

STATEMENT

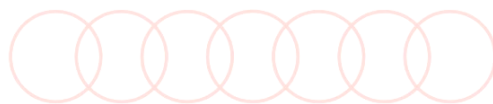
BY

HER EXCELLENCY TUMUSIIME RHODA PEACE
COMMISSIONER FOR
RURAL ECONOMY AND AGRICULTURE
AFRICAN UNION COMMISSION

ON THE OCCASION OF CELEBRATIONS OF

AFRICA ENVIRONMENT DAY AND WANGARI MAATHAI DAY, MARCH 3, 2014

MASERU, LESOTHO



- **ALL PROTOCOL OBSERVED**

I have the honour and pleasure to be here in the beautiful city, Maseru, of the Kingdom of Lesotho. The delegation of the African Union Commission is grateful for this opportunity and I bring you warm greetings and best wishes from Her Excellency Dr. Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma, Chairperson of the AU Commission. We appreciate the generous gesture of the Government and People of Lesotho to host this important Day of the African Union. We are touched by the excellent arrangements that you have placed at our disposal for the success of these celebrations. We are also encouraged by the high turn up of distinguished personalities and representatives of a cross-section of institutions in the political and socio-economic spheres. This is an eloquent indication of the importance that we all attach to environment and sustainable development.

In 2002 the African leaders declared 3rd March as the African Environment Day. This is in recognition of the contribution environment place in the lives of people. Indeed, the celebrations of the Africa Environment Day in conjunction with Wangari Maathai Day this year are of particular importance as the African Union and its Member States continue to commemorate the OAU/AU 50th Anniversary that will culminate in the adoption of Africa Agenda 2063 which, among other things, aims to makes sustainable environmental management a cornerstone of Africa's development efforts. Furthermore, 2014 is the Africa Union's Year of Agriculture and Food Security and the Tenth Anniversary of the existence of the Comprehensive Africa Agricultural Development Programme (CAADP) which has sustainable land and water management as one is its pillars. This year-long commemoration was launched by the 22nd Ordinary Session of the Assembly of Heads of State and Government of the African Union in January 2014.

The relationship between increased agricultural productivity and food security and sustainable environmental management cannot be overlooked. It is, therefore, pleasing to note that the theme for the celebrations of the African Environment and Wangari Maathai Day in 2014 is Combating **Desertification in Africa: Enhancing Agricultural Productivity and Food Security**. The theme underlines the inextricable link between sustainable land management and food security.

It is an undeniable fact that agriculture cannot thrive in Africa if we do not pay due attention to the rational utilization of natural resources including water and land. It is, therefore, important that, as we mark the Year of Agriculture and Food Security and the CAADP Tenth Year of operation, we harness and develop the necessary synergies and complementarities between agricultural development and sustainable environmental stewardship. The two cannot operate in isolation. Sustainable environmental management is, indeed, fundamental to the pursuit of food security, peace, security and stability in Africa.

Land is under increasing demand and pressure from competing uses such as agriculture, forestry and pasture as well as energy production, urbanization and extraction of raw materials. As other regions of the world turn to Africa, looking for the energy, water and food resources needed to regenerate and power their economies, we must ensure that the continent's abundant natural resources, are by priority, harnessed to catalyze our sustainable development. We must reverse the general perception that natural resources are a curse rather a blessing for the continent.

Of the world's 1.2 billion hectares of moderately and severely degraded soil, Africa has the largest areas, according to Taylor and Francis in their Research work. Between 1985 and 2000, Africa lost 25 million hectares to desertification, 60 million hectares to salinization and 50 million hectares to soil erosion. These have huge impacts on the continent's ability to grow enough food to feed her growing population, to consolidate its development gains and the maintenance of peace and security. Land degradation is an underlying cause of acute poverty and social deprivation in many rural areas of Africa. Land forms the basis of wealth and prosperity of any given society. As the productivity of croplands drop, more marginal and fragile lands are brought under cultivation, thus putting in motion a vicious cycle of environmental deterioration, poverty and food insecurity.

Unless we step up practical measures to ensure that our productive lands are preserved and degraded lands restored, nothing would stop agriculture in Africa from encroaching on existing forests to meet increasing demands for land and other resources vital for livelihoods. Increased soil degradation and the consequent low agricultural productivity is a direct cause of the breakdown of social fabrics of many rural communities in Africa. This phenomenon is exacerbating rural –urban migration. It also intensifies the immigration of the youthful population in many Africa countries, seeking economic opportunities in other regions outside the continent with many serious social and economic ramifications.

The selection of this year's theme is a reflection of the commitment of the African leadership and political will to tackle the triple and intertwined challenges of environmental degradation, low agricultural productivity and food insecurity on the continent. At Rio+20 UN Conference on Sustainable Development, world leaders, at the insistence of Africa and other developing regions, agreed to strive towards a land-degradation neutral world. This, in practical terms means that land degradation no longer exceeds the restoration of degrading land. The unfolding phenomena of climate change, biodiversity depletion, desertification, land degradation and irrational use of finite natural resources remain serious preoccupations for Africa as they pose real impediments to her sustainable development efforts.

Deserts are expanding in many parts of Africa, in the Sahel, as well as the eastern and southern regions of the continent. There is hardly any part of the continent that is immune to the scourge of land degradation. As a continent, Africa must continue to maintain this strong stand on combating land degradation and desertification. By doing this, we shall be glorifying and honouring environmental Ambassadors like the late Professor Wangari Maathai who, through the Greenbelt Movement, strove to empower women, eradicate poverty, protect existing forests and restore degraded lands and water ecosystems in Africa. Her legacy in bringing global attention to the forests of the Congo Basin will stand the test of time and remain an inspiration to all of us.

A particular feature of this year's celebrations is the training workshop for African journalists on the challenges of desertification and land degradation. The said workshop ended yesterday. This training workshop was jointly organized by the African Union Commission and the Kingdom of Lesotho with support from the Secretariat of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification and the United Nations Environment Programme. The objective of the training is to enable African journalists to report on land degradation and its social and economic implications especially for the farming communities.

It is not always easy to get the media cover stories related to desertification. The stories, if ever captured, do not often attract wide readerships which serve as an economic disincentive for journalists to cover environmental stories. To make environmental issues attractive to the media, we must strive to link them to livelihood issues like food and nutrition security, poverty alleviation and maintenance of peace, security and stability. We must emphasise that desertification and land degradation have economic, social and environmental costs to society. We must encourage investments in restoring land productivity. Initiatives like the Great Green Wall for the Sahara and the Sahel, TerrAfrica and CAADP through its pillar 1 on land and water, are some of the programmes that are being implemented at continental level to address the challenges of land degradation and biodiversity loss.

It is, therefore, my fervent hope that the two-day training that the journalists have had will provide them with the necessary skills and knowledge to serve as champions of the struggle against environmental degradation. We want to establish an everlasting mutual relationship with the media both in Africa and abroad and, at this juncture, I wish to call upon all our development partners to render the necessary capacity to the Africa media for their active engagement in raising awareness in favour of the common struggle against land degradation. On our part as the African Union Commission, we will leave no stone unturned in providing support for the media to play its meaningful role in the development of our continent.

In May 2013, the African Union adopted a decision on strengthening the involvement of the African Union Commission in the UNCCD processes with a view to making sure that African views, priorities and concerns are taken on board in the Convention's programmes of work. The African Union Assembly of Heads of State and Government again, at its 22nd Ordinary in January 2014, resolved to create an African Working Group on Desertification and sustainable land management. This working group will serve as an advisory body on monitoring the progress of implementation of the various continental and sub-regional programmes and strategies on integrated land management. I want to seize this opportunity to call upon our partners to join us in the operationalization of this body.

In conclusion, I would like, on behalf of Her Excellency, Dr. Nkosozena Dlamini Zuma, Chairperson of the AU Commission to express our sincere gratitude to the Government and the people of the Kingdom of Lesotho for promptly and favourably responding to the call to host the Africa Environment Day and Wangari Maathai Day. The offer to host the celebrations is a clear manifestation of the Kingdom's unflinching commitment to tackle desertification and land degradation. I want to extend special thanks to the Honourable Minister of Forestry Land Reclamation and his staff for their tireless efforts in ensuring the smooth organization of this event. We are equally grateful to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the Secretariat of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification for their longstanding support and collaboration in the organization of the Africa Environment and Wangari Day celebrations.

Furthermore, I would like to register my sincere gratitude to the boys and girls, women and youth groups joining us here today. Women and children, more often than not, bear the brunt of environmental degradation. They are the ones that travel long distances in search of water and fuel for the family. In case of population displacement induced by environmental degradation, it is women and children who remain behind, enduring the adverse consequences. I, therefore, salute you all for the active part you played in the celebrations.

I wish you all wonderful and memorable celebrations of Africa Environment Day and Wangari Maathai Day. May God bless the Kingdom of Lesotho, may God bless Africa and the African Union.

