Good morning, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for inviting me to the MESHA Conference.

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I am the President of IFAJ, International Federation of Agricultural Journalists. I live in Stockholm, Sweden, and work as Political Editor in Chief at Sweden’s largest agriculture newspaper. My name is Lena Johansson

I have been working as a journalist for 40+ years and as an agriculture journalist for more than 30 years. But rarely has it been more important and interesting than now. First the pandemic and now the war in Ukraine, and staggering prices on both commodities and food following this, has put agriculture on top of the political agenda.

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IFAJ is a global, politically neutral, professional organization, whose members are agricultural journalist guilds or associations. We represent more than 5 000 individual journalists and communicators in 56 member countries. Many of them from Africa.

One of the IFAJ’s objectives is to create opportunities for agricultural journalists and communicators around the world to network and make professional and personal contacts. To this end the IFAJ convenes an annual congress which is hosted by a member guild. This year we are invited to Denmark in June and by our Danish colleagues, and so far about 200 participants from all over the world have registered.

We also arrange press tours, meetings, contests, and other events. These initiatives, and the online conversations surrounding them, are a perfect platform for building positive relationships across countries, cultures, and sectors.

We have had some problems to conduct all these initiatives the last two years, due to the pandemic. It’s not easy to organize work in a global federation when you can’t travel and meet in-person. But thanks to online media we have been able to arrange webinars, discussion groups, and even two e-congresses.

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When IFAJ was first established in 1956, it was in a way a result of World War II. After the war people in Europe were starving. The politicians realized that to keep the peace, they had to develop the agriculture and increase food production. If people don’t have enough to eat, the political situation will be very unstable.

But to be able to increase the food production farmers also needed education and relevant information. Therefore, a group of European agricultural journalists and communicators decided to build a network and support each other’s work. That was the start of something which grew steadily, and some years later became the International Federation of Agricultural Journalists (IFAJ).

During the years more and more countries and guilds have joined, and in the last 20 years we have been able to welcome many colleagues from Africa. We now have members from six continents, including South America and Oceania.

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Sustainable agriculture offers many of the solutions to our future challenges and to the United Nation’s global goals – such as zero hunger, affordable and clean energy, life on land, and climate action. We won’t be able to satisfy our needs for either food or energy without products from agriculture and forestry.

At the same time, we know that this might harm both climate and environment if we don’t do it in a sustainable way. We have lived beyond our means, and to feed a growing population we have to heal our food system.

A long-term sustainable agriculture is also important for peace, justice, and strong institutions. Because, as I said before, if people can’t feed their families the political situation will be unstable, and it can turn into a security risk with demonstrations, riots, and even wars.

Local food production is also a prerequisite for people to be able to stay where they live and not be forced to flee. Farmers must be able to make a living on their farms, and I personally think that we all need to show more appreciation for the shrinking group of farmers.

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The Russian invasion of Ukraine has also shown how fragile our food system is. When the supply of food is so strongly affected by the lack of export from two of the world's leading players, food prices are soaring. And when other big food producers, such as India, then stop their export, the situation is worsening even more.

UN’s Secretary General Antonio Guterres recently warned that the Russian invasion can cause a food crisis that may last for years. Some countries may even face famine.

Climate change, energy crisis and pandemics, there are many threats to global agriculture. Therefore, professional agricultural journalism and communications are vital to report on this. Both to educate and inform farmers, and to inform a growing number of urban people, who know little or nothing about how their food is produced. And who are depending on fewer and fewer farmers to feed them.

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IFAJ members embrace freedom of the press, and only guilds who can show that they work for freedom of the press can join us. To be reliable and trustworthy journalism must be independent and can’t be controlled, either by governments or commercial forces. But this is far from reality in many countries. Last year almost 500 journalists were imprisoned and 46 were killed while doing their work.

IFAJ also has members who have been harassed and even imprisoned. And in cases like this, it’s good to have a large, global organization behind you. In these matters IFAJ also cooperates with Reporters without borders.

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As President of IFAJ I’m convinced that professional, well-educated agriculture journalists are crucial. That’s why professional development is one of the main tasks for our organization. And as I said before, skilled journalists are not important only to the farmers. We are all dependent on sustainable agriculture, and a robust food system.

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To attract young, promising journalists IFAJ have a programme called Young Leaders, where young talents get a scholarship and a training course. This way we have enrolled quite a few leaders and many of the alumni are now on leading positions in their national guilds.

We also have a similar programme for journalists from countries who not yet are members of IFAJ. Many of the African member guilds are a result of this. Journalists have been invited as participants of the Master Class programme, and then gone home and started a national guild of agricultural journalists in their country.

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I’ve seen in the conference programme that you will cover lots of interesting and important issues during the four days. I’m glad that you didn’t forget one of our most basic needs, agriculture, food production and food security. And those who report on this. And I’m honored that you gave me the opportunity to address you.

IFAJ will continue to grow. At this year’s congress we will decide on membership applications from four new countries, among them Uganda. We are convinced that our work is important, and we will continue to put the spotlight on these questions. Because farmers and agriculture will never be outdated, and we, journalists and communicators, can guide them to keep up with the demands of the times.

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Thank you!

And with these words I pronounce the 5th African Conference of Science Journalists open. Good luck with your work!