



SPEECH BY THE HONOURABLE MINISTER FOR AGRICULTURE, LAND REFORM AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT, MRS. THOKO DIDIZA OF THE REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA AT THE 24th CONFERENCE OF THE OIE REGIONAL COMMISSION FOR AFRICA, 9TH FEBRUARY 2021

Hon. Mr. Fanomezantsoa Lucien Ranarivelo, Minister of Agriculture, Livestock and Fisheries of Madagascar,

H.E. Mrs. Josefa Sacko, Commissioner Department of Rural Economy and Agriculture, African Union Commission,

Dr. Mark Schipp, President of the OIE international committee,

Dr. Monique Eloit, Director General of the OIE,

Dr N'Lemba Honore Mabela, President of the OIE Regional Commission for Africa and OIE Delegate of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Members of the Commission (Bureau),

Representatives of all International Organizations,

Country Delegates of the OIE,

Invited Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen

I am greatly honored to have been invited to open this 24th Conference of the OIE Regional Commission for Africa.

I convey to you the warmest greetings from the Government and the people of the Republic of South Africa.

The Republic of South Africa has a great respect for the OIE and is proud to be associated with this organization that has a noble aim to raise the profile of animal health, welfare and is considering issues related to wildlife and environment which are the basic tenets of a “One Health” concept.

This conference is taking place at the right time after the Africa Continental Free Trade Agreement commenced on the 1st of January 2021. The Africa Continental Free Trade Agreement create a single continental market for goods and services, that brings an opportunity for African countries to cooperate in the field of animal health amongst other fields, in order to facilitate trade in animals and animal products, whilst safeguarding animal and human health. I note that amongst other issues that may be discussed in this conference are harmonizing measures for trade on animals and animal products. This conference should offer the delegates an opportunity to already start considering what needs to be done fundamentally influence transformation of Africa's economy

Your Excellency's, ladies and gentlemen, animal diseases in general continue to be a serious impediment to economic progress in the world and a threat to food security. In particular, especially throughout the developing world, livestock are important in supporting the livelihoods of poor farmers, their families and labourers. As a result, enhancement of livestock production systems has a great impact on the improvement of lives and livelihoods.

All over the world, the benefits derived from animals may be lost if timely appropriate steps are not taken to curb the spread of animal diseases. It is becoming increasingly evident that the public veterinary sectors of the World have to work hand in hand with their private counterparts, para-veterinary professionals and farmers to diagnose, control and reduce the impact of animal diseases on development and public health.

I know that that the mandate and strategic objectives of the OIE that were established with the foundation of this organization have gradually evolved since 1924. The OIE's mandate in 1924 was to prevent the spread of animal diseases throughout the world. This mandate has over the years been gradually improved and expanded to include the concepts of improving animal health and welfare worldwide and went as far as assisting human development and significantly reducing the risk of transmission of diseases between animals and humans. This improved and expanded mandate could not have been more relevant and befitting as is the case now with the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Covid-19 pandemic and the containment measures taken by all of us in different countries has affected the way business and general activities are conducted, including the way in which meetings and conferences are organized and held. In a way, the Covid-19 pandemic has forced us to fast track the implementation of the 4th industrial revolution, which may have dragged on for a number of years under a non Covid-19 pandemic world. Virtual meetings and conferences have become the norm, and these have been successfully implemented across the world without compromising the standards of decisions being made.

I am glad to see that the OIE still continues to hold their statutory meetings and conferences to facilitate decision making and still be able to determine the standards of animal health world-wide despite the challenges caused by the pandemic.

My country, as was the case in many other countries, was hit very hard by the pandemic. The pandemic has affected us in so many different ways, ranging from the most painful experience of losing our very dearest family members, friends and colleagues to affecting business operations such as trade in agricultural produce and products within and amongst countries, and logistics of conducting business such as transportation. Borders are being closed and increasingly, it has become much difficult to obtain all the products needed to conduct business, including reagents we need in our diagnostic laboratories to render the services we have been rendering in the past and thereby facilitating international trade. We have to find new ways to facilitate the movement of agricultural goods and food in pandemic times like the one we are experiencing.

Companies are affected to a large extent by the pandemic restrictions and as a result, many jobs are being lost and this is creating more difficulties for especially developing countries. In some cases, the export of certain strategic agricultural products has been prohibited by some countries in pursuit of food security of its citizens first. These challenges have thrown several of our people below the poverty line. The attainment of the sustainable development goals by 2030 as agreed to by the United Nations General Assembly in 2015, will most definitely be much more difficult to realize.

In the African continent and elsewhere in the world, where poverty and food security were already high, the advent of the pandemic has compounded the food insecurity threat and made it unbearable for many poor citizens. The pandemic has exposed the

sometimes hidden realities of hardships across the world, including lack of food reserves for many poor people to survive the Covid-19 lockdown restrictions, lack of clean water for consumption and sanitation.

It has been said by some that when the Covid-19 pandemic is over, the world must not return to the way it was prior to the outbreak, but to a better place where there is much more equality and improved livelihoods for all citizens of this planet. This can be achieved through learning from the comradery that is currently at an exemplary level across all countries in fighting this pandemic. The same model should be implemented in fighting the poverty pandemic, which has been there for much more than the Covid-19 and can be argued that it has decimated much more people over the years.

I encourage the OIE to work together with other organizations to contribute in helping to win this battle with the invisible enemy and also think of innovative ways to prevent spillages of viruses and other pathogens across animals and humans to avoid similar situations like what we are currently experiencing from happening again.

Not only are these interventions relevant for this pandemic, with the emergence and re-emergence of important animal diseases, some of which are potentially zoonotic, surveillance has become an essential tool for early disease detection which paves a way to a rapid response against such diseases.

A well-functioning diseases surveillance system provides information for planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of health intervention programmes for both animals and humans. Similar statements can be made regarding the environment to complete the “One Health” approach.

Based on the OIE recommendations and guidelines, many countries adopted ideal packages of epidemio-surveillance principles. However, many constraints and impediments are encountered in the implementation of these principles. These constraints include amongst others, financial, logistical, technological constraints and lack of technical skills.

All of us must develop well thought out interventions to limit the impact of these constraints on animal diseases control and public health.

We have to use available communication technologies to disseminate information to everyone in the world for purposes of early warning. This will make it easy for instant reporting of diseases, reducing the reaction times of the veterinary services and other organisations.

The veterinary services should still be able to function within the confines of the law despite the challenges experienced in a pandemic. The veterinary services should still be able to perform the necessary services like diseases surveillance and reporting. As you may know some of these functions are done to ensure that there is sufficient and safe food for everyone. My government had at the beginning of the pandemic ensured that the veterinary services were still able to conduct the necessary work by declaring veterinary services as essential services. Despite the challenges, we still were able act on and to report diseases outbreaks.

We can no longer characterize animal diseases challenges as challenges of the developing world, considering the current situation and with the understanding that diseases know no borders.

Knowing very well that the pandemic we are experiencing now may be categorized as a human health problem, the world needs all available expertise including the veterinary expertise to help bring the pandemic situation under control. I call for all these expertise and knowledge to be made available to the relevant committees that are set to deal with various aspects of the pandemic at national and international levels and help quickly resolve the pandemic.

It is a known fact that veterinarians and para-veterinary professionals are experienced handling and resolving various animal diseases outbreaks and such expertise in outbreak response management needs to be brought onto the table to combat the Covid-19 pandemic. This also means sharing of common diagnostic, therapeutic and preventive resources with the human health counterparts.

This is in addition to all your efforts to beef up the veterinary services and build up the expertise in terms of the Performance of Veterinary Services (PVS) exercise and efforts to standardize global veterinary education.

Let me once again thank you all for allowing me to address this conference, I wish the OIE a productive and successful conference for the coming three days. I am confident that good resolutions will come out of the discussions that will take place during this conference.

Thank you for your attention