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BY

**THE UNITED NATIONS
DEPUTY SECRETARY-GENERAL**

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**REMARKS AT SIXTH SESSION OF THE AFRICA
REGIONAL FORUM ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY

Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe, 25 February 2020

Your Excellency, Mr Emmerson Mnangagwa, President of the Republic of Zimbabwe,

Your Excellency, Honorable Nezha El Ouafi, Minister Delegate to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, African Cooperation and Moroccan Expatriates

Your Excellency, Ambassador Thomas Kwesi Quartey, Deputy Chairperson of the African Union Commission,

Ministers and representatives of Government,

Heads of Delegations,

Distinguished participants,

Ladies and gentlemen

It is my pleasure to address this sixth Session of the African Regional Forum for Sustainable Development.

I want to thank the Government and people of Zimbabwe for hosting this Forum in this idyllic setting.

This annual meeting comes at a decisive moment for delivering the goals of our two mutually reinforcing Agendas – Agenda 2030 and Agenda 2063.

Over the course of 2019, major scientific and analytical reviews made clear that the world is not on track to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030.

And just a few weeks ago, the Africa Union's first report on the implementation of Agenda 2063 demonstrated that despite early progress, there is an urgent need for enhanced action.

2020 is an opportunity for all of us to chart a different course and to kickstart a Decade of Action to deliver the SDGs, as called for by the Secretary-General at last September's SDG Summit.

This is why all regional fora for the SDGs take an added sense of urgency this year, starting by Africa today.

Region by region, we will build momentum as the world enters the Decade of Action.

I am convinced that, with leadership by African governments and strong support from their partners and young people, the Decade of Action can deliver major improvements in peace and prosperity across the continent.

While the High-Level Political Forum will continue to provide the main platform for global engagement and sharing of experiences on the SDGs, the Decade will also allow for a annual stocktaking on our collective journey towards 2030.

And I can assure you that the Secretary-General and the United Nations development system will be with you every step of the way.

Excellencies,

As we begin this exciting decade, it is vital that we recognize the progress being made in Africa on multiple fronts.

Africa continues to have some of the world's fastest-growing economies, and growth is projected to remain stable in 2020.

The proportion of people living in poverty is declining -- from 34.5 per cent in 2015 to 32.5 per cent in 2019. In ten countries, poverty rates are below 10 per cent.

Africa has made progress in the quest for peace and security, mostly by strengthening continental response frameworks and institutions, as well as by working with the United Nations and other organizations on the ground to secure inclusive transitions.

There have been considerable gains in health outcomes – with less women and children dying in childbirth or because of diseases; improvements in access to education and electricity; and a dramatic rise in internet connectivity.

Commitments on climate action are also encouraging, with all African countries having signed the Paris Agreement and 48 having ratified.

Significant momentum is building through initiatives like the African Continental Free Trade Agreement.

Over the past five years, many governments have aligned their national plans and strategies with the 2030 Agenda and Agenda 2063.

And by the end of the High-Level Political Forum this year, 45 African countries will have completed Voluntary National Reviews.

This wide-ranging progress has been achieved because of African leadership, the engagement of Africa's young people, sound policies and effective international cooperation.

But let us make no mistake. In Africa - as elsewhere – we need to accelerate the pace and scale of our collective action.

The absolute number of people living in poverty on the continent has been increasing since 2013, owing in part to high population growth rates. That number has now reached 428 million.

Africa also has the highest prevalence of hunger, with 22.8 million people severely food insecure; many of whom go to bed hungry.

Income inequality is also high, and in most African countries, the rate of youth unemployment is more than twice that of adults.

Gender inequality is costing sub-Saharan Africa \$95 billion every year in lost opportunities.

Africa's natural environment is also suffering. Forest cover is disappearing by half a per cent annually. Africa is expected to lose 50 per cent of its birds and mammals by 2050.

And the impacts of climate change are already being felt - with the destruction of cyclones Idai and Kenneth; the on-going locust infestation across vast swathes of East Africa; and numerous under-reported climate-linked crises from the Sahel, through Zambia to Kenya and Madagascar.

This nexus between climate change, hunger, terrorism, conflict and displacement is causing havoc and human suffering in many countries, not least in the Sahel and the Horn. It represents a tremendous challenge to the continent.

Excellencies,

The scale of the task before us is immense, but the success of the SDGs depends on the success of Africa 2063.

Just as China's remarkable achievements in lifting its people out of poverty contributed to major advances under the Millennium Development Goals, so can Agenda 2063 have similar impact on the SDGs.

Action in just fourteen African countries that have both populations of more than 10 million and more than 7 million people living in extreme poverty could reduce poverty by almost 80 per cent.

Success is possible, but only if we generate more ambition, more mobilization and more solutions.

Allow me to touch briefly on each of these imperatives.

First, ambition.

Since no country is on track to deliver by 2030, every country must increase its ambition.

That starts with national plans, policies, budgets and institutions that are commensurate with what it will take to deliver universal access to quality social services and an economy that provides decent jobs for all.

It also requires national financing frameworks that support governments in mobilizing and aligning financing from all sources.

As a continent with the lowest ratios of tax-to-Gross Domestic Product, the potential to mobilize more domestic resources exists, through tax and fiscal policy reforms, better tax revenue management exists.

Ambition also demands a full embrace of the SDGs by our partners in business, technology, science and academia.

And it requires the delivery of strong commitments at this year's major global meetings on climate change, biodiversity, sustainable transport and oceans – all of which are crucial for Africa's future.

Second, mobilization.

We need to see a stronger involvement of the general public for sustainable development.

We need to do more to ensure that all Africans see their futures in the SDGs and the goals of Agenda 2063.

With a staggering three quarters of Africa's population under the age of 35, young people must be a central focus – not just in terms of economic inclusion but as the drivers of the change that these Agendas demand.

We have seen many examples of the positive engagement of young people across the continent in recent years – whether relating to corruption, violence against women or climate change.

We need to do more to encourage, expand and harness such efforts.

That includes creating space in policymaking and providing an enabling environment that allows their free expression and embraces their energy, ideas and innovation.

The third imperative is solutions.

To deliver change on the scale that our Agendas demand, major increase in international investment and support for African solutions are needed urgently.

Silencing the Guns is one such effort that demands support.

Building climate-smart infrastructure...

Expanding access to clean and renewable energy...

Ensuring that every young person is in education, training or a job...

These are among the challenges that demand a surge in investment, capacity, technology and know-how; that demand much stronger and more effective partnerships and cooperation than we have seen since 2015.

Excellencies,

In all of this, you can continue to count on the United Nations.

At the national level, the reforms of the UN Resident Coordinator system and a new generation of UN Country Teams now offer a stronger and more cohesive platform to provide governments with integrated policy and programmatic support.

We are also concluding an ambitious process to reposition the UN development system at the regional level – the Secretary-General will be providing his final recommendations in this regard to the UN's Economic and Social Council this May.

I am confident that you will see a step change in the depth and impact of our operational and other interventions, working hand in hand with the African Union.

The regional reform will help us to strengthen coordination and mobilization of resources, and give us more robust knowledge management hubs.

It will lead to greater transparency and results-based management.

Data will improve.

Transboundary efforts will grow more sophisticated.

We will be able to better advocate regional positions and issues at the global level – including the repatriation of billions of dollars lost to illicit financial flows.

The African Continental Free Trade Area is yet another platform to generate the gains we seek.

Excellencies,

There is no denying that we have a mountain to climb over the coming decade.

But as Nelson Mandela has taught the world: “it always seems impossible until it is done”.

It will take all of us – the governments of Africa, the African Union Commission, youth, women, development partners, the UN development system – to leverage the Decade of Action to deliver the SDGs and our common vision for a more peaceful and prosperous Africa.

The Africa regional sustainable development forum has a key role to play - checking the pulse of progress each year and identifying ways to go further, faster.

I can see - just by looking around this room - that Africa has both the energy and the determination to make it happen.

And my engagement with the African youth yesterday left me with a great sense of hope. This is a generation that has the optimism, the resolve, and the creativity to realize Africa’s full potential.

Their future – our future – is now!

So I look forward to hearing from you over the course of the next two days on how we can, together, raise ambition and accelerate action to ensure a future of dignity, peace and prosperity for all.

Thank you.