



Statement by H.E. Dr. Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma, Chairperson of the African Union Commission on the occasion of the Celebration of Africa Environment Day and Wangari Maathai Day, March 3, 2013

As envisaged by the Assembly of Heads of State and Government of the African Union, the celebration of the Africa Environment Day and Wangari Maathai Day provides us with an opportunity to review and critically analyze our activities in the realms of sustainable development. It is the time of the year when we, as individuals, communities and countries, can re-examine our footprints on the environment, to give ourselves a sense of our impact on the global environment at large and more so on the lives of the future generations who would be depending on the environmental resources whose services we are enjoying today.

The celebration affords us the chance to re-dedicate ourselves to the principles of environmental conservation and sustainable development and to emulate the legacy of the late Prof. Wangari Maathai, who devoted all her life promoting ecosystem conservation and the preservation of biological diversity. In addition, she supported sustainable development efforts and women-empowerment in Africa in particular, and the world in general.

The African continent continues to endure serious environmental and sustainable development challenges. The unfolding phenomena of climate change, biodiversity depletion, desertification, land degradation and irrational use of finite natural resources remain serious risks for Africa as they pose real impediments to her sustainable development efforts. In unison, we must renew our collective resolve to overcome these challenges and to ensure a better future for generations of Africans yet unborn. The road would be difficult, wrought with numerous obstacles, but is reachable. On her march towards sustainable development, Africa will need more integrated approaches at both regional and

national levels considering the three pillars of sustainable development: economic, social and environmental.

Sustainable environmental management is fundamental to the pursuit of food security, peace, security, and stability in Africa. A lot of the crises happening currently on the continent, be they droughts, armed conflicts, or other natural disasters, are exacerbated by environmental deterioration. To address the twin effects of climate change and desertification, Africa is bracing itself to devote undiluted attention to integrate sustainable environmental management into the mainstream development policies at both regional and national levels.

The celebration this year is of particular significance, taking place against a backdrop of key developments both at the level of the African continent and at the global level as well. This year marks the 50th Anniversary of our continental organization, OUA/AU. Africa, its citizens, and her friends around the world will be celebrating the decolonization of the continent and the tremendous achievements realized in the fields of socio-economic, political and environmental development as well the integration efforts of the African continent. The theme for the Golden Jubilee celebration is: Pan Africanism and African Renaissance. This theme underscores the importance of African countries to intensify work in cohesion and solidarity to preserve and promote their common values and heritage, including environment and natural resources. The concept of African Renaissance is built on the conviction that African people and nations can overcome the current challenges confronting the continent and achieve cultural, scientific, economic, environmental, and political renewal.

The recent United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, commonly referred to as Rio+20, marked 20 years of global efforts to strike a balance between human development and environmental sustainability. It emphasized the need to ensure that human development is holistic, encompassing economic, social, and environmental dimensions. One of concepts embraced and endorsed at the Rio+20 Summit was the 'green economy'. This development model has been designed to put the global economy on a sustainable path, in the process

mitigating the impact of climate change, generating jobs and wealth, reducing poverty, and ensuring food security especially in developing countries.

The concept of the green economy has gained currency to a large extent because it promises to provide a response to the multiple crises that the world has been facing in recent years –the climate, food and economic crises – with an alternative paradigm that offers the promise of growth while protecting the earth’s ecosystems and, in turn, contributing to poverty alleviation. In this sense, the transition to a green economy will entail moving away from the production and consumption patterns that tend to exacerbate the difficult conditions of existence in many parts of the developing world.

We in Africa subscribe to basic principles and ideals of the green economy. It is a concept we believe can offer the African continent and other developing regions of the world alternative approaches to development which seeks to integrate economic development with environment, human well-being, and socially-inclusive growth, thereby mitigating the risks which arise from environmental degradation. The African continent is in a unique position and is well-placed to fashion new development pathways that are more sustainable than those taken elsewhere.

The imperative for Africa to pursue the green economy model is clear, considering the fact that many African economies are heavily dependent on natural resources to fuel economic growth. Agriculture, forestry and fishing, mining and quarrying, and oil and natural gas are crucial contributors to the GDP of many African economies.

While African economies are still heavily dependent on natural resources, they have started to appreciate the incentives of diversification. Domestic industries in most of these economies are biased towards natural resources (e.g. mining), and international trade is also heavily natural resource- based. Irrational use of these resources, in pursuit of economic development, can seriously disrupt economic and social growth in the long term.

Besides the environmental and economic arguments in favour of African countries' need to adopt a green economy model, there is a strong social argument too. A large portion of the African population, especially the rural population, is directly dependent on the natural environment for their sustenance and livelihoods. Thus, the conservation of the continent's natural resources is of paramount importance to these populations. Africa's transition to green economy thus has economic as well as social dimensions and implications.

To make the celebration wholesome, it would be befitting to pay due attention to the environmental development dimension of the continent. As noted earlier Africa depends to a very large extent on the utilization of the environment and its resources to foster economic and social development. The 50th Anniversary is, therefore, expected to help us to underpin the centrality of the environment and natural resources in Africa's growth trajectory and renaissance efforts based on the principles of sustainable development.

The struggle to decolonize Africa was not influenced only by the desire of Africans to gain political freedom and the right for self-determination but it was also about having the right to control and sustainably utilize Africa's vast endowment of natural resources and ecosystems. It is therefore imperative that we jealously and steadfastly safeguard our environment to ensure our economic, social and environmental survival into the future. This has to happen to make Africa competitive in the global scheme of things.

It is fundamental not to decouple and downplay the strong linkage between the environment and Africa's performance since the end of colonialism on the continent. Thus, it is inspirational that the theme chosen for the commemoration of the Africa Environment Day and the Wangari Maathai Day for 2013 is: *"Partnership for Africa's Transition to Green Economy in Support of African Renaissance"*.

The commemoration of the Africa Environment Day and Wangari Maathai Day offers us with an opportune moment to demonstrate Africa's appreciation of the importance to opt for green and sustainable paths to development.

I wish to take this opportunity to salute the Government and the people of the Republic of Tunisia for responding to the call made by the 14th Session of the African Ministerial Conference in September 2012 in Arusha, Tanzania, to host the Africa Environment Day and Wangari Maathai Day. The offer to host the celebrations is a clear manifestation of Tunisia's unflinching commitment to the ideals of sustainable environmental management. We are grateful to the AU Member States, Regional Economic Communities, the UN Economic Commission for Africa, the African Development Bank, United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), and the Greenbelt Movement for their longstanding support and collaboration in organizing the Africa Environment Day and Wangari Maathai celebration. We are equally thankful to the secretariats of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, the United Convention to Combat Desertification, and the Convention on Biological Diversity for their cooperation.

I wish you all wonderful and memorable celebration of Africa Environment Day and Wangari Maathai Day. May God Bless Africa.

Dr. Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma

Chairperson

African Union Commission