



**Food and Agriculture
Organization of the
United Nations**

32nd Session of the FAO Regional Conference for Africa
**Opening Statement by FAO Assistant Director-General and Regional
Representative for Africa Abebe Haile-Gabriel**

Monday 11 April, 2022

Your Excellency Francisca Eneme Efua, Minister of Agriculture, Livestock, Forests and Environment of the Republic of Equatorial Guinea,

Excellencies Ambassadors and Permanent Representatives to RBAs

Distinguished delegates of Member States,

Representatives of partner organizations, civil society organizations, the private sector, research institutions and others joining us today,

Dear colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,

1. I welcome you all to the 32nd Session of the FAO Regional Conference for Africa.
2. I want to thank those who have travelled here to Malabo in Equatorial Guinea to participate in the conference, as well as those who are joining us virtually.
3. This is our first ever hybrid FAO Regional Conference for Africa and we highly value the contributions and participation of those physically in this illustrious conference centre and those who are online.
4. I wish to thank the Government of Equatorial Guinea for hosting this Conference, and for the excellent collaboration with FAO.

Excellencies, Distinguished Participants, Ladies and Gentlemen,

5. When we met last time during the previous conference, in October 2020, the world was in the grip of a new global pandemic. We are increasingly coming to live with the pandemic and the changes COVID-19 has brought since to our daily lives and to the way we perceive the world and the future.

6. Collectively, we have learned to do things differently, to go digital like never before, and to quickly forge new partnerships to overcome threats.
7. That same agility and spirit of collaboration is needed now for the silent pandemic of poverty, hunger and undernourishment and extreme vulnerabilities to shocks in Africa.
8. As you are aware, we have to grapple with multiple shocks in Africa – climate extremes, plant pests and animal diseases, economic slow-downs and down-turns, conflicts, among others.
9. When the Covid-19 pandemic hit in 2020, hunger increased dramatically, engulfing 281.6 million Africans to be undernourished. This is an increase by 89.1 million compared to 2014.
10. The year 2020 also put Africa as a region where there has been the sharpest rise in the prevalence of undernourishment – covering 21 percent of the population - which is more than double that of any other region.
11. Recent reviews indicate that acute food insecurity in the countries of Sahel and West Africa almost quadrupled between 2019 and 2022 – it jumped from 10.8 million people in 2019 to 40.7 million people in 2022, with millions more facing the risk of slipping into a crisis situation or worse.
12. Communities in the Horn of Africa are experiencing one of the most severe La Niña-induced droughts in their memory following three back-to-back poor rainy seasons. Recent estimates show that in the next three months from now, about 13.1 to 14.1 million people would be in Crisis (IPC Phase 3) or worse food insecurity situation due to drought.
13. What makes matters worse is that mechanisms and capacities to mitigate these multiple shocks are either weak or non-existent in many instances.
14. Recovery from the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 has been quite a challenge in Africa.
15. In this context, the impact on the most vulnerable can be devastating!
16. Global processes and events are also impacting agrifood systems in Africa – for example, the War in Ukraine is impacting food supply chains and prices as well as that of important agricultural inputs, such as inorganic fertilizers, particularly those countries whose imports are sourced mainly from either or both of the two countries involved in the War.

Distinguished participants, ladies and gentlemen:

17. Transforming agrifood systems must be an urgent task for all of us. In fact this was the commitment expressed by member countries in their transformative pathways for UNFSS follow up actions.

18. Modernization of agriculture and rural transformation play a central role in achieving sustainable development and prosperity for Africa.
19. But time is running out.
20. The Biennial Report recently launched by the African Union Commission confirms that most countries are not on track towards achieving the Malabo Commitments, agreed to by the AU Assembly back in 2014 right here in Sipopo Conference Centre, in Malabo.
21. Without extraordinary efforts by member countries and other stakeholders, it will be difficult to meet the aspirations of the African Union's Malabo commitments and the Sustainable Development Goals.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

22. This Regional Conference is FAO's highest governing body in Africa. Over the next four days, delegates from across Africa will deliberate and provide guidance on regional priorities in agrifood systems transformation in Africa.
23. Guided by the FAO Strategic Framework 2022-2031, FAO is working to support the 2030 Agenda through the 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.
24. These Four Betters provide the framework for many of the discussions planned for this Conference.
25. At the core of these deliberations will be discussion on: the priorities for FAO in the Africa region over the next biennium; FAO Science and Innovation Strategy and FAO Climate Change Strategy; One-Health Platform; policy priorities for inclusive and resilient recovery from the impacts of the various shocks on agrifood systems; investing in ecosystem restoration; promoting trade and investment under the African Continental Free Trade Agreement; and ensuring that women, youth and the rural poor are not left behind in the race to transform agrifood systems, among others.
26. The conference also features special events tomorrow to provide a platform for experience sharing among member countries on better production, better nutrition, a better environment and a better life, leaving no one behind. Our host country, Equatorial Guinea, will also have an event on Forest governance.
27. We value your sharing of country experiences and your guidance in this important dialogue. Only with your inputs and active participation will this conference be a success.

28. So, this conference is an opportunity for interaction and dialogue, not only to hear from FAO on our proposals on the priorities, but also to get guidance from members on how this collaboration can be the most effective way to achieve the aspirations of the Four Betters.
29. I would like to thank those who have contributed to the extensive consultations that took place at national, sub-regional, and regional levels in the lead up to this Conference, including with the Regional Economic Communities, the civil society organization, and private sector.
30. You may also have noted that last week we held, in collaboration with the AfCFTA Secretariat, an informal consultation with Honourable Ministers in charge of Agriculture with a view to briefing them on the state of play in the implementation of the AfCFTA as relates to food and agriculture. This was the first time ever that we have done such a consultation – we have received encouraging feedback from the Honorable ministers to do similar consultations in future on selected strategic topics.
31. Action at country level is critical. We strongly believe that success requires working together in a coherent manner. There is no other way. Together we can transform Africa's food and agriculture.
32. The FAO Director-General, Dr. Qu Dongyu will be attending the ministerial segment of this conference in person here in Malabo, which indicates the importance placed on this conference at the highest level of FAO.
33. I look forward to the deliberations over the next two days and to your guidance on the recommendations that will be tabled for consideration by the Honourable Ministers.

Thank you.