



Speech by

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- Mr Chairman, Prime Minister, Commissioners of ECOWAS and the UEMOA, Ministers, Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen.
- Let me first of all thank the government of Burkina Faso for hosting this important meeting. We appreciate your hospitality all the more since we know it is election time in your country. Thank you for having nonetheless made this gathering possible in the context of West Africa Week. And let me thank the Sahel and West Africa Club, and its President, Francois-Xavier De Donnea, for leading us into the subject so expertly.
- It is a great pleasure for me to be with you today in Ouagadougou. It is a great pleasure for me personally to return to your region (earlier this year I was able to visit Niger and Chad). But it is also important for me to be here given the importance we as the European Union attach to partnership with this region in the context of our Sahel Strategy. And indeed given the importance the international community as a whole attaches to working with the Sahel, of which we saw proof not least at the UN General Assembly last September, with the high-level Sahel summit which I was able to participate in.

- But we are here today for a good and specific reason. The recurrent food and nutrition crises that have hit the Sahel with increasing frequency in recent years. The underlying drivers of those crises, and climate change in particular, are not going away. Quite the contrary. The amplitude of climate change in the coming years looks likely to surpass our most extreme predictions. And all the evidence suggests the kind of crises you have seen in recent years will be getting more frequent and more intense. The result, each and every time, is not only immense human suffering, but also major setbacks to development.
- So there really is only one way forward, and that is of course to strengthen the coping capacity of those who are most vulnerable to these crises. That is exactly why we collectively decided to start AGIR-Sahel earlier this year. And it is great to see this alliance taking another step towards fruition. Many of you participated in the meeting we hosted in Brussels last June. Since then, a lot of work has taken place to take forward the resilience agenda in the Sahel – by the regional organizations, by governments in your region, by the producer organizations and civil society, by the Senior Expert Group. Thanks to all that work, we now have much greater clarity on where this alliance is heading.



- But let me step back briefly to look at why we collectively brought AGIR into being in the first place. This year, all of us together – the national governments, the regional organizations, the UN, NGOs, and donors – managed to avoid another massive humanitarian crisis in the Sahel. Over 18 m people were affected by food and nutrition insecurity. Over 800,000 acutely malnourished children under five have received treatment for severe acute malnutrition. Half of them would probably have died without specialized care. So a catastrophe was averted. Moreover, the rains have been good this year. So the prospect for the harvests will be good.
- That is the good news. The bad news is that many have lost their livelihoods. Many of the poorest families, with limited access to land and other assets, have incurred great debt levels to survive. They depend on the markets to obtain food, and have to use much of their income to buy insufficient quantities of foodstuffs. So their resilience is at a very low level. With food prices high, they may once again fall into crisis next year. The early signals for 2013 are actually quite worrying. Even if the harvests have been good, there could be a serious issue with access to food. So there is real urgency to the issue.

- And this of course is where AGIR comes in. To address the root causes behind these crises. To lift the most vulnerable people out of recurrent crises. To lift them out of dependence on emergency aid.
- That applies in particular to the poorest 20% of the population, who regularly make up 80% of those in need of emergency assistance, any year, 'good' or 'bad'. Those who are most regularly subject to malnutrition. And over the past years in the Sahel, we have collectively identified ways of building their resilience. By ensuring that development also reaches these very vulnerable groups. By targeting the ultra-poor with social transfers, in the form of cash, and in the form of nutrition supplements for young children and for pregnant and breastfeeding women. Or by exempting children under 5 as well as pregnant and breast-feeding women from health user fees. Research done right here in Burkina Faso confirms that this is effective.
- But we also need to look at education. At access to education for girls in particular. At delivering adequate family planning services. There have been promising trials in Niger in particular.

- In the long term, development is the most effective resilience-builder for the most vulnerable. And that takes time. But the basic message from Burkina and Niger and other countries in the Sahel is: you can already do resilience today. And it can have a very rapid impact.
- How can AGIR make a difference towards this ambitious agenda? As a next step after today, it will be good to see agreement on the specific objectives, and a shared understanding of the gaps – with a finalized Road Map and National Resilience Strategies. We should also try to agree on clear targets. That should be possible within the next 12 months. Within five years, it should be possible to see productive seasonal safety nets in place at the national level, to catch the most vulnerable before they fall into crisis in the hungry period. Also within five years, we should work towards an increase in food production substantially – and towards streamlining market mechanisms in the individual countries and in the West Africa Region to reduce distortion and manipulation.
- All of this will require decisive action by national governments. There are some remarkable schemes already in place. I am thinking of Niger's 3N Initiative. And I look forward to seeing during my visit how you are building resilience here in Burkina. At the same time, the Sahel is



characterized by a high degree of regional interdependence. Hence the regional organizations have a key role to play in support of national efforts.

- Where do donors come in? Many of us are already supporting resilience in the Sahel. We will seek to map that support – not least so as to identify possible gaps. Speaking for the EU, I can tell you that we are now stepping up to the plate. Over the coming three years, we are putting around € 500 m into resilience-building in the Sahel. Moreover, food and nutrition security, including resilience, is emerging as a central theme in the programming for the next European Development Fund in your region. It is too early to put specific figures to this – but we are now starting to see the objectives of AGIR reflected in very concrete terms in our development programming for the Sahel. We also recently adopted a new EU policy on support for resilience. You should hold us to this commitment. AGIR is not an empty alliance. It is about a new partnership in support of your efforts and responsibility to address the structural causes and resilience challenges. We need to stay this course together for the long haul if we are to have an impact. Just as Niger has the "3N", so AGIR is about the "3 As": Awareness, Advocacy, and Action. We have the awareness. We are

right now doing the advocacy. We need to move onto the action.

- Of course, while we will hopefully make progress on building resilience, we will have to continue to address urgent needs. Resilience will not come at the expense of emergency response where it is needed. And the crisis in Mali of course risks exacerbating existing vulnerabilities. As humanitarian Commissioner, I will stay on the ball on this.
- Mr Chairman, I look forward to the adoption by this meeting of a strong political Declaration. And I look forward to continuing to work with all of you on that basis to turn resilience for the most vulnerable people of the Sahel into a reality. Thank you very much.

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