

AFRICAN UNION

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**KEYNOTE SPEECH
BY**

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**COMMISSIONER
EDUCATION, SCIENCE TECHNOLOGY AND INNOVATION
AFRICAN UNION COMMISSION**

O N THE OCCASION OF

THE SIX AFRICAN DAY OF SCHOOL FEEDING

1ST MARCH, 2021

VIRTUAL

Excellency my big brother Dr. Ibrahim Mayaki

My sister Excellency, Amira El Fadil

My sister Excellency, Josefa Sacko

Excellency, Dr. Elioda Tumwesigye

Your Excellences, Ministers of AU Member States

Your Excellencies, AU Permanent Representatives and Members of the Diplomatic Corps;

Representatives of International Organizations, Civil Society and the Private Sector

Colleagues from the African Union Commission,

Distinguished Guests,

Esteemed Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of H.E. Mr. Moussa Faki Mahamat, the re-elected Chairperson of the African Union Commission, I am honoured to welcome you all to this very auspicious occasion of the Sixth African Day of School Feeding Continental Commemoration under the theme "Harnessing Africa's Traditional Knowledge and Food to Support Home-Grown School Feeding Programmes and Systems during COVID-19 Response and Beyond."

First and foremost, I wish to extend my gratitude to all Ministers and officials of Member States, development partners, Ambassadors and members of the diplomatic corps and other participants for taking the time to attend this important commemoration. Your presence here today is a testament to your recognition that Home-Grown School Feeding can serve as a game-changing tool to advance Africa's development to realise Agenda 2063 – the "Africa We Want".

Excellences, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

As you may recall, in 2016, the African Union's Assembly of Heads of State and Government passed a Decision recognising the importance of Home-grown School Feeding to improving access to education and learning outcomes, and the positive impact it plays in strengthening local and rural economies and food systems. As per the decision, the Assembly called for the commemoration of the 1st March as the African Day of School Feeding.

You may also recall that the Malabo Declaration of 2014, adopted by the Assembly of Heads of State and Government, renewed the political commitment towards the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP) to end hunger in Africa by 2024, including commitments to leverage home-grown school feeding to support local and rural economies and food systems.

Based on these decisions, it is clear that the foundational political commitments for Home-Grown School Feeding exist. While this may be the case, just because political commitments were secured five and seven years ago does not mean that we should rest on our laurels. To move the needle on home-grown school feeding and scale-up, the African Union Commission, African Union Member States and Development Partners must sustain past political commitments and these need to be translated into concrete actions to be implemented by stakeholders. Already we have above 36 countries already implementing School Feeding in Africa. We must embody School Feeding and Home-Grown School Feeding across policies and there must be synergy for implementation in the Member States.

Excellences, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

This brings me to why we are all here today. Commemorations provide us with an opportunity to take stock of progress achieved thus far. At the same time, it provides us with a perspective to look at the present situation and to recommit ourselves to a bold vision to achieve the Africa We Want by examining critical gaps, establishing priorities and formulating and implementing concrete actions. This bold vision is an Africa where all children, particularly the most vulnerable, have access to safe, nutritious and traditional school meals. Health is wealth only if our food is supposed to be our medicine and our medicine is supposed to be our food. The pupils and students need quality well balanced meals. This is an Africa where smallholder farmers have access to reliable markets and where proprietors of businesses and their employees benefit from providing services through home-grown school feeding programmes.

The African Union Biennial Report on Home-Grown School Feeding 2019-2020 takes stock of progress achieved. Thank you very much WFP for your partnership with us and Co-chairing the School Feeding Cluster of the CESA 2016-2025. The African Union Biennial Report on Home-Grown School Feeding is important. After all, an African proverb says, ***“You should know what is being cooked in the kitchen otherwise you might eat a forbidden food”***. We need to take stock of the State of School Feeding.

Over the last six years from 2013 to 2019 just before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, AU Member States had managed to translate continental and national political commitment towards school feeding into substantial progress. Over this period, AU Member States were able to scale-up from 38.4 million children reached with school meals in 2013 to 65.4 million children in 2019. There has also been significant progress on the policy and legislative front, with 27 Member States having a national school feeding policy as of 2019 up from 8 Member States in 2013.

However, the present situation owing to COVID-19-induced school closures threatens to scale back years of progress made by AU Member States. At the peak of the crisis,

some 297 million African students' education was disrupted, and some 50 million school-age children across 42 AU Member States missed out on school meals.

Excellences, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

While COVID-19, for the time being, has put a considerable dent in recent gains made on school feeding, it has made me reflect on the old adage that out of crisis comes opportunity. The opportunity for Africa here is three-fold. First, for Member States and Development Partners to take swift actions to restore school feeding programmes to reach children who were receiving school meals before the pandemic. Second, to make school feeding programmes more inclusive by expanding coverage to the more than 60 million vulnerable school-age children living below the poverty line who do not currently receive school meals, and, third, to reimagine how school feeding programmes are financed and implemented, making them more home-grown and integrating them with a broader package of health and nutrition services.

As it relates to Africa's arts, culture and heritage, it is important to note that Africa's diverse and rich culture in large part stems from agricultural and pastoral communities. These communities have shaped African culture through their arts and crafts. Moreover, agriculture and the foods and meals that have been part of the heritage of these communities plays a strong role in the cultural identity of African societies. Traditional cuisine is passed down from one generation to the next. It also operates as an expression of cultural identity. Different regions of Africa have unique cuisine.

The promotion of home-grown school feeding can support pastoral and agricultural communities through sourcing products directly from them. If well-designed, home-grown school feeding programmes can also promote Africa's traditional food crops and nutritious, traditional meals by incorporating them into school meal menu planners. This is important particularly because the AU theme of the year is; "Arts, Culture and Heritage". Our cuisine is our culture and Heritage. It is a reflection of who we are. Our food is also our medicine. Moreover, School Feeding also provides business opportunities to many micro, small and medium-sized businesses and employment opportunities for job seekers, many of which move back and forth between rural and urban areas. In this regard, home-grown school feeding is a game-changer in that it caters to Africa's dual economy by contributing to both the agricultural and modern sectors.

Excellences, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

In commemorating the 6th African Day of School Feeding today, I want Member States to walk the talk, go beyond rhetorics and hence upscale implementation. Today, I sound an urgent clarion call for AU Member States, Development Partners and other stakeholders to: (i) urgently restore and expand school feeding programmes to ensure it reaches the most vulnerable; (ii) strengthen operational linkages between education, health, nutrition, agricultural and social protection sectors; (iii) advance the home-grown school feeding agenda in global, continental and national platforms in order to place it on the agenda of the United Nations Food Systems Summit; (iv) organise follow-up

political and technical dialogues to reinvigorate high-level political commitment and formulate concrete actions that respond to the immediate health, nutrition and education needs of children and promote local food systems and Africa's rich culinary heritage; and (v) to join the soon-to-be global coalition on school feeding that aims to promote the home-grown school feeding agenda globally.

Remember, "When the leg does not walk, the stomach does not eat. Let us walk the talk of implementation so we should achieve the dream of Agenda 2063 and School Feeding as a game changer for the "Africa We Want".

Nutrition, Agriculture and School Feeding – how do we put it into national policies as a game changer? School Feeding can mitigate Hunger. That is why School Feeding and Home-Grown School Feeding is a cluster of CESA 2016-2025. School meals are important for they are nutritionally balance in order to help pupils and students.

Let's remember that another virus that is killing our beloved children is "hunger". We know it and we know that the vaccine to mitigate this hunger virus is Food. Therefore, School Feeding can help mitigate the hunger virus and improve wellbeing and better learning for the "Africa We Want". It also creates employability for Small Farmers Holders. Therefore Home-Grown School Feeding offers inter-generation benefits and African governments need to invest in it for healthy young people to lead us in the Future.

Sincere gratitude to our partners and stakeholders, WFP, our Sister Departments; Health, Humanitarian Affairs and Social Development, Agriculture, Rural Economy, Blue Economy and Sustainable Development, AUDA-NEPAD. Thank you for the synergy between our departments. As an African proverb says; "One who eats alone cannot discuss the taste of the food with others". Thus, the principles of subsidiarity, complementarity and collective responsibility defines our Africanness and vision of Agenda 2063.

Thank you AUDA-NEPAD for launching the Home-Grown School Feeding in 15 States. Thanks to the contributions of these organisations to the Biennial Report: UNICEF, FAO, WFP, CERFAM, UNESCO and the London School of Hygiene and Tropical medicine.

To this end, as we celebrate this day, let us do it with a firm resolve to recommit ourselves to realising that bold vision of Agenda 2063 – The Africa We Want for ourselves and our progeny.

I wish you fruitful discussions and thank you for your kind attention.

Happy 6th African Day of School Feeding.