Remarks by the United Nations Secretary General Special Envoy at the RUFORUM Independent Dialogue for African Heads of State on 01 July 2021

Excellencies, Heads of State, Honourable Ministers, Distinguished Guests - good afternoon. I thank the Government of the Republic of Malawi and His Excellency President Lazarus Chakwera, for hosting this Summit event today. I am here representing the UN Deputy Secretary General Amina Mohammed who also serves as the Chair of the Food Systems Summit Advisory Committee.

The UN Secretary General launched the Food Systems Summit in 2019 recognising that we are lagging behind on achieving SDGs, and that the COVID pandemic threatened to take us backwards. As the UN Decade of Action commences, we are only 9 farming seasons away from 2030 and transforming our food systems is one of the ways in which we can impact SDGs and make progress for the sake of people, planet and our shared prosperity.

In the ongoing UN Food Systems Summit Dialogue process, we have seen diverse constituencies come together to give voice to ideas and approaches that could provide opportunities for potential pathways for countries to transform their food systems. To deliver the Summit, we have launched processes that reinforce each other: from the Summit Dialogues, to Action Tracks, to the Scientific Group, to Levers of Change and to our Champions, we see six areas emerging from the Summit process including:

1. nourishing people - at the centre of which is ending hunger and malnutrition;
2. reducing impact on climate change and biodiversity;
3. building resilience;
4. improving livelihoods and empowering communities;
5. shifting to sustainable consumption; and
6. leveraging knowledge and innovation.

Excellences, while food defines us, defines our communities, our countries and brings us together, we must rethink how we are producing, processing and consuming food. We must reinvent and revitalise how we work together in a systems approach to create multiple wins - not just for ourselves but for our planet too.

There are various entry points for Africa to transform its food systems and I will just give a few examples:
Africa has the most undeveloped arable land, equivalent to 25% of the world’s fertile land;

Estimates suggest that for every 10 per cent increase in farm yields, there has been a 7 per cent reduction in poverty in Africa;

Closing the gender gap in Africa will result in up to a 10 percent increase in food production and up to a 13 percent decrease in poverty;

In Sub-Saharan Africa, 7 out of 10 are farmers and are responsible for 80% of food production. Imagine if we could empower them to produce efficiently and sustainably.

With the right partnership and collective action within the continent, we can drive both policy and technological innovations that can benefit our people and our economies and reduce negative effects on our environment.

As the Pre-Summit takes place later this July, and the Summit in September, we are encouraged to see African countries coming together, showing leadership, exchanging ideas, sharing knowledge and being bold as we heard the Minister of Malawi state a minute ago in his remarks. I am optimistic about the emergence of a strong narrative from Africa anchored in our own context.

I wish to commend NEPAD, UN ECA, RUFORUM, other academia and other partners that have supported Member States in the Summit process and ensuring that we come through on an African vision.

It is important that Africa sits at the global table and presents her priorities in food system transformation. It is also important that African countries anchor their national pathways and game changing ideas in scientific evidence. It is essential that governments and other stakeholders understand where to invest for the highest returns.

In conclusion, I hope that we can use the Food Systems Summit as an opportunity to build back better and stronger.

Thank you once again for inviting me and I wish you bold and courageous conversations that can allow us to walk and work together towards a sustainable 2030 agenda.

This is our Fifth issue in a series of articles we are releasing as part of our RUFORUM Thought Pieces on the Pre-UN Food Systems Summit 2021. This Thought Piece is part of the discussion Issues presented by the author during “African Heads of State Dialogue”. You can get more information about RUFORUM at www.ruforum.org. You may also share your thought piece about the UN Food Systems Summit Dialogue with us by writing to e.adipala@ruforum.org and copying e.acan@ruforum.org
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