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Speech by President Michael D. Higgins
At the IFA/Teagasc International Conference on Family Farming
Shelbourne Hotel, Dublin

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I am delighted to be here with you this morning, and I would like to thank the Irish Farmers' Association and Teagasc for inviting me to take part in this international conference on the vitally important topic of family farming.

Indeed we should never forget that farming connects us to one of the most basic and fundamental of human activities – that is, the production of food that is necessary to sustain human life. Our farmers are keeping alive the ‘endangered language’ of interconnections between man and nature, which carries within it the knowledge to ensure food security.

Of course there exist many different types of farming – from collective, or communal, to corporate farming. Yet, of the 570 million farms across the world today, 500 million (almost 90%) are family farms. Family farming – which the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organisation, the FAO, defines as “a means of organising agricultural, forestry, fisheries, pastoral and aquaculture production which is managed and operated by a family and predominantly reliant on family labour, both women's and men's” – family farming, then, remains the predominant form of food production in both developing and industrialised countries. According to the FAO's latest figures, family farms currently produce more than 80% of the world's food in value terms (FAO, “The State of Food and Agriculture 2014”: <http://www.fao.org/3/a-i4036e.pdf>).

Given this vital role played by family farming in ensuring global food security, but also in eradicating extreme poverty and malnutrition, in fostering thriving rural communities, in protecting cultural as well as biological diversity, and in allowing for the sustainable management of our natural environment, we must all warmly welcome the United Nations' decision to declare 2014 the International Year of Family Farming.

This International Year provides a framework inviting all those concerned to unite forces in order to respond to the challenges facing small farmers across the globe. May I, then, commend the IFA and Teagasc for their willingness, manifested in

today's conference, to pool their expertise in order to make an Irish contribution to the efforts underway at international level. I was particularly pleased to see that your focus is not only on Ireland but also on the wider global context, the object of your first session this morning.

I am confident that this conference can provide a valuable input in identifying the policies and supports required so that family farming can thrive in Ireland and throughout the world. Indeed an enabling regulatory and policy environment is key to allowing as many farmers as possible to make a viable living out of the family farm.

This is equally true for farmers in Ireland as for those abroad.

As you may be aware, I am just back from a three-week visit to Africa. Today, 70% of the planet's food insecure population lives in rural areas of Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Near East. Many of them are family farmers, especially smallholders, with poor access to markets, policies, technologies and natural resources, notably water. Such blatant inequalities in food distribution between continents and, within countries, between urban and rural areas, are a concern for all of us. And I believe that Irish farmers and their representative organisations and training bodies can play a significant role in tackling these global issues and in sharing their skills and knowledge.

It is time to forcefully challenge what is, in my view, a flawed assumption – the idea that modernisation and socio-economic progress require urbanisation. I believe, conversely, that sustainable rural development offers a viable alternative to massive rural flight, which too often feeds the mushrooming of shanty towns on the edge of cities.

There is in Africa a profusion of evidence showing that poor farmers can quickly deploy their productivity potential when the appropriate supports and policies are effectively put in place. For example, in Northern Ethiopia's Tigray region – an area which was once a synonym of famine and barren land – I saw how new management techniques, pioneered by the regional government, with the support of Irish Aid, have turned a desolate landscape into a productive valley supporting thousands of families.

During my visit to Malawi, I had the privilege of visiting the community of Saopampeni, in the Salima District, who have worked with NGOs to identify their critical vulnerabilities and design solutions to improve their livelihoods. Those solutions include, among others, village savings and loan clubs, community seed banks, livestock "pass on" schemes, energy efficient stoves, micro irrigation, and crop diversification. The latter is critical to the fight against malnutrition, not just in Malawi but in many countries across the world, where the focus on a single crop – maize in Malawi's case – has done little to solve the hunger challenge.

Hunger, of course, is no longer as pressing an issue in Ireland as it is in some parts of the world. Another challenge which particularly affects African farmers and which constitutes one of the most serious obstacles to increasing agricultural productivity in that continent is women's insecure access to land tenure and credit, as shown in several important studies conducted by UN agencies among African farmers (See, e.g. "Women and Access to Land and Credit: Discussions and Key Findings", UNECA, July 2007. See also: "State of Food and Agriculture: Women and Agriculture - Closing the gender gap for development", FAO, 2011.).

Yet, many other challenges facing family farmers here and abroad differ in intensity more than in kind: access to land, to credit, to markets; the need to innovate and add value to agricultural products – these are challenges that are shared by family farmers across the globe.

As this particular audience knows very well, here in Ireland, land mobility, and in particular, the need to enable young farmers to access the land they require to make a living in agriculture is perhaps the most pressing challenge for the future of family farming.

It is a question I have addressed in several of my past speeches, most recently at the National Ploughing Championships, where I referred to the important study commissioned by Macra na Feirme on "Land Mobility and Succession in Ireland." (<http://www.macra.ie/system/assets/131/original/land-mobility-and-succession-in-ireland.pdf>)

The current age structure of Ireland's farming population, the fact that very little farmland – less than 0.5% per annum – is transferred in our country in any given year, and the insufficient harnessing of the potential of collaborative farming are issues that need to be tackled head-on.

I was therefore delighted to hear of the Conference on Collaborative Farming organised by Teagasc last April, and to learn that Macra na Feirme launched, also in April 2014, a pilot "Land Mobility Service". Such initiatives, aimed at allowing a new generation of Irish farmers to get started, are highly commendable.

The disproportionate levels of accidents, too many of them lethal, that occur on Irish farms is another grave issue which, I know, the sector is working on addressing. Children and older people appear to be particularly vulnerable to farm accidents – and the importance of fostering children's interest in farming while making sure that they are not exposed to risk is a concern for many farming parents.

The first National Farm Safety Awareness Day, organised by the IFA and the Health and Safety Authority in July of this year, is an important step towards the resolution of this tragic state of affairs. I most sincerely hope that we will soon see the day when farming will no longer be one of the most dangerous occupations in

our country.

Agriculture is a cornerstone of Ireland's environment, society, economy and identity. All of you here know the special place that the land and its care, and so many aspects of rural Irish life, hold in our history and our hearts. All of us, as members of society, avail of the multifaceted benefits that a robust family farming sector provides, and therefore I firmly believe that farmers are entitled to our collective support in ensuring the viability of Irish family farms.

In the area of environmental protection, family farms provide a vital public service in maintaining the health of ecosystems, in providing protection for water quality and in safeguarding endangered habitats and species. Within the EU, for example, substantial financial supports are provided to help farmers to continue undertaking their activities in harmony with nature, and without damaging the natural capital on which we all depend.

The global challenges of climate change and biodiversity loss must, I believe, be key considerations for the farming community and efforts must be made to identify how the sector can most effectively contribute, both locally and globally, to emission reduction endeavours.

Family farming also fulfils fundamental social, economic, and cultural functions. Importantly, our agri-food sector supports 300,000 people in employment nationally. But the social benefits of farming go beyond that: farming families are embedded in territorial networks; they spend their incomes mostly within local and regional markets, generating many agricultural and non-agricultural jobs.

From an economic perspective, as Ireland's largest indigenous industry, the sector not only plays an important role in providing for the domestic market, but it has also conquered international markets. This achievement is first and foremost to the credit of our farmers, who have worked so hard to establish the good international reputation of Irish beef, lamb and dairy, and whose current focus on sustainable modes of production is to be commended.

With global demand for food forecast to increase by 70% by 2050, we have every reason to be confident in the potential for growth of Irish farming. The upcoming abolition of milk quotas will also open new, stimulating opportunities for the dairy industry. In seizing on these new opportunities, it is essential, however, that the farming community ensures that the deriving benefits are shared by the many, and not just divided among the biggest.

I believe that it is equally important to build up Irish agriculture's capacity to expand into new markets globally, as it is to strengthen local production and distribution systems and to encourage smaller farmers to directly transform and add value to their products. Innovation and local product development are crucial

to the vitality of our rural communities. It is, then, greatly encouraging to see, in today's Ireland, a proliferation of innovative ideas and projects which manifest the dynamism and potential of family farming in our country.

Maintaining vibrant agriculture and preserving the family farm model is of critical importance to the future of this country. It is a vital necessity if we want to ensure that no portion of our national territory is left neglected – economically, socially or environmentally. It is a vital necessity if we want an Ireland of thriving local communities. And it is a vital necessity if we want to continue to eat good food, and sustain a living and rich relationship with our natural environment.

Go raibh míle maith agaibh go léir.