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REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

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Opening address to the
Third Global Conference on Agriculture, Food Security
and Climate Change
Johannesburg
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Chairperson

Members of the Diplomatic Corps, including the Dean of the Diplomatic
Corps

Representatives of the partner governments and organisations

Honoured guests

Delegates

Ladies and gentlemen

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South Africa is indeed pleased to be hosting this Third Global Conference on Agriculture, Food Security and Climate Change, following on the previous successful events held in The Netherlands and in Vietnam. We are seeing today the participation of countries, organisations, farmers, scientists and other partners, all of whom are keen to see concrete actions in agriculture in responding to the global challenges of food security and climate change. In pursuit of food security, we need to see climate responsive farming practices being supported in policy, and ensure they receive the necessary financial and technical backing. We should see action that translates into new ways to ensure food security.

There is no doubt that through the previous Conferences, and the development of a Science stream, we have started to build an international movement around climate smart agriculture. We must now take the next step, and I hope that this Johannesburg Conference is remembered as the event which turned this informal process into something more structured. The event which brought us together; the event which turned ideas into action.

All of you here are well aware of the many challenges facing agriculture and food security in the context of climate change. We know that already there are millions of hungry people around the world, including in South Africa, and that is the immediate reality of food security. But we also know that climate change is going to make food production even more difficult in the future, so we cannot continue as we have been. Add to this the fact that the global population is set to grow in the future, mostly in the developing world, and if we do not do something different even

more people will go hungry. In short, we have a looming crisis, for which agriculture, in its broadest sense, bears the responsibility of preventing.

Agriculture is therefore bound to respond to these environmental and social pressures. To start with, we must produce more food. Drawing on science and new technologies, we must increase the output of every hectare that is suitable for agriculture. We have seen significant productivity gains over the last few decades, and we must build on these, always ensuring we do so in a sustainable manner. Food security must be a determinant in all planning and policy decisions.

Secondly, agriculture must ensure it does not contribute to further climate change. At the moment, agriculture and agro-processing are estimated to produce up to 30% of all greenhouse gases, so we are in part the makers of our own problem. We have to find different ways to farm, sharing, encouraging and supporting practices with reduced energy inputs and less harm to the environment.

And finally we need to assist farmers to become more resilient in the face of current and future changes in weather patterns and extreme weather events. There is good science available, and numerous programmes and projects which are showing the value of doing things differently. We must learn from and promote those policies and practices which make farmers less vulnerable, including irrigation schemes, support for smallholders and crop diversification.

These objectives are captured in the term “climate smart agriculture”, which the FAO has described as integrating the three elements of increased food production, reduced emissions (or mitigation), and

increased resilience (adaptation). What is new is the understanding that these cannot be tackled in isolation – they require an integrated approach that seeks to achieve all three simultaneously. I trust delegates to the Conference will explore the complex interface between these three elements, and advise on how best to find a unified approach.

Given the international interest, I think we can say that the concept of climate smart agriculture seems to have found widespread support. But if we want to make an impact on the way in which we do our business in the future we are going to need a more organised approach. By the time we leave on Thursday we must have a solid platform for future action.

South Africa subscribes to the benefits of agro-ecological approaches to agriculture, and to conservation farming practices which seek to preserve our natural resources, especially soil and water, for future generations. The National Climate Change Response Plan invokes every sector to consider steps to mitigate and adapt to climate change, within the framework of the National Development Plan. Our National Food Security Policy provides for the planting of 1 million hectares of unused land, owned by communities without access to finance, to expertise and to markets. I am pleased to record that our smallholder farmers have just delivered a consignment of 140 tons of maize to the World Food Programme in Lesotho, confirming the viability of these family-owned farms. Our support for climate-smart agriculture is premised on these experiences, and the belief that the land and the sea are only borrowed from future generations.

And so as South Africa we have two further imperatives, which we hope will be infused into the discussions. One of these is the fact that many of

the “new” approaches being proposed are not new at all, even if they have been given new names. For hundreds of years farmers across the world have been practicing sustainable agricultural approaches, ensuring that they leave something good for the next generation. We must not lose sight of the value of indigenous knowledge; the kind of knowledge and wisdom which has underpinned practices around the world for many generations, and which are still often used in developing countries.

The other imperative is to ensure that we keep a focus on why we are doing these things. The call for universal food security is a good one, but we must recognise that it is the developing world, particularly Africa and Asia, that suffers most from the challenges of poverty and hunger. Whatever we do, we must keep our attention on poverty and inequality, which manifest most directly in hunger and malnutrition.

It does not end there, however. The burdens of hunger and food insecurity are felt most acutely by women and their children, and our deliberations must contain a gender perspective. In whatever we propose, we must be able to directly change the lives of women and children in the poorest parts of sub-Saharan Africa and elsewhere.

I believe that we can make such a difference, provided we make the right decisions and act on them. We have conceptual clarity, we have the political will, and we can secure the finance. Our role is now to put it all together into a single force – to be “united in our diversity”.

And that, ladies and gentlemen, is why I am so pleased to welcome you to South Africa for this Third Global Conference on Agriculture, Food

Security and Climate Change. Your presence is much appreciated. Let me also thank our partners in this event: the government of The Netherlands, the government of The United States of America, and the government of Vietnam. Your efforts are held in high regard.

I thank you and declare this Conference open.