

**Opening Statement by**  
**Abebe Haile-Gabriel, FAO Assistant Director-General and**  
**Regional Representative for Africa**  
**At the Thirty-first Session of the Regional Conference for Africa**  
**Senior Officials Meeting**

Your Excellency, Mr Anxious Jongwe Masuka– Minister for Lands, Agriculture, Water and Rural Resettlement, the Republic of Zimbabwe,

Distinguished Delegates of Member States

Representatives of partners organizations, CSOs, the Private Sector,

Dear colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen:

1. I wish to welcome you all and thank you for honoring our invitation to attend the Thirty-first Session of FAO’s Regional Conference for Africa, which is being held in a virtual mode.
2. I would like to thank the government of the Republic of Zimbabwe for accepting to host this Conference in a virtual mode.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

3. This conference is taking place at a unique moment in history.
4. Evidences indicate that most countries in Africa are not on track to meet the Malabo targets as well as the Sustainable Development Goals on eradicating poverty and ending hunger.
5. The situation of hunger for about a quarter of Africa’s population has been a daily experience. The number of people affected by the scourge of hunger is rising fast.
6. For example, Africa has the highest prevalence of undernourishment (19.1 percent), which is more than twice the global average (8.9 percent). Healthy diets have simply become unaffordable for close to a billion people in Africa. This need not be!
7. The high vulnerability of economic and livelihood systems to climate variability and extremes, conflict and instabilities, transboundary pests and diseases and adverse economic conditions have all contributed to such a state of affairs.

8. The case of Desert Locust that has been ravaging crops and pasture in Eastern Africa is an example of how vulnerable rural livelihoods can be to risks.
9. COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the problem further, with its far-reaching impacts on the lives and livelihoods of people.
10. Because of COVID-19, undernourishment in Africa could increase by up to 40 million people in 2020. Vulnerable groups, communities and countries have been impacted more, because they lack the necessary capacities to absorb the shocks. This is particularly true for much of African countries.
11. In Africa, more than elsewhere, these shocks overlap, and have debilitating impacts. Obviously, there is no other options than taking bold and accelerated collaborative actions to address these overlapping crises and build back better.

**Ladies and Gentlemen:**

12. Guided by the priorities as defined by its governing bodies, FAO has been supporting the efforts of member countries towards meeting the goals of ending hunger and malnutrition, promotion of production intensification and value-chain development, building resilience, and sustainable natural resources management and environment.
13. FAO has been collaborating with the African Union and its specialized institutions as well as Regional Economic Communities to support the design and implementation of regional frameworks and programmes, in the context of the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme Framework, (CAADP), the Africa Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), among others.
14. The ongoing collaboration with the AUC and other partners in the context of COVID-19 response has been an example of what could be achieved together.
15. As you will recall, the initial response to COVID-19 was exclusively public-health focused, almost to exclusion of other dimensions, including food security.
16. While the focus on public health remains quite appropriate, it was also necessary to urge for public attention to embrace a more comprehensive and holistic approach – with a view to avoiding the undesirable eventuality of a public health crises transforming itself into a food security and livelihood crises.
17. FAO and AU, in collaboration with other partners managed to convene the African Ministers meeting as early as April 16, which was instrumental in elevating the profile of food supply systems as part of the overall strategy to deal with the pandemic.
18. The Joint meeting of Ministers in charge of Agriculture, Trade and Finance – a first of its kind that was convened by the AU on July 27 – was not only significant in its own right; it was also emblematic in terms of charting the way for what should happen going forward.

19. The platform created an opportunity for key strategic partners, such as the AUDA/NEPAD, WB, AfDB, EU, IFAD, WFP, among others, to come together in a Joint Taskforce to support the implementation of the priority actions areas defined in the ministerial declarations.
20. This is because a successful agriculture and food systems agenda can only be achieved in an environment of multi-sectoral and inclusive multi-stakeholders engagement, collaboration, mutual commitment and accountability.
21. It is in recognition of this fact that FAO has been deliberate in engaging the CSOs, Farmers organizations, the private sector, the academia, networks of parliamentarians, among others, also in preparation for this conference.
22. It should be clear to all of us that business-as-usual practices are not going to lead us anywhere.

**Ladies and Gentlemen:**

23. A new FAO is in the making with our Director-General, Dr. Qu Dongyu, committing to transform FAO to become a dynamic, flexible, agile and inclusive organization. The Director-General has been launching new initiatives – such as the Hand-in-Hand initiative to support efforts in eradication of poverty and hunger; as well as streamlining and strengthening the Organizational capacity and its modus operandi, for it to be fit for purpose to deliver on four Betters: **Better Production, Better Nutrition, Better Environment and Better Life for all.**
24. FAO is actively investing in strengthening data to support evidence-based policy and practice. This is being achieved through forging strategic partnerships to promote innovation and digitalization in agriculture; and aims to intensify efforts to strengthen national statistical capacities. In this respect, the recently launched platform, by FAO and Google of a new Big Data tool for all, called Hand-in-Hand geospatial platform is a good example.
25. FAO is formulating its Strategic Framework that will guide its work for the next 10 years. This should be informed by regional priorities, including from the Africa region – to which this Regional Conference is expected to contribute.
26. FAO has launched a comprehensive COVID-19 response and recovery programme, with 7 key pillars including reinforcing the Global Humanitarian Response Plan for COVID-19; improving Data for Decision-making; ensuring Economic Inclusion and Social Protection to Reduce Poverty; bolstering Trade and Food Safety Standards; boosting Smallholder Resilience for Recovery; preventing the Next Zoonotic Pandemic through a strengthened One Health Approach; and triggering Food Systems Transformation.

**Ladies and Gentlemen,**

27. You will note that your draft agenda is centered on these strategic issues – including discussion on resilience building and addressing the challenges faced by particular vulnerable communities and groups such as SIDS, Landlocked countries; and on the priorities in the Africa region.
28. I would like to thank all of you for your contributions during the extensive consultations that have been taking place at national, sub-regional and regional levels in the run up to this Conference.

29. It is our expectation that the ministerial sessions, including on Covid19 and Agri-food Systems, Hand-in-Hand Initiative, Food Systems Transformation through innovation and digitalization, in the context of the 2021 UN Food Systems Summit; as well as the session on Committee on World Food Security, will facilitate interactive discussion and provide further guidance on the priorities for Africa going forward.
30. The Conference agenda also accommodates special events to highlight the Africa Solidarity Trust Fund, and the launch of the Joint FAO-AU Report on Regional Outlook on Gender and Agribusiness in Africa.
31. I look forward to fruitful deliberations and your guidance on the recommendations that you will table for consideration by the Honourable Ministers.

I thank you.