

**OPENING REMARKS BY HIS MAJESTY KING LETSIE III OF THE KINGDOM OF LESOTHO AT THE HIGHLEVEL PANEL OF EXPERTS SESSION ON OVERCOMING THE FOOD SECURITY AND NUTRITION ROADBLOCKS IN SOCIAL PROTECTION RESPONSES TO COVID-19 - OCTOBER 6, 2020**

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**DISTINGUISHED DELEGATES,**

**LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,**

IT IS A REAL PLEASURE AND HONOUR FOR ME TO KICK-START THESE IMPORTANT DISCUSSIONS ON **“OVERCOMING FOOD SECURITY AND NUTRITION ROADBLOCKS IN SOCIAL PROTECTION RESPONSES TO COVID-19”**. I AM EQUALLY HONOURED AND GRATEFUL TO BE JOINED BY **HER EXCELLENCY MS VALERIE N.GUARNIERI**, WFP’S ASSISTANT EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR AND **HER EXCELLENCY MS LOLA CASTRO**, WFP’S REGIONAL DIRECTOR FOR SOUTHERN AFRICA REGION WHO ARE CONVENING THIS VALUABLE DISCUSSION ON BEHALF OF THE UNITED NATIONS WORLD FOOD PROGRAMME.

AS A UNITED NATIONS SPECIAL AMBASSADOR FOR NUTRITION, I AM DELIGHTED TO DELIVER THESE OPENING REMARKS FOR THIS IMPORTANT EVENT THAT SEEKS TO ADDRESS THE CHALLENGES TO FOOD AND NUTRITION SECURITY IN THE COVID-19 ERA AND BEYOND. I HAVE NOTED WITH GRATITUDE THAT THIS EVENT WILL BE GRACED BY THE PRESENCE OF A LINE-UP OF RENOWNED EXPERTS THAT COME FROM ALL OVER THE WORLD, AND WHO WILL NO DOUBT MAKE VALUABLE AND INFORMED INTERVENTIONS AND PRESENTATIONS DURING THE COURSE OF THIS SESSION.

THE ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION IS FRAMED IN THE CONTEXT OF THE GLOBAL E-CONFERENCE ENTITLED: THE COVID-19 CRISIS AS AN OPPORTUNITY: WHAT'S NEXT FOR SOCIAL PROTECTION? WHICH IS IN CELEBRATION OF THE FIFTH ANNIVERSARY OF THE **SOCIALPROTECTION.ORG** KNOWLEDGE AND LEARNING HUB, WHICH WAS FOUNDED AT THE REQUEST OF THE G20 DEVELOPMENT WORKING GROUP BACK IN 2015.

**DISTINGUISHED PARTICIPANTS,**

IN THE WAKE OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND ITS FAR REACHING SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACT, THE ROUNDTABLE SESSION AIMS TO DISCUSS THREE CRITICAL AND TIMELY QUESTIONS : **WHAT** ARE THE ROADBLOCKS IMPEDING THE ABILITY OF SOCIAL PROTECTION RESPONSES TO TACKLE THE VICIOUS TRAP OF POVERTY, HUNGER AND MALNUTRITION; **WHY** SHOULD WE BE CONCERNED ABOUT THEM; AND **HOW** CAN WE SUCCESSFULLY OVERCOME THEM IN ORDER TO ENHANCE THE CATALYTIC RELATION BETWEEN FOOD SECURITY, NUTRITION AND SOCIAL PROTECTION INTERVENTIONS.

AS THE TITLE OF THE CONFERENCE INDICATES, THIS DISCUSSION OFFERS A FORUM IN WHICH WE CAN ENVISAGE HOW TO TURN THE CURRENT PANDEMIC INTO A REAL OPPORTUNITY. AN OPPORTUNITY, TO BUILD AND TO STRENGTHEN CROSS-SECTORAL AND EFFECTIVE COALITIONS THAT WILL WORK TOWARDS ELIMINATION OF CHRONIC HUNGER AND POVERTY.

HAVING SUCH AN EMINENT PANEL OF EXPERTS AT HAND FILLS ME WITH OPTIMISM THAT WE WILL WORK TOGETHER, GUIDED BY CONSIDERABLE KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERIENCE, TO DEAL WITH THE

CHALLENGES THAT WE FACE IN RELATION TO NUTRITION AND FOOD SECURITY. THE COMPLEXITY OF POVERTY AND HUNGER AS SOCIAL PROBLEMS MAKES MULTI-SECTORAL AND MULTI-STAKEHOLDER COALITIONS A NECESSITY. THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC HAS BROUGHT WITH IT UNPRECEDENTED SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHALLENGES THAT COMPEL US TO WORK TOGETHER EVEN CLOSER THAN BEFORE.

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON ECONOMIES AND HEALTH SYSTEMS GLOBALLY HAS BEEN DRASTIC AND ALL ENCOMPASSING. WHILE CONTAINMENT MEASURES HAVE SAVED LIVES, THEY HAVE ALSO TRIGGERED ECONOMIC RECESSIONS AND SEVERE IMPACTS ON COMMUNITIES AND INDIVIDUALS.

WE ARE NOW FACED WITH URBAN HUNGER AND VULNERABILITIES WHICH WE HAVE ALWAYS KNOWN EXISTED, BUT WE WERE NOT WELL PREPARED TO ADDRESS. IN SOME COUNTRIES, THE PANDEMIC HAS ADDED YET ANOTHER LAYER OF SUFFERING AND COMPLEXITY TO EXISTING AND LONG-STANDING CRISES, WORSENING THE PREVALENCE OF HUNGER, POVERTY AND MALNUTRITION.

THE NUMBER OF PEOPLE AFFECTED BY HUNGER HAS GRADUALLY RISEN SINCE 2014. MODEST GAINS OF THE PAST YEARS IN RELATION TO NUTRITION AND FOOD SECURITY HAVE BEEN REVERSED. IT IS OBVIOUS THAT NATIONS OF THE WORLD NEED TO REDOUBLE THEIR EFFORTS IN ORDER TO ACHIEVE THE ZERO HUNGER GOAL BY 2030. THE SITUATION REMAINS DIRE. AN ESTIMATED 690 MILLION PEOPLE IN THE WORLD ARE HUNGRY – AN INCREASE OF ALMOST 60 MILLION PEOPLE OVER A PERIOD OF FIVE YEARS!!

WFP ESTIMATES THAT, IN 79 COUNTRIES WHERE IT WORKS, THE HUNBER OF ACUTELY FOOD INSECURE PEOPLE COULD INCREASE BY 80% FROM 149 MILLION DURING PRE-COVID 19 PERIOD, TO OVER A QUARTER OF A BILLION BY THE END OF 2020. EVERY LOW AND MIDDLE INCOME COUNTRY FACES THIS CHALLENGE.

BRINGING IT CLOSER HOME IN THE SOUTHERN AFRICAN REGION, WHERE I COME FROM, THE COVID-19 CRISIS ALONE IS LIKELY TO REVERSE THE GAINS MADE TOWARDS THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS (SDGs). THE PANDEMIC HAS EXACERBATED THE SITUATION THAT WAS ALREADY PRECARIOUS. FOOD

INSECURITY IN MY REGION WAS ALREADY ALARMINGLY HIGH EVEN PRIOR TO COVID-19 PANDEMIC, WITH A RECORD OF 45 MILLION FOOD INSECURE PEOPLE.

DESPITE THESE DAUNTING CHALLENGES, WE HAVE SEEN HOW COUNTRIES HAVE REACTED TO BUFFER THE IMPACTS OF THIS UNPRECEDENTED CRISIS BY STRENGTHENING SOCIAL PROTECTION SYSTEMS AND INTERVENTIONS TO REACH THOSE IN NEED. IN A PERIOD OF JUST OVER SIX MONTHS SINCE THE BEGINNING OF THE PANDEMIC, A SIGNIFICANT NUMBER OF COUNTRIES HAVE PLANNED OR PUT IN PLACE OVER ONE THOUSAND SOCIAL PROTECTION MEASURES IN RESPONSE TO THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC. THE INCREASE IN SOCIAL PROTECTION SPENDING IS EXPECTED TO EXCEED THE LEVEL OF EXPENDITURE THAT OCCURRED AS PART OF THE GLOBAL RESPONSE TO THE 2008 RECESSION.

**DISTINGUISHED LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,**

THE PANDEMIC HAS BROUGHT TO THE FORE THE IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL PROTECTION SYSTEMS TO SHIELD THE POPULATION AGAINST, NOT ONLY THE HEALTH CRISIS, BUT ALSO AGAINST HUNGER AND MALNUTRITION. AS LIVELIHOODS ARE PUT UNDER STRAIN AND THE MULTI-FACETED SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC KICK-IN, THE ABILITY OF HOUSEHOLDS TO PROVIDE NUTRITIOUS DIETS FOR THEMSELVES AND THEIR FAMILIES IS EVEN MORE COMPROMISED.

WHILE MEASURES TO CONTAIN THE VIRUS ARE PUT IN PLACE AROUND THE GLOBE, THERE ARE PEOPLE WHO ARE MORE CONCERNED ABOUT DYING FROM POVERTY AND HUNGER THAN FROM THE VIRUS ITSELF. THE INABILITY OF MEMBERS OF THE COMMUNITY TO MEET THEIR FOOD AND NUTRITION NEEDS ALSO COMPROMISES THEIR IMMUNITY AND ABILITY TO FIGHT AND DEFEAT THE VIRUS.

THIS CRISIS HAS OPENED OUR EYES TO SEE THOSE MEMBERS OF SOCIETY WHO, HAVE BEEN EXCLUDED FROM OUR SOCIAL PROTECTION SYSTEMS. THIS NECESSTATES THAT NEW AND

INNOVATIVE WAYS BE ESTABLISHED TO EXTEND ADEQUATE AND HOLISTIC PROTECTION TO PREVIOUSLY UNREACHED AREAS. THIS UNDERSCORES THE IMPORTANCE OF PUTTING FOOD SECURITY AND NUTRITION AT THE CENTRE OF SOCIAL PROTECTION EFFORTS.

WE NEED TO MAKE SOCIAL PROTECTION SYSTEMS WORK FOR FOOD SECURITY AND NUTRITION AS WE FOSTER SYNERGIES ACROSS SECTORS, POLICIES AND PROGRAMMES TO BRING ABOUT HUMAN CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT AND MEANINGFUL CHANGE TO OUR SOCIETIES AT LARGE.

LET ME EMPHASISE THIS POINT FURTHER BY QUOTING STUDIES DEVELOPED AND LAUNCHED BY THE WORLD FOOD PROGRAMME AND THE ECONOMIC POLICY AND RESEARCH INSTITUTE IN MY COUNTRY AND REGION WHERE THEY SAY AN **“APPROPRIATE SOCIAL PROTECTION STRATEGY NEEDS TO RECOGNISE THE ESSENTIAL ROLE FOOD SECURITY AND NUTRITION PLAY IN BUILDING A PROSPEROUS SOCIETY ABLE TO NOURISH ALL ITS PEOPLE, AND FOR WHICH NUTRITION IS THE FOUNDATION OF THE CAPABILITIES THAT SUSTAIN THIS PROSPERITY OVER TIME”**.



I IMPLORE ALL PARTICIPANTS AT THIS EVENT TO REFLECT ON THIS VISION AS YOU EMBARK ON AND CONTINUE THIS CONVERSATION IN YOUR ORGANISATIONS, COUNTRIES AND COMUNITIES. A CONVERSATION THAT CAN LEAD US TO FINDING THE INNOVATIVE AND HOME-GROWN SUSTAINABLE SOLUTIONS TO OUT-ROOT HUNGER AND DEPRIVATION WITHIN OUR LIFETIMES.

IN CONCLUSION, I THANK YOU MOST SINCERELY FOR YOUR COMMITMENT AND DEDICATION TO MAKE THIS A BETTER WORLD FOR ALL. I NOW LEAVE YOU TO A PRODUCTIVE AND INVIGORATING DISCUSSION THAT COMES TEN DAYS AHEAD OF WHAT WILL CERTAINLY BE AN UNUSUAL WORLD FOOD DAY. IT IS MY EXPECTATION THAT THE KEY OUTCOMES OF THIS IMPORTANT SESSION WILL INSPIRE DECISIVE ACTION BY GOVERNMENTS ALL AROUND THE GLOBE IN RELATION TO FOOD SECURITY AND NUTRITION.

**I THANK YOU ALL AND WISH YOU FRUITFUL DELIBERATIONS.**