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Statement by the Director-General

His Excellency, the Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Morocco,

His Excellency, the Chairperson of the Conference,

Excellences,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I wish to convey my deep appreciation to the Kingdom of Morocco, and to His Majesty King Mohammed VI, for hosting this FAO Regional Ministerial Conference. Your warm hospitality is deeply rooted in your nation's character, making us feel truly at home here in Rabat. Your generosity and all the detailed arrangements are also a reflection of the solid partnership between FAO and Morocco.

Since we met at the last Regional Ministerial Conference for Africa in Malabo two years ago, hunger in Africa has increased, driven largely by the ongoing effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, economic shocks, the climate crisis, and ongoing conflicts.

Twenty years ago, in 2004, African leaders adopted the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme through the Maputo Declaration. Ten years ago, in 2014, they reaffirmed their commitment to end hunger through the Malabo Declaration. Yet today, in 2024 – thirty years later - hunger is on the rise and over a billion people in Africa are unable to afford a healthy diet.

We are meeting at a critical moment, which requires our urgent and collective action. Despite the many challenges, I remain optimistic about the opportunities that lie ahead.

Africa boasts the largest area of arable land of any continent and is abundant in natural resources, and more importantly, you are the youngest continent in the world. The youth are our future, the future for rural development, and for agrifood systems transformation. Africa's young people offer extraordinary potential, and the African nations' recommitment to the post-Malabo agenda re-confirms your political will.

Documents can be consulted at www.fao.org

However, realizing this potential requires strategic partnerships, greater investments, and harnessing the power of digital technologies, and other new technologies like biotechnologies, to address the challenges from biotic and abiotic stresses.

To drive efficiency and productivity in Africa's agriculture sectors we must chart a new course, now. Together.

It is through the transformation of Africa's agrifood systems that we can unlock the benefits across food security and nutrition, the economy, equality, the environment, and resilience. The urgent need for agrifood systems transformation is central to the discussions at this Regional Ministerial Conference, and the FAO Strategic Framework 2022-31 is a roadmap towards more efficient, more inclusive, more resilient, and more sustainable agrifood systems, for better production, better nutrition, a better environment, and a better life, leaving no one behind.

The Four Betters are not just a vision - they are a call to action.

Dear Colleagues,

Since we met two years ago, we have completed the first biennium of implementing the Strategic Framework.

We have committed to better production in Africa through our work on digitalization of agriculture sectors, green-powered irrigation, and sustainable mechanization.

We are fortunate to be here in the Kingdom of Morocco, an example of how long vision and concrete actions on the ground have led to the transformation of its agrifood system and rural development in this holy kingdom. This was due firstly to the political will of His Majesty the King, together with the political will of the government, and especially of the Minister for Agriculture for so many years and leading to his appointment as Prime Minister.

Without political will and commitment, and a stable government – especially the Ministers of Agriculture - nothing would have been achieved. I always say that as a Minister of Agriculture you need to be committed to the four seasons: each season has its own specific crop and needs a year for it to come to its full harvest.

Some countries, due to political reasons, change their Ministers of Agriculture faster than one season, but sustainable agrifood systems depend on sustainable Ministers of Agriculture who understand food and agriculture and rural affairs – this is critical for deliverable results.

We need persistent commitment on the ground, ownership, partnership, and action by Members – this is how FAO works.

Ten African countries are now participating in the FAO 1000 Digital Villages Initiative because we are now living in the digital world, and we need to integrate rural development and agrifood systems into the digital era.

In southern Africa, the Agricultural Information Management System (AIMS) has been rolled out across 16 countries. The system was developed by FAO and provides policymakers and planners access to reliable and timely agricultural information for better planning and decision-making.

We have invested in innovative technologies, such as in Rwanda where together with the European Union we are using drones to deliver quality germ cells for livestock reproduction.

In Côte d'Ivoire, we are working with the private sector to turn food waste into organic fertilizer using the larvae of black flies.

In the United Republic of Tanzania, DNA sequencing and barcode labelling are being used to preserve the integrity of avocado seedlings.

Twenty-nine African countries have joined the FAO One Country One Priority Product (OCOP) initiative to develop profitable green value chains for special agricultural products.

Under the One Health approach, more than 50 laboratories in Africa have been enhanced with better equipment and training.

With the African Union Inter-African Bureau of Animal Resources, we are developing a comprehensive database on fisheries and aquaculture in Africa that will help eliminate longstanding challenges in data accessibility.

Together with ECOWAS, FAO commissioned a scoping study in five African countries for a One Million Silos programme for West Africa and the Sahel, which aims to increase storage capacity from 500 000 to 1 million tons by 2026, with big payoffs for better nutrition.

Through the FAO Green Cities Initiative, and our contributions to the Great Green Wall, we are promoting a better environment for Africa, including green jobs and urban food gardens.

In this aspect, we can learn a lot from Morocco. Although with unfavourable rainfall conditions and natural resources needed for “green” conditions, yet with long vision and political will they have managed to create a green generation.

More and more people will migrate from the rural areas to the cities – by 2050 it is estimated globally that more than 70 percent of people will be living in the cities – in Africa this figure is approximately 60 percent. This is only one generation away!

So, we need to design the kind of African cities we want for the future. We need to integrate agrifood systems with the environment, soil, land, and water, as well as aquaculture with horticulture, with food being produced in the “gardening cities”.

A better life depends on green cities, on a green economy, and of course combined with science and innovation. This is the ultimate outcome of the Four Betters - to improve the quality of life!

To achieve this, we need to continue working through programmes like South-South and Triangular Cooperation to assist other brothers and sisters in Africa, first. We need to work with all natural resources, including underwater resources. This is the technical advantage of FAO.

In this regard, we need to recognize the comprehensive work carried out by Morocco, working from biodiversity to food diversity, inclusively.

We need passion and long-term engagement and commitment to work for farmers especially smallholder farmers, for rural development.

These are just some of the recent highlights in Africa, which are detailed in the new digital publication ‘FAO in Africa – Highlights in 2023’.

We have also mobilized over USD 91 million from the Global Environmental Facility (GEF) and the Green Climate Fund (GCF) for projects in Africa. The partnerships and portfolios with the GEF and the GCF have grown exponentially in Africa in response to countries' needs to access climate financing for climate change mitigation and adaptation.

Thirty-six sub-Saharan African countries have now joined the FAO Hand-in-Hand Initiative, and investment plans for Africa now exceed USD 12 billion. FAO's strategic collaboration with resource and technical partners in Africa has enabled greater dynamism and agility in the region and we aim to continue that positive trajectory.

Our partner in this event, the Kingdom of Morocco, stands as a leading example in agrifood systems transformation, for the region and beyond. With modernization and diversification at its core, Morocco has made significant strides such as, among others, investing in modern irrigation systems, greenhouse cultivation and aquaculture; expanding fruit and vegetable production for domestic and export markets; and modernizing its olive oil production to become one of the top global producers.

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Let us use this Regional Ministerial Conference as a platform to exchange knowledge and best practices, to the benefit of all African countries. Each country must take its own lead in transforming its agrifood system, and FAO stands ready to support you on this important journey.

Your input over the next days will be critical in progressing your national pathways, as well as shaping our collective efforts by identifying the priorities for your region over the next biennium.

Let us do more and better together, for a better life for all Africans, farmers, and consumers across the continent, leaving no one behind.

I want to say to all Ministers and Vice Ministers, we will strengthen the FAO Country Offices in your countries, with increased professionalism and expertise to support your transformation of agrifood systems.

This is my personal and organizational commitment. You can count on me. The future of Africa is in your hands, together with international assistance and partnership.

Thank you.