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FAO REGIONAL CONFERENCE FOR AFRICA

Thirtieth Session

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Statement by the Director-General

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour to open the 30th Session of the FAO Regional Conference for Africa here in Khartoum.

I thank the Government and people of Sudan for their hospitality and support.

This Regional Conference is very important to further align FAO's work to the needs of African countries in light of the Malabo Declaration and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Achieving the SDG 2 on ending hunger and all forms of malnutrition and promoting sustainable agriculture development is FAO's highest priority.

This is also a fundamental condition to achieve sustainable development for all.

Unfortunately, as you know, the latest numbers show that hunger increased in the world in 2016.

Sub-Saharan Africa was one of the most affected regions, with almost one quarter of its population suffering from undernourishment nowadays.

Yesterday, we had a very fruitful high-level special event on Zero Hunger.

Ministers and other authorities discussed ways and strategies to bring the fight against hunger in Africa back on track.

And reinforced the commitment to eradicate hunger by 2025, as called for by the Malabo Declaration.

But as I would like to reiterate that the SDG 2 calls for the eradication of all forms of malnutrition by 2030. It is not only about hunger.

And this is for an important reason.

Today we are facing a global epidemic of overweight and obesity.

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The numbers are growing in most developing and developed countries alike.

In 2016, more than 1.9 billion adults in the world were overweight. Of these, over 650 million were obese.

The situation is also worrisome here in Africa.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), more than 30 percent of adults in Africa are overweight.

Obesity rates are nearing 10 percent in countries such as Sierra Leone and Liberia.

About 41 million children in the world under five years old are overweight. A quarter of these children live in Africa.

The WHO has alerted that obesity-related diseases may become the biggest killer in Africa by 2030.

We need immediate action to address this situation.

Rapid urbanization and the consumption of highly processed foods are the major drivers behind this increase in overweight and obesity.

Here in Africa, we have verified that people are often unaware that certain foods are unhealthy.

And people do not necessarily see being overweight as a problem.

So the challenge ahead is how to promote healthy diets when urbanization is stimulating a dietary transition towards more processed food.

To answer this, we have to act in two fronts: production and consumption of healthy food.

This includes the implementation of clear responsibilities for the advertisement and information of food products.

People must be aware about the pros and cons of what they are eating, and also be encouraged to eat healthy food.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

This Regional Conference is primarily dedicated to the theme of creating decent and attractive employment for rural youth.

This is a huge challenge. Africa is the youngest continent in the world.

Estimates foresee that some 10 to 12 million new jobs will have to be created every year for the new labour market entrants over the next 20 years.

Today, a major part of Africa's working force (54 percent according to ILO) rely on the agricultural sector for livelihoods, income and employment, especially in family farming.

Agriculture will continue to be an important socioeconomic sector and generate employment opportunities in the coming years in Africa.

But not enough to absorb such a high volume of new workers in the next decades.

FAO's point of view is that all activities along the food value chain should be explored in terms of job creation.

This includes processing, packaging, transportation, distribution, marketing and service provision, especially financial and business services.

So countries need to promote a rural and structural transformation that fosters synergies between farm and non-farm activities, and that reinforces rural-urban linkages.

The growing demand coming from urban food markets can create job opportunities in all agriculture-related activities.

And not only agricultural employment, but also non-agricultural employments in rural areas, such as agro-tourism and other services.

FAO launched last year a regional programme called “Youth Employment: enabling decent agriculture and agri-business jobs.”

This programme goes beyond farm jobs, and explores the potential for youth employment in food value chains, agri-business development and their related support services.

The aim is to develop capacity and scale up successful approaches through programme formulation and partnerships.

The mission is huge and will not be achieved without a coordinated effort.

More than ever, strategic partnerships are needed to bring together the African Union, the African Development Bank, the UN system and other development partners.

It is also important to implement rural development strategies that recognize the importance of family farming.

As you know, more profitable urban markets can lead to the concentration of food production in large commercial farms, and also to the creation of value chains dominated by large processors and retailers.

In this context, smallholders and family farmers need specific policies and regulations.

This includes providing access to inputs, credit and technology, and improving land tenure rights.

This also includes social protection programmes, for example by providing cash transfers, and also by linking public food purchase to family farmer’s production.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The African continent is particularly affected by and vulnerable to climate change.

It is of utmost importance to promote the adaptation of food systems to this changing climate, especially in relation to poor rural communities.

We expect to hear from you on how FAO can best help your countries in planning and implementing actions, as well as in mobilizing financial support to build resilience of rural livelihoods.

The Green Climate Fund (GCF) is one of the mechanisms now available to finance developing countries in relation to climate change.

FAO is working closely with a wide range of countries around the world that have formally requested the Organization’s assistance to present projects to the fund.

This includes 28 full project proposals at various stages of preparation, and also 16 Readiness projects.

A “Readiness project” is a special category of the GCF that provides relatively small scale funding (up to USD 3 million).

In Africa, FAO is currently supporting the development of 6 project proposals.

Two of them are at the full proposal development stage, in Benin and the Republic of Congo.

Four more are at the concept note stage, in Mozambique, Gambia, Kenya and Tanzania. These concept notes are expected to be submitted to the Fund later this year.

The Fund has approved three Readiness Proposals with FAO as the delivery partner, including two for Equatorial Guinea and one proposal for Kenya.

The GCF Secretariat has also technically endorsed Readiness projects with FAO as delivery partner for the Republic of the Congo and Chad.

Readiness proposals for Senegal and Burkina Faso have already been submitted to the GCF. Additional projects are under development for Sierra Leone, Burkina Faso, Chad and Mali.

So a lot of work has been done. And FAO will continue to support all countries that wishes to have access to the Green Climate Fund.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Climate change is also strongly contributing to increase the outbreaks of pests and diseases all around the world.

Here in Africa we now have the example of the Fall Armyworm.

It was first reported in the continent in 2016.

Since then, it has spread rapidly to cover practically all countries of Sub-Saharan Africa, and put in danger the production of maize and other crops.

FAO has been on the front line in responding to the Fall Armyworm threat with many actions.

We launched a step-by-step guide for farmers on how to deal with this transboundary pest.

This management tool will be distributed online, and also through the expansive network of Farmers Field Schools throughout the region.

We have also developed a mobile app called FAMEWS. It will allow farmers to detect, monitor and track the spread of Fall Armyworm directly in their fields.

We are currently deploying FAMEWS in Madagascar, South Africa and Zambia, and to the rest of Africa by the end of February.

The FAO Programme for Action on Fall Armyworm, also endorsed by the African Union, aims to leverage much-needed funding.

So far we have raised USD 13 million. FAO has contributed to USD 10 million from its own budget. But we need much more.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Furthering decentralization is another objective for the biennium 2018/2019.

As I have said since I took office as Director-General, FAO must be a knowledge organization with its feet on the ground.

Let me highlight some measures that have been taken to reinforce FAO Offices in Africa.

The technical capacity of the Regional Office in Accra is being strengthened by the creation of eight additional technical posts. Two new posts were also assigned to the Sub-Regional Office for Eastern Africa in Addis Ababa.

In Addis, we want to reinforce not only programme delivery, but also the liaison role of the Office towards the African Union and the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa.

The establishment of a Subregional Office for West Africa in Dakar is at an advanced stage, and should be completed by the first semester of 2018.

We are also implementing measures to increase the flexibility of National Offices in the use of resources.

This will allow FAO to better respond to country-specific and emerging needs.

Priority will be given to focus on technical capacity, partnership building, outreach and South-South and Triangular Cooperation.

We are also developing guidelines for monitoring the Sustainable Development Goals at country level, thus contributing to the integration of the SDGs in national planning and progress monitoring systems.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me conclude by saying that many challenges remain ahead.

But with steadfast commitment, African countries can deliver on the Malabo Declaration and the Sustainable Development Goals.

It is important to have your feedback in relation to FAO's three regional initiatives in Africa, and also on the priorities for the years to come.

I would like to take this opportunity to reiterate that FAO will continue to support the region to deliver the ambition of inclusive growth and shared prosperity for all.

No one can be left behind in our common quest for sustainable development.

Thank you for your attention.