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Ministerial Declaration

Special Session of the African Ministers of Environment and Natural Resources, convened under the auspices of the Specialized Technical Committee for Agriculture, Rural Development, Water and Environment

WE, the Ministers and Heads of Delegation from African Member States, having met virtually on **13 November 2020**, on the occasion of the Special Session of African Ministers of Environment and Natural Resources, covering the following sectors:- *Biodiversity, Climate Change, Disaster Risk Reduction, Environment (including Multilateral Environmental Agreements), Forestry, Land Management (including the Great Green Wall initiative), Meteorology, Water and Sanitation, and Wildlife*; convened under the auspices of the African Union Specialized Technical Committee for Agriculture, Rural Development, Water and Environment, on the Challenges and Opportunities Presented by the COVID-19 Pandemic;

Recognizing the intricate relationship between environmental health, animal health and human health – and the continuing negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on all aspects of development in Africa – with loss of lives and unprecedented social-economic disruption, slowing progress on achieving the continent’s aspirations under Africa’s Agenda 2063;

Offer our sincere condolences to the governments and people of Africa for the loss of lives caused by the pandemic;

Acknowledge the role that continuous production and delivery of adequate, timely, quality, and reliable weather and climate information services play in the socio-economic development, security of livelihoods, protection of lives and property, disaster preparedness and risk management, reduction in vulnerability to hydro-meteorological hazards, preservation of development gains, development planning, and informed policy and decision making;

Note with Concern the increasing waste emanating from the use of Personal Protection Equipment aggravating environmental pollution through illegal dumping and unsafe disposal of waste;

Acknowledge that the COVID-19 pandemic has shifted governments' attention and priorities away from the environment and natural resources further constraining investment in the sectors;

Concerned with the impacts of the pandemic on communities which depend on natural resources for their livelihoods and in particular the travel and tourism industry;

Further concerned that an increase in the use of the forests and wildlife products for treating the symptoms of COVID-19 may lead to overexploitation of some resources if extraction is done on commercial scales without appropriate governance mechanisms.

Declare and Resolve to: -

1. **Ensure** that appropriate environmental policies and strategies responding to epidemics and pandemics are put in place, and implemented effectively to promote environmental sustainability, regulate the trade and consumption of wildlife products, avoid deforestation, biodiversity loss and degradation of other important ecosystems which are essential for preventing future occurrence of zoonotic diseases;
2. **Ensure** that as the COVID-19 pandemic unfolds, we make all possible efforts to contain and minimize the impacts on the environment and natural resources through inclusion of these sectors in governments' response measures and strengthen human, technical and financial resources of the responsible national and regional institutions;
3. **Commit** to support and strengthen the National Meteorological and Hydrological Services (NMHS) in the mitigation of the impacts of extreme weather and climate events during and after the pandemic;
4. **Provide**, where possible, financial support for the critically threatened sectors including wildlife tourism, environment related hospitality industries and forest industries to secure jobs and livelihoods;
5. **Allocate**, where possible, adequate financial resources for the implementation of the African Union strategies on sustainable land management, forestry, water and sanitation, wildlife, and meteorology (weather and climate services);
6. **Strengthen** the coordination and implementation mechanisms for the Great Green Wall for the Sahara and Sahel Initiative and support its expansion into the Southern African region;

7. **Strengthen** the role of, and mainstream disaster risk reduction into the overall COVID-19 response mechanisms to capitalize on the experiences of the DRR experts in dealing with the crisis;
8. **Replenish** Disaster Risk Management funds for recovery from both COVID-19 and other disasters engendered by natural hazards as well as future risks and uncertainties;
9. **Harmonize** and or create pool of multi-hazards disaster management funds at all levels;
10. **Use** existing disaster management structures to respond to emerging hazards/disasters, including epidemics and pandemics to ensure sustainability and institutional memory;
11. **Strengthen** multi-hazard early warning systems and ensure multi-stakeholders' participation;
12. **Provide** adequate access to water and sanitation as prerequisites for containing the spread of coronavirus;
13. **Focus** attention on the imperatives of mainstreaming environmental sustainability, natural resources and biodiversity conservation in the national, regional and continental stimulus programmes for the post COVID-19 period;
14. **Continue** to promote the role of, and the rights of local and indigenous communities in sustainable environment and natural resource management, to relieve pressure on land and forest cover, prevent biodiversity loss and contribute to water, food, renewable energy and energy security, and climate change adaptation;
15. **Commit** to invest in the scaling up of initiatives which contribute to Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN) targets to accelerate restoration of degraded land through implementation of Sustainable Land Management practices and other Land Based Solutions which enhance coherence and synergies, through working with all stakeholders in particular youth, women and people living with disabilities;
16. **Develop** innovative ways to prevent future pandemics through Sustainable Land Management, the circular and restoration economy in the context of LDN, as we acknowledge that the manner in which land is being utilized and managed affects our health, food, water, energy and livelihoods;

17. **Embrace** an integrated and holistic approach to environment, natural resources and biodiversity conservation and utilization to serve the interests of all stakeholders in particular youth and women and ensuring environmental integrity and green recovery;
18. **Strengthen** national, regional, transboundary and international cooperation to effectively regulate the exploitation, trafficking, trade, and consumption of wild fauna and flora and their products and combat illegal wildlife trade by allocating sufficient financial and technical resources;
19. **Recommit** ourselves to address the increasing threats of climate change, desertification and biodiversity loss through the provision of adequate financial and technical capacities at national and regional levels;
20. **Provide** support and promote the ecosystems' restoration which is critical to biodiversity conservation, climate adaptation, provision of ecosystem services and reducing potential public health threats associated with new emerging zoonoses;
21. **Commit** to strengthen the response to climate change, by taking advantage of the opportunities offered by the recovery from COVID-19 to support the transformation of the continent towards a sustainable, greener and climate friendly future through well designed economic recovery stimulus packages to accelerate the mainstreaming of climate action into development;
22. **Call upon** Member States and development partners to support and enhance existing initiatives such as the African Adaptation Initiative (AAI) Africa Renewable Energy Initiative (AREI), the Adaptation of African Agriculture Initiative (AAA) and the Great Green Wall Initiative, ensuring a balance between adaptation and mitigation actions, and to support African countries to access the relevant support for climate action to the maximum extent as specified in the Paris Agreement;
23. **Encourage** regional and transboundary cooperation in river basin management to ensure adequate access to water;
24. **Invite** governments and partners to maintain and increase their financial and technical support to the environment and natural resource sectors including alternative activities during and after the pandemic;
25. **Note with Satisfaction** progress in the development of the African Union Climate Change Strategy that aims to provide impetus to the continent's efforts to collectively tackle the impacts of climate change and support sustainable development efforts;

26. **Welcome** the proposed African Green Stimulus Programme which is intended to support the continent's environment and sustainable development recovery response to the devastating socio-economic and environmental impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic;
27. **Call Upon** the Commission to prepare a report on the impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Environment and Natural Resources in Africa and present the report at the next meeting of the STC.
28. **Express** gratitude to the Commission for organizing the Ministerial Session