also happy to hear the strong emphasis on tapping into the potential of young people to be part of the solution for our most pressing challenges. I'd like to think that this would have pleased Norman Borlaug, as he always reminded us that we shouldn't overlook the ability of young people to come up with solutions to our greatest problems. And if the students I met with on Monday are at all representative of the commitment and the creativity of this next generation, I think we are indeed in good hands. And let us also not forget that we have more work to do to involve young women in agriculture and science, and this too is a key priority for FAO.

My second point: Let's not be afraid of hard conversations. There were so many wonderful, thought-provoking, stimulating events this week on the vast array of issues that are covered in food security and agriculture. I was able to participate in a side event this week hosted by the U.S. Department of State on "Reconciling Bioecology and Biotechnology." This event reinforced that, while we may not always agree, it is nonetheless critical that we have difficult conversations together in the same room in order to identify solutions and find common ground. And in those hard conversations, we need to ensure that they are inclusive, allowing for and encouraging the voices of women, youth, marginalized communities and indigenous properties.

And finally, we urgently need to create linkages across sectors to achieve transformative change, and we need to do so at scale. For example, before the end of this year and following on the U.N. Food Systems Summit, we will also have the Biodiversity Diversity and Climate Cost and the Nutrition for Growth Summit. It is imperative that the decisions and commitments emerging from these separate processes converge in a meaningful way. A key lesson from the Food Systems Summit and a point highlighted repeatedly this week is that important work is being done across sectors, including agriculture and food security, nutrition, fisheries and aquaculture, biodiversity, climate change, public health; yet current trends underline that we will not achieve our shared goals until and unless we meaningfully link and integrate our work. We all must truly invest in this systems approach and change our way of thinking, collaborating and investing.

It was so fitting then that the overarching theme of the 2021 Borlaug Dialogue has been – *Gaining Momentum: Food Systems Transformation in the Decade of Action*. It is the perfect message at the perfect time, I think.

On behalf of FAO, I would once again like to thank Barbara and all those involved with the World Food Prize Foundation for this opportunity to share these reflections on the important

events and discussions that we had this week and wish everyone safe travels back home, and hope to be with you in person in 2022. Thank you.

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**Barbara Stinson**

President, World Food Prize Foundation

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Beth Bechdol, thank you so much for those aspirational, inspirational words. You have clearly been with us this entire week, and I know many from FAO have done so. Get out of the way of youth—it's brilliant advice. And focusing on women in agriculture—we know it's the path forward. Having those hard conversations—we're trying to do that here, and everyone is trying to do it. It has to happen. It can't be that divergence and disagreement get in the way of the progress that has to happen through the conclusion of this decade. And cross-sectoral cooperation, collaboration must happen—and it is. And to hear FAO come forward throughout the week but just in your final comments with a clear understanding of how important that is, is crucial to our progress going forward.

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