Thirty-First Session of the FAO Regional Conference for Africa

Declaration by Civil Society Organizations

Your Excellences, Honourable Ministers, and Distinguished Guests.

Today, 250 million Africans remain hungry, and nearly a billion cannot afford a healthy diet. Our food systems are under tremendous pressure. With rapid population growth, we are having to contend with multiple simultaneous threats, including climate change and depleting soils, let alone the deeply entrenched social and economic imbalances perpetuated by COVID.

More than ever, achieving SDG2, demands that we rise to the challenge of ensuring the availability of sufficient quantities of safe, nutritious, and affordable food, while promoting sustainable agriculture. We need radical change - rapid transformation of our food and farming systems to eliminate hunger and progress the other interconnected SDGs.

THIS is where market-led innovation has an important role to play. The private and public sector MUST work together, to leverage innovation, and advances in digital technologies to address the unique challenges that limit African food and farming systems, especially productivity, and access to finance and markets, with the end goal of creating higher value commercial, employment, and entrepreneurship opportunities that are critical to eradicating poverty and driving long-term sustainable development.

Human-centred and problem-driven innovation can bring new, critical capabilities for agile adaptation of food and farming systems. These could be digital tools that boost farm productivity while enabling adoption of sustainable farming practices; alongside digital financial products targeted at increasing farmer income.

Data and digital technologies can also empower the public and private sector to identify and predict food security shocks as early as possible, for better planning and decision-making.

Innovation is the key to not only overcoming systemic risks and challenges that threaten food security but spurring a quantum leap in the transition towards resilient, sustainable food and farming systems.

We recommend urgent, practical, and decisive action from African governments. This starts with:

- public-private collaboration to align policy priorities, giving the local private sector the ability to lead the rapidly growing food market in Africa that could be worth $1 trillion by 2030;
- taking the highest return approach to catalyzing innovation and digital transformation in Africa, by investing in home-grown talent, educating girls, as well as empowering women and disabled people;
- eliminating mobile money transaction taxes, that disproportionately hit typically unbanked rural farming communities the hardest. Africa’s world leading position in mobile money ecosystems, can offer tremendous opportunities for innovation and bringing novel digital services to farmers;
- catalyzing GPS location-based services, and reliable and affordable connectivity in rural farming communities, by creating policy environments that allow private-sector investment into satellites and rocket launch infrastructure, leapfrogging costly terrestrial infrastructure;
- nurturing local tech startup ecosystems, through policy measures that attract patient risk capital from local investors.

27 October 2020