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FAO Director-General calls for science and technology to bridge digital, rural and gender divides

26 August 2026 | News

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The Asia-Pacific region must place science, technology and artificial intelligence at the centre of efforts to transform agrifood systems, while ensuring that innovation helps close – rather than widen – the digital, rural and gender divides, FAO Director-General QU Dongyu has said.

Speaking on Tuesday at the 11th APEC Food Security Ministerial Meeting, the Director-General highlighted the region's progress in reducing hunger while stressing the need for a new generation of agrifood systems that are more efficient, inclusive, resilient and sustainable.

Asia has made significant progress since the launch of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. In 2025, the prevalence of undernourishment in the region was 25 percent lower than in 2015. Yet around 292 million people in Asia still face hunger, while nearly one third of the population cannot afford a healthy diet.

"This tells us something important: food security is about more than just producing enough food – it is about producing the right food, making it accessible and affordable, and doing so sustainably," the Director-General said during panel session on high-quality agricultural and rural development in the Asia Pacific region.

He highlighted the potential of digital technologies, artificial intelligence, biotechnology, precision agriculture and smart machinery to open new frontiers in agriculture and rural development, while stressing that their benefits must reach rural communities and translate into better livelihoods, nutrition and resilience.

He called for diversified production, stronger local food systems, improved food safety and greater access to nutritious, affordable foods, alongside rural revitalization through better infrastructure, digital connectivity, stronger value chains and greater opportunities for women and young people.

As the region undergoes rapid change, the Director-General called for stronger collaboration to connect science and knowledge with investment and practical solutions.

“FAO stands ready to contribute to this partnership through science, standards, data, policy expertise and practical experience from across the world,” he said.

Science, technology and inclusivity

During a second panel, focused on technological innovation and digital agriculture, the Director-General stressed that the transformation driven by science, technology and artificial intelligence must be inclusive.

“Science, technology and AI must not widen the triple divide – digital divide, rural divide, and gender divide – it must help close them,” he said.

He emphasized that the true measure of digital agriculture is not the sophistication of an algorithm, but whether innovation delivers tangible benefits for people and communities – enabling farmers to produce more with less, helping families access healthier food at affordable prices, strengthening rural communities against climate shocks and allowing agriculture to prosper without exhausting natural resources.

He called for AI to be harnessed as a “force multiplier”, turning vast amounts of data into practical decisions for producers and agrifood systems – from weather forecasting and early warning of pests and diseases to optimizing irrigation and inputs, improving supply-chain efficiency and better matching supply with demand. “We can make use of AI, but we cannot eat AI,” he said.

The Director-General stressed that innovation should become a regional public good, with economies sharing data, knowledge, technologies, standards and good practices to accelerate adoption and bring solutions to scale. He also interpreted what “SMART” agriculture stands for, “s” for science driven, “m” for machine learning, “a” for AI, “r” for resilience and “t” for transformation of agrifood system.

His speeches came a day after the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding between FAO and Hunan Agricultural University, strengthening cooperation in food security, sustainable agricultural development, digital agriculture and South-South and Triangular cooperation.