

**AFRICAN UNION**

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**STATEMENT BY H.E. CHAIRPERSON OF THE COMMISSION OF  
THE AFRICAN UNION**

**ON THE OCCASION OF THE COMMEMORATION OF THE AFRICA DAY**

**25 MAY 2008**

Fellow Africans,  
Friends and Partners of Africa,

Every year, the Commission celebrates 'Africa Day' under different themes relevant to the development of Africa. For example the theme for 2006 was “Working together for integration and development”, whereas that of 2007 was observed under the theme “Let’s strengthen Africa’s place in the world through strategic, balanced and responsible partnerships”.

This year, we are celebrating Africa Day by recommitting ourselves to addressing persisting and emerging social issues such as water, sanitation and health in the context of achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in Africa. By choosing “Meeting the Millennium Development Goals on Water and Sanitation” for this year's commemoration, our Heads of State and Government reaffirm their determination to step up efforts in solving problems related to water and sanitation as vital ingredients of a healthy living in Africa. The Commission has recognized the increasing disease burden on Africa attributed to environmental deterioration, extreme poverty, and

inadequate personal and community hygiene. Accordingly, the Commission has elaborated a number of policies and strategies, which are being implemented by Member States, Regional Economic Communities and other partners in the health sector. The Commission also continues to implement, with undiluted dedication, programmes and strategies developed to promote sustainable environmental management and improving the adaptive capacities of the African people. For example, the AU Commission, in collaboration with the UN-Habitat, organized the African Ministerial Conference on Housing and Urban Development (AMCHUD) in 2005. The major thrust of this Conference was to improve housing and the living conditions of people in cities and towns with adequate access to water and sanitation and with the view to reduce the growth of slums. This was in conformity with a MDG 7 and also the Maputo Decision of the AU Summit in 2003 “On Promoting the Development of Sustainable Cities and Towns in Africa”. Implementation of the recommendations of AMCHUD by all stakeholders is well underway.

Similarly, following the adoption of the landmark decision on climate change by the AU Summit of January 2007, the Climate for Development in Africa Program is being developed as a coping strategy to minimize the impact of climate change on the continent especially on the water sector. In adapting to climate change and variability, Africa needs the support of all and sundry. Capacity building, especially at the level of Member States, RECs, and the AU Commission is of particular importance for the successful implementation of adaptive strategies. As you may know, the Commission is driving forward the process of implementing the Green Wall for the Sahara Initiative, which has also witnessed importance milestones with the elaboration of an implementation plan to address the issue of land degradation and desertification in the arid and semi-arid zones of Africa.

Of equal importance is the implementation of the Disaster Risk Reduction Strategy in Africa for which, a Strategy and Action Plan has also been developed and adopted by the relevant organs of the African Union. An Implementation plan is in the process of being elaborated.

The Commission is now partnering with the Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery of the World Bank and International Strategy for Disaster Risk Reduction of the United Nations in the capacity reinforcement of the Regional Economic Communities and the Member States. On the issue of sustainable water management in the continent, the Commission of the African Union has been instrumental in federating the various River and Lake Basin Authorities under the aegis of African Network of Basin Organisations whose Bureau has been adopted by the African Ministers' Council on Water as its sub-committee on Trans boundary waters. Policy and institutional framework guidelines with regard to sustainable water management have already been developed and disseminated.

For us to avert the threats posed by environmental degradation, particularly water and sanitation problems, it is imperative that Member States formulate and implement appropriate policy and legislative frameworks that would ensure the sustainable management of the environment and to improve water and sanitation conditions in the continent. It is therefore essential that environmental issues are mainstreamed into the national planning processes and be allotted the necessary financial and human resources. There is a pressing need for a renewed focus on increasing Africa's ability to adapt to, and to mitigate the disastrous impacts of disasters to avoid deteriorating water and sanitation infrastructures, hence avoid water and sanitation related diseases, malaria in particular. The necessary frameworks for advocating streamlining environmental issues into the national development agendas exist at the levels of the AUC and the NEPAD. The Commission and the NEPAD Secretariat are available to support Member States in their mainstreaming efforts.

Furthermore, the search for sustainable and alternative energy sources to lessen our dependency on the biotic resources and variable and unaffordable oil prices remains ever urgent. Deforestation continues to increase at an alarming annual rate of 53 million hectares to satisfy the growing need for food, wood and wood fuel. In light of this, it is important to recall the high level consultative meeting organized by the Commission in

July 2007 in collaboration with the Government of Brazil and UNIDO to assess the prospects of biofuel development in Africa with a view to reducing our dependency on wood fuel and to conserve forests and other biological resources of Africa to enhance water security amongst other things.

In conclusion, I express my sincere concern for the health of all those people who are, unfortunately, victims of water and sanitation shortages, as well as high food prices and limited access to health facilities, and assure them of the unflinching resolve of the Commission of the African Union to advocate for sustainable management of the African environment through the adoption and implementation of suitable environmental policies and frameworks in the continent.

The Commission remains available at the service of Member States and partners to lead the drive to reinvigorate the continent's capacity to mitigate and adapt to the challenges of water and sanitation degradation aggravated by many environmental and socio-economic conditions. We hope that you will all join us in meeting these daunting challenges, because, together we can overcome them.

I wish you all a successful and memorable occasion.