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Statement by

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Making the most of Africa's rural youth dividend

Today's youth generation is the largest ever, with some 1.2 billion young people in the world aged between 15 and 24 – a potential powerhouse of energy and creativity.

It is imperative that these young women and men find decent employment and opportunities to contribute to the growth, social stability and well-being of their communities. Sustainable Development Goal 8 targets full and productive employment for all women and men by 2030, including youth. This is an urgent need, and SDG8 also proposes to substantially reduce the proportion of young people not in employment, education or training by 2020.

That is now just three years away. Where do we stand today?

A huge 70 million young people are unemployed. And 37.7 per cent of working youth live in poverty compared with 26 per cent of working adults. The situation is worst in sub-Saharan Africa where the working youth poverty rate is almost 70 per cent.

The "youth bulge" is especially pronounced in Africa. At a time when the youth population is declining gradually in other regions, it is still growing in sub-Saharan Africa. Sixty per cent of Africa's population today is younger than 25, and by 2050 the region is expected to have the highest concentration of young people in the world.

The situation of young people in rural areas is of particular concern. The scope of the challenge is illustrated by the fact that in Africa, an estimated 11 million young people will enter the job market every year for the next decade -- the majority of them in rural areas, where agriculture is still the biggest source of livelihoods.

Rising urban and rural populations and growing demand for food, as well as changing consumption patterns that increasingly favour higher-value foods, would seem to offer new livelihood opportunities for rural youth and a route out of poverty through agriculture, agro-processing and agro-industry. But young rural women and men face many challenges in terms of productivity, access to decent employment and entrepreneurship.

Although small farms are responsible for up to 80 per cent of production in sub-Saharan Africa, productivity gaps remain high on many of these farms, and farmers – notably women farmers - are often hampered by poor infrastructure and lack of access to markets, finance, inputs and knowledge. The investment gap in Africa for infrastructure alone is estimated at about $48 billion per year, and rural-urban gaps in coverage

and quality of infrastructure are pervasive and affect not only productivity and livelihoods but also quality of life.

In rural areas, young people are particularly disadvantaged, for example in access to finance and land, and young rural women are often at the greatest disadvantage in this regard, as well as being most penalized by poor infrastructure – leading to a heavy burden of tasks like fetching fuel and water. Unpaid care responsibilities and such context-specific social practices as early marriage create further barriers to their advancement. In addition to increased access to resources and services, young rural women and men also need to be able to develop the skills that enable them to take advantage of livelihood opportunities.

Clearly there is an urgent need for investments that build dynamic rural economies. Such economies will provide decent job and entrepreneurial opportunities to rural youth, both in the agriculture sector and beyond, including in the food systems that link rural and urban areas.

A youthful population can offer a nation a creative, energetic and entrepreneurial workforce. However, when young people are not able to find jobs and earn decent wages where they live, they are also more likely to migrate to urban centres or abroad in pursuit of work and better standards of living than their parents.

The fact that as much as 40 per cent of international remittances are sent to rural areas suggests that rural-urban inequalities and lack of employment prospects are taking a toll on rural communities.

Clearly, there is a pressing need for governments and the development community to invest in rural Africa to create quality economic opportunities for young people and make migration a choice rather than a necessity. Such investment would have multiple benefits, for example enabling nations to meet their commitments to the Sustainable Development Goals for poverty eradication (SDG 1), ending hunger (SDG 2), as well as SDG 8.

This takes on a special significance when one considers that rural areas are home to 80 per cent of those living in extreme poverty and the vast majority of the world's most hungry citizens.

A strong agricultural sector provides a solid foundation for economic growth, rural youth employment, and improved food and nutrition security in many developing countries, particularly across Africa. It also plays a critical role in tackling climate change and restoring fragile ecosystems. For all these reasons, rural development - including agricultural development – that provides opportunities for decent livelihoods and improved quality of life for young rural women and men is also critical to address some of the main drivers of migration from rural areas.

Studies indicate that GDP growth generated by agriculture is at least 3 times more effective in reducing poverty than GDP growth in any other sector; and for sub-Saharan Africa, the poverty reducing effect of investment in agriculture is estimated to be as much as 11 times higher than other sectors.

IFAD's experience has shown that when given the opportunity, young people in Africa, as in other regions, can make a living from agriculture when given the right support and when there is a more level playfield in terms of access to assets, services and markets. In West and Central Africa, for example, IFAD provided training and business development services for young people involved in farming and other rural enterprises. In a project undertaken with the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA), young "agripreneurs" have started new ventures in Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kenya and Tanzania.

In a global survey conducted in 2014, more than 70 per cent of young farmers said that access to finance was their main barrier. In Nigeria, the IFAD-supported Community-Based Natural Resource Management Programme provides seed capital to young people from very poor families. They also receive training in business management and credit handling, and prepare a business plan that responds to local demand. This is then submitted to the local community development committee for financing. Thus the programme addresses not only the need for money but the support, skills and financial literacy which are also critical to developing successful businesses.

Young rural people must be at the heart of the 2030 Agenda. To achieve balanced and inclusive economic growth and truly "leave no one behind," it is essential that governments, development institutions and the private sector recognize the potential for young rural women and men to lift themselves and their communities out of poverty.

But to do so, they need targeted investments and policies that allow them to innovate and prosper, whether on or off the farm. This is particularly true in Africa, where the so-called "youth bulge" must be seen in terms of the potential of millions of young women and men to build a sustainable future. That future depends on the availability of decent work, and equality of opportunity, which we all must play a part in providing.