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REGIONAL COMMISSIONS

**Regional Perspectives on  
Policy Priorities and Practical Measures to  
Expedite Implementation in Agriculture, Rural Development,  
Land, Drought, Desertification and Africa**

**Statement by the  
Economic Commission for Africa  
on behalf of the UN Regional Commissions**

**Intergovernmental Preparatory Meeting for CSD-17  
23-27 February 2009, New York**

Madame Chair,  
Excellencies,  
Distinguished Delegates,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am pleased to address you on behalf of the five regional commissions of the United Nations.

Sustainable agricultural and rural development, secure and equitable access to productive land resources, mitigating the impacts of drought and combating desertification are keys for enhancing progress on meeting the Millennium Development Goals.

**Agriculture is re-emerging as a priority sector in the international agenda**, due to the increasing pressures on the agricultural sector to produce food, as well as agro-industrial products to sustain the world's economic growth. High levels of growth in agricultural output have been experienced in both the ECLAC and ESCAP regions.

These achievements have provided important lessons and enabled important investments. **However, as the results of CSD-16 also showed, there are signs that agricultural development and trade regimes have been socially and environmentally unsustainable in these, as well as other regions.** In Latin America and the Caribbean, rural poverty has remained largely unchanged, in spite of a 30 per cent increase in value added. Although the Asian and Pacific region produces more than 50 per cent of the world's agricultural crops, every year, some 2 million deaths

may be attributable to food insecurity. Gaps between rural and urban areas in terms of quality of life and livelihood opportunities are widening across the region. In Africa, the only region in which per capita food production has been declining over the past three decades, there is increasing rural poverty, rising food prices, widespread famines. Valuable resources are spent by African countries on food imports totaling some US\$25 billion annually.

Constraints of the natural resource base are becoming more evident. Population growth and market development are creating mounting pressure on land resources in the ECA and ESCAP regions. In Africa two thirds of land is degraded to some degree, directly impacting 485 million people, or sixty-five percent of the entire African population. At the same time, the ESCAP region is the most heavily impacted, globally, by land degradation, in terms of the numbers of persons affected. Deforestation and biodiversity loss, as well as soil degradation, all of which are in the roots of desertification, have intensified in the ECLAC and ESCAP regions. Drought is an increasingly frequent and severe challenge in all regions, while desertification and land degradation persists globally. Both phenomena constrain agricultural productivity and by extension impact food and human security, and economic activity. These impacts are transboundary and threaten both national and global security.

**Regional and national differences have significantly influenced implementation experiences and priorities as shown by the results of each regional implementation meeting and related regional processes. In each region, the outcomes and priorities have been influenced by varying challenges.**

In Africa, policy inconsistency and low priority accorded to agriculture, severe undercapitalization, poor natural resources development and management, and policies of the region's trading partners and are among the primary challenges. Priority areas for action include removal of price distortions, access to investment and finance, research and extension services, land policy reform, and institutional and human resource capacity, including for information management.

In Asia and the Pacific, resource constraints as well as high populations and persistent poverty highlight the need for policy priorities in the areas of farmer empowerment and incentives for environmentally sustainable consumption and production patterns. The development of eco-efficient, rather than intensive agricultural activity in that region should be based on sustainable

and optimal land use and management. Community empowerment; harnessing and adapting indigenous and local knowledge; and accelerated investment in research are important policy approaches, particularly for reducing drought risk and desertification.

In Europe and North America, key concerns include the conversion of agricultural land to other uses; bio-energy production and risks related to real estate markets. In Africa, migration, tensions and conflict related to the impacts of drought and desertification; water efficiency and energy security; and donor coordination to support sustainable agriculture and rural development are key concerns. Bringing together research, extension and education was considered important to address the challenges in the region. Priority areas for action identified include coherently meeting the objectives of poverty eradication, food security and sustainable resource management and addressing the social and environmental impacts throughout the life-cycle of food production, and support for Africa.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, environmental and socio-economic outcomes have been influenced by inequitable access to land and markets and pricing systems that do not take into account environmental externalities. For many, shortfalls in human capital and demographic structures in rural areas, along with lack of access to finance and the capacity to adopt new technologies limit competitiveness in increasingly globalized supply chains and markets. Priority actions include education; access to finance, assets, public services and support institutions; corporate social responsibility; risk mitigation and climate change adaptation mechanisms; comprehensive rural development programmes, including integrated river basin management; pollution reduction and information management.

The ESCWA region shares the challenge of increasing populations and a declining natural resource base with the ESCAP region. For this region, priority policies and actions are identified in the areas of agricultural innovation, as well as integrated rural development. Socially-just land policy, land use planning and sustainable management are also key steps. Comprehensive long-term drought risk management and response; and concerted efforts to combat desertification and reverse land degradation trends are also priorities.

**For all regions, land lies at the heart of social, political and economic life, and at the core of the response to many of these challenges.**

Equitable access to land, security of tenure and sustainable land/resource management are shared priorities of the ECLAC, ECA and ESCAP regions. In Africa, the HIV/AIDS pandemic is an added and significant dimension. In this, and other regions, conflicts between customary and modern land management systems can result in insecure land tenure and shelter. Policies and actions have been identified to address comprehensive land reform, particularly for Africa, equitable land tenure, human security and communities, planning and administration, sustainable land management, research, information and knowledge management and capacity development.

This thematic cluster is highly integrated. Several cross-cutting issues are identified as arenas for policy action, including water and energy security; sustainable land use and ecosystem services; climate change; gender equity; empowerment of small farmers, rural communities and women; and education for sustainable development. Practical, cross-cutting measures identified by regional commissions include international cooperation, financing for development and public-private partnerships.

**An important objective of this meeting is to highlight policy options and practical measures that have been proven to address barriers and constraints.** Each region has many contributions to make in this regard, but I will mention only a few from each region.

Effective policies and measures in Africa have included capacity-building at the household level through diversification of crops, support for storage, processing and marketing and access to water. The alignment of nutrition objectives with food security and agriculture-related development goals has helped such initiatives. In other areas, incomes have been increased through providing access to credit revolving funds in food-insecure communities. Farmer-to-farmer extension systems have empowered farmers, and improvements in the efficiency of fertilizer use have expanded yields and increased incomes. An innovative index-based weather insurance scheme enhanced access of insured farmers to finance needed to recover from drought.

Asian and Pacific initiatives that empower communities, women and small farmers, have shown success. Investments in research on technology for the use of agricultural residues and including

for the production of biomass-based fuels have also paid off. Public-private partnerships have been an effective modality for raising finance, while linking land use rights with responsible stewardship has resulted in socio-economic and environmental benefits.

In Europe and North America, the revitalization of former state farms and extension support for farming by non-farm families has had positive environmental and social impacts. A database on land and soil desertification has enabled assessment, analysis and forecasts.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, providing access to capital and technology has helped farmers to participate in, and create, niche markets. Comprehensive approaches to water, integrated river basin management, regional planning and environmental management tools are increasingly promoted. Economic and other incentives for local communities, landowners, and small- to medium- sized producers have improved the sustainability of land use. More effective projects have been implemented by channeling investments through regional and municipal governments.

Positive initiatives from the ESCWA region include comprehensive land use planning.

**Madam Chair,**

**While Africa is part of each CSD thematic cluster of issues, it is clear that this session holds more than the usual importance for Africa's sustainable development.** Agriculture is Africa's economic backbone, employing 60 per cent of the labour force and responsible for twenty per cent of GDP. Seventy per cent of the African population living on less than US\$1 per day can be found in rural areas.

Collective efforts and dynamic political commitment for achieving regional integration, expanding opportunities for investment, greater private sector support and outreach to civil society are needed. Capacity-building, including technical and financial assistance to the African Union, regional economic communities and countries can support and consolidate the trend towards peace, stability and democratization, as well as progress in political governance and administration. Emerging structures and practices must be built on and, in the face of a global financial crisis, ways must be found to sustain high growth rates to financially empower countries.

Cooperation with Africa was an important issue at the Regional Implementation Meeting of the Economic Commission for Europe. Recommendations were made, in particular for strengthening donor coordination and for using specific policy tools to further improve the effectiveness of cooperation. Many participating governments confirmed their commitment to better integrating African countries into the global economy by placing development at the center of the multilateral trading system.

**The fuel, food, financial crises have made the challenges to sustainable development more acute.** In response, we have seen a vigorous debate on biofuels, the greening of economic stimulus measures in major economies, and global discussions on a green new deal being led by the UN system. These all underline that environmental and socio-economic systems are increasingly globalized and integrated, yet increasingly vulnerable.

The increasing political and public awareness of, and support for, investments in sustainable development can **provide a unique opportunity to reverse unsustainable trends, to the benefit of all, including developing countries.** Public investments intended to stimulate growth in the ECE region could promote cleaner production methods, greener technologies and infrastructure at home and abroad. In Asia and the Pacific, there is evidence of greater political commitment to, and strategic investment in ‘green growth’ policies, as endorsed by ESCAP members since 2005.

**Distinguished Delegates,**

**Looking to the future, greater policy attention must be paid to the environmental sustainability of economic growth and the inherent ability of socio-economic systems to transform themselves for the better, in the face of crisis.** The Regional Commissions look forward to participating in the upcoming deliberations to identify effective policies and measures that address fundamental constraints, but which can help prepare our communities, societies, economies and ecosystems for the changing sustainable development context.

Thank you for your attention.