Statement on behalf of Mr. Serge Nakouzi,
FAO Representative to the Islamic Republic of Iran
and to the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO)
on the occasion of the World Day to Combat Desertification 2015

- Excellency Dr. Jalali, Deputy Minister and Head of the Forests, Range and Watershed Management Organization,
- Esteemed representatives of the local communities,
- Distinguished guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Tomorrow, the 27th of Khordad 1394 (17th of June 2015), marks the World Day to Combat Desertification. The Representation of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations in the Islamic Republic of Iran, is delighted to be invited to celebrate, together with the Ministry of Jihad-e-Agriculture, such an important event.

Desertification has significant direct and indirect economic, health, environmental, and social impacts. Many economic impacts occur in agriculture and related sectors. The health impacts associated with extreme dust and sand storms, which are directly caused by desertification and land degradation, are a concern of many governments. Among these are not only severe respiratory diseases, but also traffic accidents caused by dust and sand storms.

Desertification is actually the breakdown of the fragile ecological balance which is at the root of a continuous process of self-destruction for all elements of the life system. The biggest challenge with desertification and land degradation is that they are self-feeding processes, thus the soil, water and vegetation degradation all act as both immediate results and direct causes of desertification, making an already bad situation worse.

The web of impacts of desertification may become so widespread that it is often difficult to determine accurate financial estimates of the damages. But one thing is for sure, the serious effects of desertification are dramatic for the poor populations of developing countries. Many face precarious conditions and lose their agricultural production. In order to survive, they often resort to overexploitation of the readily available natural resources, selling their agricultural equipment, or simply migrate to urban areas in search for better living conditions. The integrity of the rural communities is at stake. People become withdrawn and sometimes strongly individualistic, leading to ethnic, family or individual conflict. All these factors further weaken the economies of developing countries affected by desertification.

This is why we need to combat desertification. We need to use conventional as well as unconventional approaches to face its impact on economic development and food security. The 2015 World Day to Combat Desertification theme, ‘attainment of food security for all through sustainable food systems’, focuses on the two following post-2015 development Goals:
• **SDG (2.4)** By 2030 ensure sustainable food production systems and implement resilient agricultural practices that increase productivity and production, help maintain ecosystems, strengthen capacity for adaptation to climate change, extreme weather, drought, flooding and other disasters, and, progressively improve land and soil quality.

• **SDG (15.3)** By 2020, combat desertification, and restore degraded land and soil, including land affected by desertification, drought and floods, and strive to achieve a land-degradation neutral world.

Let us look at what is happening in Iran. Over-exploitation of cropland, pastures and forests are the most critical root cause for land degradation and desertification causing the rapid disappearance of forests, pervasive loss of biodiversity, severe and widespread erosion by wind and water as well as increasing soil salinity.

Addressing these challenges and putting in place effective solutions for Sustainable Land Management (SLM) need comprehensive technical solutions, promoting SLM practices and their impacts on productivity and on wider ecosystems services. This means developing reliable and cost-effective data and technical information on the status and trends of land resources.

It is important as well not to overlook the socio-economic context, in particular the needs and aspirations of farmers, herders and local communities thus contributing to the national goals of food and nutritional security and poverty alleviation.

Planning optimal use of land and water resources in irrigated and rain-fed systems and taking into account non-agriculture uses of the land is mandatory.

I am delighted to share with you that through the provision of its global technical and policy expertise, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) is undertaking a successful project with the Forests, Range and Watershed Management Organization (FRWO), together with the support of the Global Environmental Facility (GEF), in Rehabilitating Forest Landscapes and Degraded Lands (RFLDL) in the arid and semi-arid areas of Kerman and South Khorasan Provinces. The tangible results that have been attained to date are many in terms of desertification control, restoration of ecosystems, enhancing biodiversity, reinforcing food security and generating sustainable livelihoods for local communities. This shows not only the effectiveness of the approach applied, but also reaffirms the viability of the technical methodologies implemented within the framework of this project in confronting the complexities of similar adversities in the country.

Through the RFLDL project, local communities have been empowered through socio-economic initiatives and appropriate technical knowledge to embrace sustainable forest and land management practices thus safeguarding the forests, and improving their livelihood means.

These activities are closely aligned to the national policies on combatting desertification, on the protection of biodiversity and on mitigating the impact of climate change.

To bring my statement to a close, I would like to highlight that FAO is committed to collaborate with the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran, together with other agencies of the UN.
system, and other donors and partners, and to join efforts in order to meet the new development targets of post-2015 agenda that address land use, land and soil management and land governance.

Thank you for your attention.