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Statement by the Independent Chairperson of the FAO Council

Chairperson,

Honourable Ministers,

Director-General and

Distinguished Delegates,

1. It is an honor and pleasure for me to participate in the 32nd Session of the FAO Regional Conference for Africa, and to address this meeting in my role as the Independent Chairperson of the FAO Council. Before sharing some thoughts, please allow me to convey my appreciation to the Government and people of Equatorial Guinea for the excellent organization of this session of the FAO Regional Conference for Africa, and of course, for your warm hospitality in your beautiful country.

2. While countries recover from the severe impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, food insecurity and climate change also continue to pose “an existential threat to humanity” in your region. And we are confronted with another global crisis due to the war in Ukraine.

3. Conflicts and wars in many regions cause unbelievable human suffering, food insecurity, and the migration of millions of people. Food prices are spiking and developing countries are hit hardest again. With the war in Ukraine, African nations are facing rapidly rising consumer prices which are endangering global wheat and corn supplies and sending fuel prices soaring. Prior to the war in Ukraine, international food prices had already reached an all-time high. This was mostly due to market conditions, but also high prices of energy, fertilizers, and all other agricultural services.

4. Hunger and food security are the first and foremost biggest challenges we are facing today. Our world is changing quickly around us. Innovations spring up daily like seedlings in spring, but this expansion is not without consequence. Despite this progress, more than 800 million people live in hunger, 3 billion do not have access to safe, affordable, and nutritious food, and 2 billion suffer from nutrition-related diseases. The dots do not connect; one-third of food produced globally is wasted, while children are still hungry. And let us not forget that we will have to feed 10 billion people in 2050 for which an increase in sustainable agriculture production is needed.

5. Furthermore, I would like to applaud your region for addressing the food losses here. You are investing in processing techniques, rural road and electricity infrastructure, and modernization of value

Documents can be consulted at www.fao.org

chains and markets. With this, other regions can learn from your efforts. In this respect, the promotion of food safety standards is crucial.

6. Science and innovation, including new digital tools and technologies, offer an opportunity for addressing your challenges, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and increasing demand for the region's food products, and changes in consumer demands. The FAO COVID-19 Response and Recovery Programme for Africa provided a comprehensive and coordinated approach to dealing with the challenge, initially focusing on information and impact assessment, to inform policy, advocacy, and country programming.

7. Efforts directed at enhancing national and regional capacities, and establishing collaborations and partnerships have to be mentioned: collaboration with the African Development Bank (AfDB), the European Union, the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), and the World Bank has increased policy support, investments, advocacy, and programming for COVID-19 response and recovery.

We can produce more food than ever, but biodiversity and the amount of arable land are decreasing. There is a clear need for a more systemic and coordinated approach among key sectors and stakeholders for the sustainable management of forests and biodiversity for food and agriculture in your region. I compliment you on the already existing initiatives in this regard. We can learn from these and you have to bring them to scale.

8. It is also clear that the shortcomings of our global agrifood system have been laid bare. We need transformative change, and we need it now. There are no excuses anymore for not acting. Sustainable agrifood systems are and should be part of the solutions.

9. The lessons learned from FAO's implementation of programmes in the region will emphasize the implications for supporting transformation to more efficient, inclusive, resilient, and sustainable agrifood systems for better production, better nutrition, a better environment, and a better life, leaving no one behind.

10. FAO is needed now more than ever before to achieve its most noble mandate and our joint efforts should continue to be directed towards transforming agrifood systems in the region. All stakeholders have to take their respective responsibilities and work together towards the achievement of FAO's goals, as well as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the 2030 Agenda.

11. It is unequivocal that to achieve the SDGs by 2030, agrifood systems must benefit from urgent action to address rapidly increasing diet-related health concerns, damage to ecosystems, and the threat of climate change.

12. Allow me to recall the strong momentum created by the UN Food Systems Summit 2021: countries in your region affirmed their commitments to move towards more inclusive and sustainable agrifood systems. The leading role of FAO was also highlighted during this event. In this regard, we should be proud that FAO is hosting the Coordination Hub to provide coordination for the follow-up actions as well as to potentially leverage key partnerships in the wider ecosystem of support.

13. I would like to compliment your region for the emphasis given to addressing the degradation of its natural resources as well as an understanding that radical changes are needed in the interaction between agriculture and the environment — moving from agriculture as a cause of degradation to a situation where agriculture becomes a central part of the solution towards a more sustainable future.

14. For the challenges facing the region, the role of innovation and technology as accelerators is pivotal in supporting the shift to more sustainable agrifood systems. Scaling up these initiatives is indeed a priority. Certainly, innovation can boost this. Indeed, the development of the FAO Strategies on Science and Innovation, and Climate Change is directed to respond to an urgent need in your region for action against climate change, and for science and innovation to accelerate agricultural productivity and

sustainability. That is also why your input in the development of the FAO Science and Innovation Strategy is so important.

15. The efforts made by your region should continue, and I also encourage the region to support the implementation of such FAO corporate initiatives as the Hand-in-Hand Initiative, and Regional Technical Platform (RTP) on Common Agricultural Policies and Practices. These initiatives aim to reduce the vulnerabilities of the rural poor through improved food system capacities using FAO's data tools.

16. Of course, the proof of the pudding is in the eating i.e. relying on the means of implementation. In this regard, your emphasis on the role of the private sector, in particular the food industries, is crucial in making the region's agrifood systems more sustainable, more resilient, more inclusive, and more efficient to provide better nutrition for all.

17. Last but not least, women and youth are key actors in agrifood systems in Africa as producers, processors, traders, wage workers, and consumers across the African continent. They also have the potential to be active agents of change and resilience builders. Acknowledging the crucial role of women and youth is of utmost importance for your future and is the first step, but everything depends on how you will make this concrete.

Chairperson,

Honourable Ministers,

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18. To conclude, this Regional Conference for Africa has a unique role to play in helping define FAO policies, and I firmly believe that the continuing engagement and commitment of the governments in this region will do much to ensure that FAO continues to serve you well and to be an effective agent in the struggle to free the world of hunger and malnutrition, leaving no one behind.