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International Forum  
on  
'Forging innovative partnerships for the implementation of  
the Great Green Wall for the Sahara and Sahel Initiative

**16 to 17 December 2013**  
**FAO, Rome, Italy**

**Opening Remarks**

**By**  
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Ms. Maria Elena Semedo, Deputy Director-General for Natural Resources of FAO

Ms Monique Barbut, UNCCD Executive Secretary

Ms. Christine Pasca Palmer, Representative of the European Union

Representatives of the African Union Member States

Representative of the EU Delegation to African Union

Representatives of International Organisations

Ladies and Gentlemen

It is an honour and privilege for me to address you on behalf of the African Union Commission during the opening session of this very important meeting. I would like to thank the FAO for hosting this meeting.

When the Great Green Wall for the Sahara and Sahel Initiative was endorsed by the Assembly of the African Union in 2007 we were under no illusion that it would take a very long time and a huge amount of human and financial resources to realize its enormous potential. We were also clear in our mind that it requires strong partnership and sustained commitment at all levels for it to succeed. The original concept note bears witness to this fact, where the GGWSSI is foreseen to be implemented over a period of thirty years in three phases each lasting for ten years. The budget estimate was put at between 1.6 to 2.4 billion US dollars.

To operationalize this grand Initiative, the African Union policy organs enacted key decisions and guidance mandating the Commission to ensure proper coordination and facilitation of the programme – also calling for synergy among other relevant frameworks such as the CAADP as well as for leveraging partnerships platforms that have been put in place.

As a result, efforts have been exerted towards integrating the GGWSSI with other flagship programmes and partnerships such as the Africa-EU Joint Strategy under environment and climate change. The GGWSSI is one of the flagship programmes for sustainable land management within the recently adopted Strategic Plan (2004-2017) of the Commission. It is also to be recalled that African Ministerial Conference on

Environment (AMCEN) endorsed the GGWSSI as Africa's pathway to achieving the Rio+20 commitment on Land Degradation Neutral World.

There is also a good deal of political ownership in many of the countries involved in the Initiative, where governments have put in place appropriate institutional mechanisms to facilitate effective implementation at national level.

This heightened political commitment to the ideals of the Great Green Wall for the Sahara and Sahel Initiative stems from realization that the Initiative directly addresses the concerns of the three Rio Conventions (UNFCCC, BCD and UNCCD). It provides a common platform to harness the synergies and complementarities between these conventions. It is a critical area of intervention in the continent's efforts to address the challenges of climate change, desertification and loss of biodiversity.

We at the African Union Commission are proud of the partnership we have been able to build over the years in support of the implementation of the GGWSSI. This partnership is unique in a sense that it is a partnership of stakeholders who are concerned with the increasing impacts of land degradation in the Sahel and Sahara zones with serious consequences on the lives and livelihoods of the population in these areas, sharing a common vision for addressing the situation.

Over the last few years, we have been encouraged by the enlargement of the GGWSSI partnership. In addition to the European Union, FAO and the Global Mechanism of the UNCCD, we now have the World Bank and the Global Environment Facility coming with programmes that add value and support GGWSSI large-scale implementation. There is also a growing number of regional partnerships involving the Regional Economic Communities, the Permanent Inter-State Committee for Drought Control in the Sahel (CILSS), the Sahara and Sahel Observatory, and a host of regional and international NGOs providing vital inputs for the overall success of the Initiative.

This meeting is organized with a view to renewing, enlarging and strengthening their resolve in support of this great initiative of the African Union - an initiative which has a great prospect for transforming livelihoods in the arid and semi-arid zones of the continent. We have made progress slowly, but surely in putting the GGWSSI on the landscape as we have assisted 13 of the countries involved in the GGWSSI to develop national strategies, action plans and projects to operationalize the GGWSSI concept.

The development of national action plans and strategies in a way completes the preparatory phase of the GGWSSI. We are now ready to move into the implementation phase. True, it took us a fairly long time to reach this stage but it is an achievement that we can all be proud of. It is now time for undertaking concrete activities on the ground that would have positive impacts on the lives of the rural communities.

We would like to call upon all partners to remain committed to the worthy course of implementing the GGWSSI. This is the time where the initiative needs your support the most in order to maintain the momentum and enthusiasm at continental, regional and national levels for the programme. We need to reassure our communities that we can go beyond the development of plans and we can make a difference on their lives.

I would like to thank the Global Mechanism of the United Convention to Combat Desertification and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations for taking the lead in the preparations for this partnership engagement. We appreciate the tremendous efforts that have gone into the preparation of the country factsheets, which mirror the priorities of the concerned countries as reflected in their national plans and strategies. I would also like to thank the European Union and FAO for their continuous support from the very beginning, through which we were able to conceptualize the Initiative and elaborate national action plans and strategies.

The African Union Commission remains committed to the full realization of this initiative and continues to ensure that it provides for the effective coordination of the initiative.

I thank you all for your kind attention.