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Organización de las  
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Alimentación y la Agricultura

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# FAO REGIONAL CONFERENCE FOR AFRICA

**Thirty-first Session<sup>1</sup>**

**26 – 28 October 2020**

**Statement by the Director General**

Your Excellency, Mr President **Emmerson Dambudzo Mnangagwa, The Republic of Zimbabwe.**

Minister Anxious Jongwe Masuka,

Minister for Lands, Agriculture, Water and Rural Resettlement,

Honorable Ministers of the Africa Region,

Mr Independent Chairperson of the FAO Council,

Distinguished Delegates,

Representatives from Parliaments, Private Sector, Civil Society and Academia,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

1. First of utmost, Mr President's statement has made FAO regional conference with **our great honor, great dynamic and historical record**. I extend my gratitude to the Government and people of the Republic of Zimbabwe for hosting this conference with your great contribution.
2. Now please allow me to **express my condolences** for the loss of Mr Perrence Shiri, the former Minister of Agriculture of Zimbabwe.
3. My thoughts and solidarity are also with all the victims of the COVID-19 pandemic in the region and beyond, and the heroes fighting against it.
4. And I would also like to pay tribute to the national authorities of all our Members, who are hosting FAO offices across the region, and who help us keep our employees safe, while they continue delivering FAO's mandate.
5. I would like to recognize the Government of the **Republic of Zimbabwe** for the flexibility shown in collaborating with the FAO Secretariat to convene this first virtual Regional Conference for Africa in FAO's history.

<sup>1</sup> Rescheduled from 23-27 March 2020, Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe

Distinguished Delegates,

6. As Director-General, one of my early priorities was to transform the regional conferences from purely formal stand-alone occasions, into more dynamic events that are seamlessly connected to regional visions and efforts, even with regional flavors and styles.
7. This is why I consider it of utmost importance that **the deliberations and outcomes of this renewed Africa Regional Conference be strongly connected to the African vision**, as expressed in the **Malabo Declaration on Agriculture Transformation** in the framework of the **Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP)** as well as the **Agenda 2063**.
8. Regional conferences are an essential part of FAO governance and need to make sure that the regional perspective is heard.
9. Successful regional conferences enable us to better serve your needs and improve and accelerate our delivery of results.
10. Through open dialogue and the active exchange of good practices, we can strive to assist policy makers across the region in facing common challenges.
11. In that context, I was pleased to see that a series of preparatory high-level meetings were held in collaboration with Regional Economic Communities and Members on sub-regional and regional priorities for this conference.
12. The new and dynamic approach to holding this first virtual regional conference for Africa also includes the creation of a Regional Dialogue Area where Members may post comments on the various technical and programmatic papers.
13. This allows Members to make more extensive statements that can be shared with all delegations and relevant key players.
14. The Members Dialogue Area also includes PowerPoint presentations with audio recordings of the main technical papers of the conference.
15. I would like to thank the representatives of the private sector, civil society and other partners for the extensive dialogues and meetings held this year in preparation for this conference.
16. I am pleased that they are joining us today and enriching the discussions.
17. This is how the regional conferences are becoming a dynamic, interactive and inclusive platform for policy setting consensus building.
18. Most importantly, the regional conference needs to be useful and concrete for you.
19. This is your conference – the regional Governing Body session. My colleagues and I will be listening closely.
20. In that respect, we are eager to hear your views and inputs on a number of important policy items, including:
  - First, the priorities that the region wishes to see in the new FAO Strategic Framework that is under preparation;
  - Second, your expectations for the UN Food Systems Summit that will take place in 2021;
  - Third, your priorities for the transformation of agri-food systems based on your own condition that we need to act on; and
  - Fourth, the strong political commitments of achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially SDG 2 and SDG1 in your countries.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

21. I mentioned the substantial changes in the process leading to this regional conference.
22. They are part of our **agenda of transformative action** to build a dynamic, inclusive and agile FAO that serves its Members to achieve the “four betters”: better production, better nutrition, a better environment, and a better life.
23. The Council has endorsed this agenda of change that includes structural, programmatic and operational adjustments.
24. We have adopted a modular and flexible structure that allows for cross-sectoral collaboration and breaks down silos.
25. We brought together the three Deputy Directors-General, the Chief Economist, the Chief Scientist and the Director of Cabinet, who now form a collective leadership team. This team supports me in all areas of the Organization’s mandate, exemplifying the new collaborative approach of FAO.
26. **Three out of the six members of my core leadership group come from your region.**
27. In that respect I am pleased to announce that a daughter of Africa, Ms Ismahane ELOUAFI was selected as the first Chief Scientist in the history of FAO.
28. Among the other numerous adjustments and reform efforts, I wish to highlight the establishment of a dedicated Office for Small Island Developing States (SIDS), Least Developed Countries (LDCs) and Landlocked Developing Countries (LLDCs). **39 Members of your regional group will benefit directly from this Office’s work.**
29. We have also established an **Office for Innovation** and an **Office of Climate Change, Biodiversity and Environment**.
30. We have strengthened our **investment center** to increase its catalytic effects with International Financial Institutions and the private sectors globally.
31. We have also established an **Office of SDGs**, to make sure that all our work contributes to Agenda 2030, which is our common framework for sustainable development.
32. The **Joint FAO/WHO Centre**, which could also be considered a coordination platform, houses two important joint efforts: The Codex Alimentarius Commission as well as all of FAO’s work on zoonotic diseases and others, like One Health, AMR and food safety.
33. These transformations and adjustments started at FAO headquarters and have now been extended to all our FAO offices across the world, as we are One FAO regardless of where we are.
34. We will continue to give **special attention to strengthening FAO’s country, sub-regional and regional offices**, as they are the backbone of FAO’s delivery.
35. This is reason I have instructed that the Heads of Country Offices will have P5 as a minimum grade with competence. When I came to the office in August of 2019, there were 24 FAORs under P5.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

36. Africa is the continent of untapped potential and remains a key priority for me, as Director-General of FAO.
37. Agri-food system transformation will not only determine food security and nutrition; but also, the continent’s success in addressing political, socio-economic and environmental concerns.

38. I therefore wish to **acknowledge the African leadership for having prioritized the agenda of agriculture development** through the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP), and the 2014 Malabo Declaration on Agriculture Transformation.
39. And I would like to acknowledge the contribution of Members to the **African Solidarity Trust Fund at FAO**.
40. But we need to be aware of the serious challenges in front of us.
41. FAO's 2019 report on the State of Food Security and Nutrition as well as the African Union's Biennial Review Report indicate that **Africa is not on track to meet SDG2**, and much less the more ambitious target set in the Malabo Declaration of ending hunger by 2025.
42. Recent evidence continues to signal a **rising trend in hunger in Africa**. Today, 250 million people remain hungry.
43. Globally, over the last five years, Africa has had the fastest growth in the number of people going hungry. If the current trend continues, the number is projected to reach almost 433 million by 2030.
44. The situation of nutrition and healthy diets is equally worrying. About 965 million people in Africa cannot afford a healthy diet.
45. Climate variability and extremes, conflicts, transboundary pests and diseases and adverse economic conditions have contributed to the deterioration of the food security and nutrition situation in the region.
46. But there is considerable concrete action happening on the ground.
47. For example, we developed a three-year **Global Action for Fall Armyworm Control** to ensure a strong coordinated approach at country, regional and global levels.
48. Over the last three years, FAO has spearheaded 63 FAW-related projects, mostly in Africa, establishing several good practices and accumulating valuable knowledge along the way.
49. We made good progress in the control of the **desert locust**.
50. In East Africa, for instance, the anticipatory action approach was quite successful with national Governments in collaboration with FAO and partners, protecting over 580 million USD worth of crops, **enough to meet the annual cereal needs of 13 million people**.
51. These successes demonstrate a good model of partnerships among Members, FAO and donor partners.
52. But the **COVID-19** pandemic has made the situation far more complex.
53. We have been monitoring the global situation in relation to the impacts of the pandemic on food security and food systems from the early days of the outbreak.
54. It became evident early on that the combined impacts of COVID-19, suppression measures and the subsequent global recession will make hunger and malnutrition worse, increasing the number of people who are hungry and poor, especially in low-income countries.
55. That is why we co-organized in **April**, together with the African Union, **the first virtual meeting of the AU Agriculture Ministers**, to discuss the implications of the pandemic on food security and nutrition.
56. The resulting **ministerial declaration** and the established task force, which includes representatives of the European Union, the International Financial Institutions and other partners lead to concrete measures to protect Africa's most vulnerable populations.
57. In **July**, FAO supported the AU in holding a meeting bringing together the **Ministers responsible for Agriculture, Trade and Finance** to interact and agree on strategic actions.

58. I am pleased to see this **historic first platform** that facilitates dialogue among these three sectors to address the impacts of this pandemic, as it transforms from a health crisis to an economic and food security emergency.
59. And I am encouraged to see that our joint efforts are continuing through the Virtual *Cultivate-Africa Dialogue* next month, where FAO will be involved.
60. The event will address “short and medium term interventions needed to ensure food availability and access as well as long term productivity” as agreed upon by the ministers at the meetings of April and July.
61. FAO also supported governments across Africa in carrying out predictive analysis for the potential secondary impacts of the pandemic on food systems, markets and agriculture.
62. And by reprogramming existing support and new funding **we provided livelihood support to close to 12 million people** across the continent, thereby helping to prevent and mitigate the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on vulnerable households.
63. It is with all these impacts in mind, that we launched a holistic and comprehensive **FAO COVID-19 Response and Recovery Program**.
64. The program aims to mitigate immediate impacts, while strengthening the long-term resilience of food systems and livelihoods - in line with the UN approach to “build to transform” and in pursuit of the Sustainable Development Goals.
65. In addressing the socio-economic impacts of the pandemic, the program is working together with our flagship initiative: The **Hand in Hand initiative**.
66. Launched less than a year ago, the **Hand-in-Hand Initiative** is evidence-based, country-led and country-owned and aims to end poverty and hunger in Least Developed Land Locked Countries, Least Developed Small Islands Countries, food crises countries, countries with extreme poverty levels, and countries where the pandemic has accentuated vulnerabilities.
67. It is a new business model for collaboration, which uses a broad spectrum of partnerships and leverages the technical and data capacity of the Organization, to determine the best options to reach the most vulnerable and have the greatest impact on poverty and hunger.
68. The initiative is equipped with state-of-the-art tools:
- The Hand in Hand **Geospatial Platform** that supports all stakeholders with rich, shareable data, while respecting the relevant protocols of data confidentiality.
  - The **Data Lab for Statistical Innovation** that combines non-conventional data sources, big data, data science and text mining methods to improve the precision and the timelines of decision-making and impact assessment.
69. I am pleased to say that many Members are already engaging with this Initiative. So far, we have started implementing it in **29 countries, 11 of which are in this region**.

Dear Colleagues,

70. I am convinced that **agricultural and rural development are the keys to winning the battle against poverty and hunger in Africa**.
71. Africa has substantial comparative advantages and opportunities to transform its agri-food systems.
72. The African food markets are growing and are estimated to provide a trillion-dollar market opportunity by 2030.

73. This means new opportunities for jobs, entrepreneurship and innovation along agriculture and food value chains.
74. Demographic trends indicate a rapidly urbanizing population and a growing middle class – which has disposable incomes to spend on consumer and durable goods.
75. In addition, with a mainly young population, Africa’s demographic dividend has tremendous potential to transform the supply and demand of future goods and services, including in the agriculture and food industry.
76. Advancements in knowledge, technology and skills, including the rapid adoption of digital technologies provide new opportunities.
77. **Digital technologies** can drastically cut transaction costs and shorten the value chain, support a range of market outcomes and accelerate progress towards achieving the SDGs.
78. They promote inclusion, allowing financial institutions to enter rural markets without having to bear the cost of being physically present.
79. Blockchain technology can build trust, promote transparency, and increase traceability of food throughout the value chain.
80. E-commerce platforms promote market access and expand consumer choice, while encouraging youth and women to remain in, or return to, rural areas.
81. This can transform rural areas into more attractive places to live and work.
82. And we need to explore all potential partnerships and synergies.
83. For instance, four weeks ago, FAO and the **World Tourism Organization of the UN (UNWTO)** signed an agreement to join forces in supporting the development of sustainable tourism in rural areas.
84. Agri-tourism and eco-tourism are important drivers of socio-economic growth and could reduce inequalities, increase the resilience of rural communities, and boost incomes.
85. In that context, I announced our intention to launch the **1 000 Digital Villages Project**. The idea is to identify 1 000 villages across the world and convert them into digital villages or towns.
86. Digital villages and rural tourism could be engines to increase resilience, diversify incomes of farmers and to build back better.
87. I invite each Delegation to propose three locations or sites in their country that combine advantages and characteristics of agricultural production, food systems, cultural products and touristic attractions to be transformed into digital villages where you have a lot of things to share and to sale online.
88. We can advertise for these digital villages and their agricultural production, food systems and cultural elements through our various digital platforms.
89. We can also promote this initiative through the **Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems (GIAHS)** platform.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

90. As we enter the Decade of Actions for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the delivery of the SDGs, we need to step up our ambitions – through accelerated and scaled up actions – in a manner that transforms our food and agriculture systems.
91. **Gender equality and the empowerment of rural women** are important building blocks towards the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

92. Women and girls in rural areas are bearing a disproportionate burden of the COVID 19 pandemic, due to pre-existing gender inequalities, which make them particularly vulnerable to shocks.
93. We must give equal opportunities and rights to rural women to own land and other productive assets, and to access credit, decent employment and markets, so that they can reach their full productive potential.
94. This way, they can fully contribute to the fight against rural poverty, hunger, and malnutrition to build a better Africa for all generations.
95. I look forward to launching the **Regional Outlook on Gender and Agri-food Systems in Africa**, during this regional conference, together with the African Union.
96. Another cornerstone in our efforts to deliver our mandate is **Partnerships**.
97. We must mobilize all the stakeholders and strategic partners – governments, the private sector, civil society, academia, youth and women.
98. It is with this crucial importance of partnerships in mind that FAO is finalizing a new **strategy for its engagement with the private sector**.
99. Together, we must seize the opportunity to form strategic partnerships with private sector entities and advocate for innovative business models to achieve the SDGs.
100. The private sector can offer innovative tools, resources, knowledge and technologies, more reliable marketing channels, which are critical to reinforce our work on the ground.
101. Let's take advantage of the **2021 UN Food Systems Summit** and the Pre-Summit that will take place in Rome, to galvanize momentum for transformative solutions to agri-food systems.
102. In this regard, I would like to encourage you to **identify and rally behind regional champions** to spearhead and coordinate the efforts in Africa. FAO is committed to support your efforts.

Honorable

Ministers,

Dear colleagues,

103. We meet in trying times, but the opportunities ahead of us give me a great hope.
104. Looking at ourselves in the mirror of history, we learn from past experiences and lessons.
105. On 16 October, we celebrated **FAO's 75th anniversary**.
106. Like us today, the founders, were also facing even worse challenging times, when in 1945 they created an Organization dedicated to "promoting the common welfare of its members", as stated in FAO's Constitution.
107. We are inspired by their determination and far sighted vision.
108. We embrace the **Pan African Vision** of a prosperous Africa, based on inclusive growth and sustainable development with healthy and well-nourished citizens and a modern Agriculture for increased productivity and production.
109. And we pay tribute to the **food heroes**; farmers, producers, traders, suppliers and many others, who have kept foods on our tables every day, supporting their families, communities and beyond.
110. They can also be the heroes who will build a better world.
111. It is our **historic duty** to support them!

112. So that the day soon comes, when we can say: **MISSION ACCOMPLISHED!**

Thank you.