

African Ministerial Conference on the Environment

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Remarks by

Naoko Ishii, CEO and Chairperson, Global Environment Facility

Excellencies, Ministers, Colleagues and Friends, good morning to all of you.

It is a great pleasure for me to be back at the Africa Ministerial Conference on Environment meeting and have an opportunity to address you today.

If there is one message that I would like to leave you all with this morning, it is the following: the job you are doing is the most important job of all, but you cannot be successful on your own!

Back in 2015, when the world came together and adopted the Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris Climate Change Agreement, it acknowledged that the global commons—our land, oceans, climate, forests, biodiversity—are the very foundation for all our aspirations for growth and prosperity, for our economies and our societies.

This is true everywhere, but in particular in Africa, where about half of all jobs are in agriculture—80% of them small-holders—and therefore directly dependent on natural capital for their livelihoods. At the same time, droughts and storms and changing weather patterns are threatening ecosystems and the vital services they provide to large populations, undermining food security, fueling conflicts over limited natural resources and contributing to uprooting and migration of many communities.

Against this backdrop it is easy to see why the job of ministers of the environment is so important.

But it is also important to recognize that ministers of environment cannot be successful on their own.

To safeguard the global commons and to put us on a path to achieve the SDGs we need a fundamental transformation in our key economic systems.

We need to transform our food system to dramatically reduce its foot print on the environment, and make food production much more resilient to a changing climate.

We need to further accelerate the energy transition: 2015 was the second year in a row when globally newly installed power capacity based on renewable energy exceeded newly fossil-fuel based power generation capacity—but renewables still only account for about 3 percent of total energy consumption.

We need to transform our cities. Africa is the region in the world that is urbanizing the fastest—the decisions we take today about city planning are absolutely critical for the trajectory of the next 50 years.

At the broadest level we need to transform our economies from the current linear “take-make-waste” model to a “circular” model in which we dramatically reduce resource use in our economies.

These are economy-wide transformations that require an integrated approach which brings not only the whole of governments together, but a broader coalition of different stakeholders, including the business sector, city mayors, financial institutions and more.

Ministers of environment can be central players in these transformations—but must work across other sectors to make a real change.

I am very excited about the leadership on these issues that I see from many African countries. And I am very pleased that the Global Environment Facility in many cases has been able to support these efforts.

For example, in the GEF’s current funding cycle—GEF-6—we have supported a large-scale food-security program in 12 drylands countries in Africa that aims to build resilience and improve productivity of local food-systems for the benefit of small-holder farmers’ livelihoods.

In urban development, we are working with several African cities as part of our global sustainable cities program helping laying the foundations for creating the compact, coordinated and connected cities that Africa will need in the future.

We are also helping to push innovation, new technologies, and new ways of catalyzing finance for the environment. For example, we have provided risk-willing capital for the Africa Renewable Energy Fund, which invests in small-scale renewable energy projects across Africa.

We always congratulate African leaders on respecting natural capital as a basis for their sustainable development. We see that in the efforts to combat illegal wildlife trafficking, which not only jeopardizes the survival of many iconic species, but also undermines local livelihoods. I am pleased to see that our illegal wildlife program has now grown to include 10 African countries and 8 Asian countries.

How to nurture the blue economy is another promising area. We have supported the Government of Seychelles to prepare for the issuance of the world's first Blue Bond, which will help them to sustainably capitalize some of the benefits of their blue economy. Last week, our host country for this meeting, Gabon, announced the establishment of Africa's largest marine protected area!

Looking ahead we need to build on, and accelerate, this progress. We at the GEF are right now in the process of designing our next four-year investment program which will begin implementation in June 2018.

Excellencies, now is the time to aim high. The stakes are simply too high to continue with the status quo. We need to come together and tackle the root causes of the deterioration of our environment. None of us can do it alone. I look forward to working with you and all of your colleagues and counterparts as we together lift our response to this enormous challenge.

Thank you.