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STATEMENT

BY

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THE ROLE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN ACHIEVING FOOD SECURITY IN THE POST COVID-19 ERA: INVESTING IN A SAFE, NUTRITIOUS AND CLIMATE-RESILIENT FOOD SYSTEMS

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Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

1. I am pleased to join you today for this important discussion on the role of artificial intelligence in achieving food security. I am convinced that the discussions will help us to further engage in dialogue on alternative ways towards the realization of food security.

2. The 2021 High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF), convened under auspices of the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) undertook an in-depth review of SDG 2 on zero hunger. It noted that, even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the world was off-track to achieve zero hunger by 2030 and healthy diets were inaccessible for a significant part of the world's population. It estimated that the pandemic might have pushed **83 million** to **132 million** more people into chronic hunger in 2020, adding to the **690 million** in 2019.

3. To address this situation, the HLPF stressed that the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the urgent need for concrete actions to end hunger and all forms of malnutrition and ensure inclusive, resilient and sustainable food systems. It recognized that digital technology, and closing the digital divide, are essential for recovering from the pandemic and achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

4. This perspective is supported by the scientific analysis in the 2019 Global Sustainable Development Report (GSDR), which underscores that the SDGs will not be achieved through narrow sector-specific approaches, that focus on one or a constricted subset of goals. It suggests that we should be smart and find strategic and innovative ways to *use* the inter-linkages between the SDGs to speed up results - minimizing trade-offs and generating positive impacts across multiple goals and targets. The scientific analysis in the GSDR identifies six entry points where the connections among the SDGs are especially strong – one of which is building sustainable food systems and healthy nutrition patterns.

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5. Actions to transform food systems can leverage the complex inter-linkages inherent to the 2030 Agenda and boost progress during the Decade of Action and Delivery, while also supporting recovery from the pandemic.

6. Food systems transformation must focus on providing nutritious foods to a growing population and reversing recent increases in hunger rates. However, it is worth noting that food systems release **29 percent** of global greenhouse gases and account for **70 percent** of freshwater use. It is also estimated that the agriculture sector is responsible for **80 percent** of deforestation.

Furthermore, there is a clear need to better manage links between human health and food systems, given the increasing prevalence of zoonotic diseases, such as COVID-19, which now threatens food security for millions.

7. To ensure equitable access to good nutrition, we must look beyond up-scaling current food production practices in a business-as-usual approach, because more of the same would be incompatible with meeting the Paris Agreement commitments, as well as many of the SDGs. Instead, we need solutions that bring together the best scientific knowledge, global good practices, technical support and private sector involvement to achieve all the potential gains.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

8. It is gratifying to note that over **22,000 people,** from **183 countries,** virtually joined the recent UN Food Systems Summit. Participants at this People's Summit called for countries to renew and accelerate commitment to realizing the SDGs. They urged countries to take a systems approach to food, aligned with the 2030 Agenda, that addresses the complexity of our world.

9. In his Statement of Action on the UN Food Systems Summit, the Secretary-General identified five action areas, that emerged from the Summit process, to help inform the transitions needed to realize the vision of the 2030 Agenda.

These include: (1) Nourish All People; (2) Boost Nature-based Solutions; (3) Advance Equitable Livelihoods, Decent Work and Empowered Communities; (4) Build Resilience to Vulnerabilities, Shocks and Stresses; and (5) Accelerate the Means of Implementation.

10. The Secretary-General announced that the Rome-based Agencies -- FAO, IFAD and WFP -- working with the UN system, civil society and business will jointly lead a coordination hub that draws upon existing UN system capacities to support follow-up to the Food Systems Summit.

11. As we implement these actions, we must engage the people who drive our food systems, such as farmers or herders, in the process of taking transformative action. The business community, from Small and Medium Enterprises to Multinational Corporations, must do its part through promoting responsible business practices and providing innovative solutions to make food systems more sustainable, resilient and equitable, to ensure access for all to a nutritious and healthy diet.

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

12. Science and technology can aid the necessary transformations in food systems. Artificial Intelligence (AI) in particular shows significant promise in addressing some of the

trade-offs in food systems by, for example, improving efficiencies in production, reducing waste and freshwater use, replenishing soils and in offering customized advice to farmers at scale.

13. While such promise is exciting, caution must also be exercised with respect to the potential for adverse consequences, as it is already evident in other applications of AI. Capacity to use AI is unevenly distributed across developed and developing countries. The huge amounts of data needed for AI systems may be hard to collect from regions where broadband Internet is unavailable.

14. There is therefore a risk that AI applications could leave poorer countries, and farmers behind. Automation of farm labour, dependent on AI-driven systems could also displace millions of workers -- such as seasonal labourers employed during planting/harvesting seasons -- requiring investment in other opportunities.

15. It is therefore, important that technology such as AI is evenly shared with developing countries that face the greatest challenges with regard to food security. The importance of equal access to science and technology is illustrated by the deep inequalities we are facing today regarding access to the vaccines. We must rethink our trade and property rights systems in a spirit of global solidarity.

16. While AI and machine learning hold immense promise for transforming food systems, they must be accessible and draw from knowledge and data in particular contexts in order to support nutrition everywhere and improve outputs for small farmers, including women who make up a significant portion of workers in the agricultural sector.

17. I am pleased to inform that there are supportive platforms within the UN, such as the Multi-Stakeholder Science, Technology and Innovation Forum for the SDGs, which offers a space to share knowledge and showcase the many innovations in developing countries that have the potential to be scaled up and shared across regions, including applications of AI for food systems transformation.

18. In addition, capacity-building initiatives led by the UN Inter-Agency Task Team on Science, Technology and Innovation (IATT) and the 10-Member Group to support the Technology Facilitation Mechanism can also be leveraged to ensure that AI in food systems meets specific needs across regions.

19. The online platform -- 2030 Connect -- is another tool and part of the Technology Facilitation Mechanism that provides a space dedicated to facilitating the adaptation and adoption of SDG knowledge and sustainable technologies, especially in Least Developed Countries.

20. Let me conclude by re-assuring that, through the HLPF convened under auspices of ECOSOC, we will continue the dialogue on food security in July 2022 -- given its interrelationships with all other SDGs. The Forum will also consider the use of technology, and I will ensure that the use of AI for promoting food security features prominently in the discussions.

Thank you.