

Statement delivered by
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Madam Chairperson,

To the Director-General of FAO,

To my colleagues, Ministers and Deputy Ministers present,

Senior officials of FAO and various officials of the various Member countries,

The region I am from, sub-Saharan Africa, remains on the backfoot of food security matters and broader agricultural development. As a region we remain a significant importer of food with an import bill averaging USD 44 billion a year and a trade deficit of USD 2 billion per annum. This makes food security a particular challenge within the region. Given the significance of the agricultural sector to the broader economy in sub-Saharan Africa of overreliance on food imports, today's discussion, which is agriculture and food transformation, From Strategy to Action, is crucial to us. This is more so as a number of the sub-Saharan African countries also have agriculture as part of the economic recovery strategies.

At the height of the pandemic, when the global food supply chains experienced glitches and some key food exporting countries placed temporary bans on exports, our region and, indeed, the broader continent was at a risky position. Thankfully, the intervention by FAO and other partners ensured that global leaders recognized this threat earlier and export bans were swiftly reversed. Still this was a hint that as a global community we need to work on a more resilient global food system, which is well diversified across all regions.

If I were to come back to South Africa, in my own country we are in a slightly fortunate position. Even at the height of the pandemic, South Africa remained a net exporter of agricultural and food products and 2020 was one of the best seasons because of favourable rainfall, increased investment that supported the crop yields.

There were bumper harvests of staple crops such as maize, soybean, major fruits such as citrus and deciduous fruits and sugar. Nevertheless, the essential imported agricultural and food products that South Africa is dependent on, such as rice, almost 100 percent; wheat, about 50 percent, dependent on imports; palm oil, 100 percent, dependent on imports; and also a small share of poultry products and pork.

South Africa is in a more fortunate position with higher levels of investment that enable access to better farming technologies through biotechnology and mechanical technology and favourable trade policy which ensures market access to various countries and encourages farmers to produce continuously.

The gains of the higher agricultural production have also been illustrated in food security levels in South Africa, which in various indices, such as the Global Food Security Index recently released by the Economist, still put South Africa at a relatively higher position of 69 out of 130 countries that are surveyed by the index, with 1 being the best and 130 being the worst. From a regional perspective,

South Africa is the most food-secure country in the sub-Saharan region because of the aforementioned reasons about investment in agriculture.

With that said, in 2020 the number of South Africans in poverty increased, as previously stated. The major challenge was an overall increase in food prices and deterioration in South Africa's food safety net programmes. Food insecurity increased despite the government's efforts to issue food vouchers and different social grant support systems.

The challenge was not that South Africa's food prices were rising faster. Instead, most people were out of work with no buying power. Notably, before the COVID-19 pandemic, South Africa had pockets of food insecurity when one considers that household level perspective while at the national level the country is generally viewed as food secure. Over 6 million South Africans in low-income households are not food secure, primarily due to affordability. I should also point out that South Africa's food system is a paradox.

On the one side we have a well-developed and commercially viable food production underpinned by modern technology and efficient value chains servicing domestic and export markets. On the other side we have vulnerable subsistence and smallholder farmers that struggle to be integrated into food value chains. The consequence of this dual food system is the increasing food insecurity in the country despite sufficient quantity of food produced by commercial farmers. The rising inability to access and afford safe and nutritious food is a function of growing unemployment, inequality and limited access to natural resources and underdevelopment infrastructure in rural and township areas.

For the near-term, various sub-Saharan governments' response to the rising food insecurity during the pandemic has primarily been through increased grain imports, primarily in Zimbabwe, Zambia, Rwanda, Tanzania, Kenya, Nigeria and Malawi. Some of these countries also wrote out formal input support schemes to assist farmers ahead of the 2021 production season, which began from October 2020 for most countries. Direct income support to vulnerable households was limited to South Africa within the sub-Saharan region but household food insecurity rose even there.

As I conclude, Madam Chair, the various experiences seem to suggest that food systems in sub-Saharan Africa have experienced stress and disruptions as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, the set of policies that were implemented by governments across the African continent seem to have had limited impact in ensuring the optimal function of the food system. With prospects of various waves of COVID-19 pandemic emanating from a slow vaccination process, it is unlikely that the most vulnerable parts of the food systems, mainly smallholder farmers and informal supply chains, would maintain their resilience if the scale of the pandemic in sub-Saharan Africa increases.

With COVID-19, making the vulnerabilities and weaknesses of food supply chains more apparent and the effectiveness of government interventions becoming more apparent, questions remain about what a post-COVID-19 food system would look like.

Several structural considerations are likely to start shifting. Drawing from the lessons across sub-Saharan Africa, formal and informal supply chains need to evolve in such a way that adapt to COVID-19 pandemic and other crises such as climate change are necessary to be taken into consideration. Scale-specific technologies and food systems that enable farmers to establish multiple distribution channels outside of the existing conventional markets are critical in creating greater resilience. Rebalancing these considerations with scale and profitability remains a challenge.

With that said, there are various policy recommendations that would need to be in place to position sub-Saharan Africa food markets to better cope with COVID-19 and other crises in the future. These include the need to provide more holistic policy interventions that effectively redresses bottlenecks that affect the entire span of the value chain sectors, including but not limited to input suppliers, transporters and food transporters, processors, traders and retailers.

Two, significant interventions and market infrastructure, including grain silos and cold storage systems to support value chains of perishable products in most parts of Africa where this infrastructure systems are still underdeveloped and need to be expanded. Thirdly, to establish and expand social protections to vulnerable groups such as youth, women and people with disabilities but also those most affected by restrictions on economic activity, particularly urban poor and informal workers and resource-poor smallholder farmers.

Fourth, more effectively implement existing regional trade agreements as well as the alignment with the African continental free trade area, all of which represent an opportunity for greater levels of food market integration. The opening up of food markets under these sets of trade agreements will reduce the reliance of sub-Saharan Africa on food imports while increasing the growth potential and resilience of domestic and regional food systems.

In closing here, in South Africa, we are finalizing what we call the Agriculture and Agro-processing Master Plan, which seeks to improve the effectiveness of our food systems and foster inclusion, and through this we hope we will be able to sustain and improve our food security system in our country.

Thank you very much, Honourable Chairperson.