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FAO REGIONAL CONFERENCE FOR AFRICA

Thirty-first Session¹

26 – 28 October 2020

**Statement by the Chairperson of the 30th Session of the Regional
Conference for Africa**

Your Excellency, Mr Emmerson Mnangagwa, President of the Republic of Zimbabwe,

Your Excellency, Mr Anxious Jongwe Masuka– Minister for Lands, Agriculture, Water and Rural Resettlement, President of the Thirty-first Session of the FAO Regional Conference for Africa,

Your Excellency, Mr Khalid Mehboob, Independent Chairperson of the FAO Council,

Your Excellency, Mr QU Dongyu, Director-General of FAO,

Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, Ministers

Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, Ambassadors and Permanent Representatives to the United Nations in Rome,

Honourable delegates,

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my great pleasure to address the Thirty-first session of the Regional Conference for Africa (ARC) and begin with briefing you on the Thirtieth African Regional Conference, which took place in February 2018 in Khartoum, the Sudan. The conference's theme was "*Sustainable development of agriculture and food systems in Africa: improving the means of production and the creation of decent and attractive employment for youth*". Along the lines of this theme, due consideration was given to alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the Malabo Declaration on Accelerated Agricultural Growth and Transformation for Shared Prosperity and Improved Livelihoods, with commitment to end hunger in Africa by 2025, in the Framework of the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP) and other strategic continental frameworks.

¹ Rescheduled from 23-27 March 2020, Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Regional Conference engaged in serious discussions on important issues related to food security and sustainable agriculture development in Africa.

These included the analysis of trends prevalent in food insecurity and the triple burden of undernourishment and malnutrition in relation to the underlying drivers, including adverse climatic conditions, conflict and a difficult global economic environment.

The negative impact of climate change on food security, nutrition and livelihoods was among the main issues discussed, combined with due consideration of innovative approaches for climate change adaptation and mitigation, as well as Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) and Disaster Risk Management (DRM) for the Africa region.

The conference emphasized the creation of youth employment opportunities in agriculture in rural areas in Africa, with specific attention given to youth engagement in agri-food systems.

It has also affirmed the importance of achieving food security and nutrition through mainstreaming biodiversity across Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry,

The Regional Conference called on African countries to step up their support and contribution to **the Africa Solidarity Trust Fund (ASTF)**. Subsequently, the ASTF Round Table of Contributors was successfully convened in June 2019 in Malabo, Equatorial Guinea Hosted by H.E. Obiang Nguema Mbasogo, President of the Republic of Equatorial Guinea; it drew high-level delegates, including four heads of States, from 22 African and 14 non-African countries. It ended up with a total of USD 25 million of pledges.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Thirtieth Session of the Regional Conference for Africa has reiterated the commitment to achieve zero hunger in Africa by 2025, as anchored in the African Union's Malabo Declaration, and the continuance of pursuing policies and programmes that will redress the deteriorating trends of undernourishment and malnutrition in all its forms in Africa;

To this respect, the Members expressed commitment to:

- Put in place conducive policies and strategies, mobilizing and allocating adequate resources, and channelling institutional capacities and capabilities for accelerated implementation of sustainable food and agriculture systems in an integrated and coordinated manner;
- Increase agricultural productivity, including the application of innovations, technologies, information systems, Information and Communications Technology (ICT), and improved inputs and mechanization;
- Adopt policies and programmes to increase responsible and youth-inclusive investments to modernize the agricultural sector, and involving youths in policy formulation and dialogues and decision-making processes concerning them;
- Promote viable and decent employment and entrepreneurship opportunities for young women and men in farming and non-farming rural activities as a means of addressing the root causes of distress rural outmigration, strengthening rural-urban linkages and reducing the incidence of migration;
- Promote an enabling business environment to further engage the private sector as an engine of job creation and strengthening apex youth associations and agribusiness bodies;
- Enhance our collaboration and coordination towards a stronger and more effective mainstreaming of biodiversity across agriculture, forestry and fisheries, including in the context of climate change.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Following up our responsibilities as Chair of the 30th African Regional Conference, to assess the progress of implementation of the recommendations and commitments of the Session, we have managed to deliver the Conference message through a number of events, and meetings, with a good participation of our fellow colleagues. Here is a brief account of these events:

- At the **159th Session of the FAO Council, Rome, June 2018**, we reported to the Conference on the background and summary of the 30th ARC recommendations and highlighted the key areas for follow up;
- We also, informed, in our statement to the **41st Session of the FAO Conference in Rome, June 2019**, the conference on the agreed arrangement for the host and date for ARC Thirty-first Session, followed up further by the African Regional Group in Rome. The Conference witnessed a series of side events, which explored the challenges and opportunities of reaching Zero Hunger, biodiversity for food in agriculture and youth role in agriculture across several regions including Africa;
- On the side-lines of the **Ministerial Level Forum (MLF) on Global South-South Cooperation (SSC) in Agriculture in Changsha, China during the period 1 – 2 November 2018**, we organized a consultative meeting of the participant Members. The meeting affirmed the importance of the Regional Conference as a channel of communication, coordination and joint activities among Members. This provided an opportunity of experiences sharing and feedback from Members on the Regional Conference recommendations and commitments. The feedback indicated that due attention is being given to the recommendations combined with progress in the implementation, especially the ongoing efforts in areas of research, innovation and technology, which have shown some promising results;
- At the **AU Third Ordinary Session of the Specialized Technical Committee on Agriculture, Rural Development, Water, and Environment (ARDWE) held in Addis Ababa, in October 2019**, we had the opportunity, as Chair of the 30th ARC, to advocate for the ARC, provide updates, by sharing information on the theme and the process towards the 31st Session of the ARC together with the planned events prior to the conference, followed by bilateral meetings, with some of the participant Members, regional and sub-regional organizations including AU and Development Partners;
- Along the same lines, from **25 to 27 November 2019 in Kampala-Uganda**, a message was delivered to a plenary session at the high-level event titled: ***“Inspiration, Inclusion, and Innovation: The Tenth Anniversary of the FAO-China South-South Cooperation Programme and Future Perspectives for South-South and Triangular Cooperation”*** The message emphasized the promotion of China and FAO South-South Triangular Cooperation and encouraged Members to become fully involved in the two way approach of cooperation with China. Updates on the preparations and processes of the ARC 31st Session were also provided.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Since the inception of CAADP in Maputo, Mozambique in the year 2003, the CAADP programme encouraged and advanced collective thinking, triggered better understanding and appreciation for the enormous role the agriculture sector could play towards the noble goals of the eradication of hunger, poverty alleviation, social justice and sustainable development. Subsequently, it has been and is still one of the top issues discussed at the 30th ARC.

I am grateful to the African Union Commission for leading the Biennial Review (BR) mechanism exercise through a continent-wide consultation process that fostered alignment, harmonization and coordination among multisectoral efforts and multi-institutional platforms for peer review, mutual learning and mutual accountability.

Notably, the implementation of the Biennial Review (BR) mechanism had shown great success in the preparation and submission of the Biennial Review Reports, the First (BR) in January 2018 (Inaugural) and the second (BR) Report in February 2020.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

An important event between the 30th and 31st ARCs was the election of Mr QU Dongyu, the new FAO Director-General at the **41st Session of the FAO Conference in Rome, June 2019**.

Please join me in extending the ARC's warm congratulations combined with our appreciation and thanks to him for accepting the challenge. Following his election, FAO has successfully rolled out the new *Hand-in-Hand Initiative*, to help accelerate achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals - especially ending poverty and hunger - and leaving no one behind.

It is an advanced level of partnership bringing countries with the highest poverty and hunger rates together with developed countries to support their development efforts. As described by Mr QU Dongyu, it is a true partnership, built on mutual respect and trust, and strengthened by our joint goal of reaching the SDGs and creating a world free of hunger. I am sure this conference will further enrich the initiative's concept with more discussions, exchange of experiences and advancement of its agenda.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Another landmark event between the two conferences was the signing of the **treaty establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA)** in March 2018 at the end of the 10th extraordinary session of the Assembly of Heads of State and Government of the African Union. It entered into force on 30 May 2019 for the **24** countries that had deposited their instruments of ratification.

The AfCFTA represents a window of opportunity for African countries not only to promote intra-African trade, but to diversify and transform the continent's economy, and pursue important human rights and anti-poverty goals. I send congratulations to the Government of Ghana for being selected as the secretariat of the AfCFTA, which is the world's largest free trade area since the formation of the World Trade Organization.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Since October 2019, and until today, our continent has been exposed to the worst upsurge of desert locusts. The swarms of desert locust have spread over Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, the Sudan, Uganda and the United Republic of Tanzania. Records show that such pandemic has not occurred for the last 70 years.

The desert locust is one of the most dangerous agricultural pests known to humanity. Desert locusts can travel up to 135 km, or more, in one day. A one square kilometre size swarm can eat the same amount of food in one day as about 35 000 people. Hundred thousands of hectares were treated in Eastern Africa to control the invasion of the desert locust, but the situation remains extremely alarming in the Horn of Africa.

Desert locusts do not respect boundaries and will move wherever there is a green plant and destroy it. They represent an unprecedented threat to food security and livelihoods; this creates a major challenge for the governments within the continent to unite and support each other in controlling this pest. At the same time, we look to the international community to continue to lend a helping hand for the affected countries which face this disaster.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

While our continent is already hit with food security crises, the COVID 19 pandemic is adding to the existing challenges of the unprecedented locust outbreak in the Horn of Africa, climate change related crises and prevalence of conflicts and political instability. It has potentially undermined both short-term production and distribution combined with the fall in global demand which will likely prolong the negative trade effects.

Again, this new situation flags a serious challenge in relation to the negative impacts on food security and livelihoods. We need to identify and rally around priority areas in order to accelerate a more rapid transformation of food systems, reduce commodity independence, build productive capacities to address the underlying economic vulnerabilities and strengthen capabilities for supply chain resilience.

During and after the pandemic, we need to think and do things differently. Embarking on enabling policies and home-made solutions. To this respect, we should take advantage of the opportunity of the establishment of the Continental African Free Trade Area for the full implementation of its objectives on top of which the promotion of intercontinental trade and facilitation of movement of commodities.

I would like to acknowledge the active engagement of the Honourable Ministers for Agriculture as well as the Ministers responsible for Trade and Finance towards providing coordinated guidance and leadership to the COVID-19 challenge in Africa. FAO and the AU should be commended for the crucial facilitation and coordination role that they have played, including the Joint FAO-AU Taskforce that brought together strategic partners to support key areas of intervention. Resilience building efforts carried out by FAO and other international development partners continue to remain extremely valuable.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I wish to take this opportunity to sincerely thank all those who have taken part in the excellent preparatory work ahead of this Regional Conference. I would particularly like to express my gratitude to the FAO Regional Office for Africa, and the FAO Representation in Zimbabwe, which have made a considerable contribution to ensure the success of the Regional Conference. My thanks go to FAO Representation in the Sudan, which has extended considerable support during my tenure.

I would also like to highlight the continuous and essential work done by the African Group of permanent representatives in preparing for the Regional Conference.

Lastly, I would particularly like to thank the Director-General of FAO for his tireless leadership, his exemplary vision, and for putting Members' priorities at the heart of FAO's mandate.

At this point, I have the honour to hand over the duties of the Chair of the Regional Conference; I wish my successor, the Honourable Anxious Jongwe Masuka – *Minister for Lands, Agriculture, Water and Rural Resettlement* of Zimbabwe, the greatest success, and a fruitful and productive Thirty-first session of the Regional Conference for Africa to you all.