ADDRESS OF H.E. Dr. AMANI ABOU-ZEID, COMMISSIONER OF INFRASTRUCTURE AND ENERGY OF THE AFRICAN UNION COMMISSION

ON THE OCCASION OF THE

63rd UNWTO COMMISSION FOR AFRICA VIRTUAL MEETING

08 JUNE 2020
I would like to thank and commend Mr. Zurab POLOLIKASHVILI, Secretary-General of the World Tourism Organization and my brothers, Hon. Ronald. K. Chitotela, Minister of Tourism and Arts of Zambia; and Chair of the UNWTO Commission for Africa, for convening this important meeting which provides an essential platform for tourism industry, especially when we are all going through unprecedented times.

It is an encouraging and clear signal that we are all committed to pooling our efforts to mitigate the devastating impacts of this global outbreak and most of all that we commit ourselves to protect and facilitate the development of the tourism industry in Africa for the benefit of the continent and its people.

Mr Secretary General and Honourable Ministers
Brothers and sisters

Tourism is one of the most important sectors in Africa. This is an industry that, more than others, permeates the socio-economic life of the majority of Africans. It links Africans across borders and provides livelihood to all segments of the African Populations. The tourism industry in Africa employs over 20 million people, i.e. 6.5% of the total workforce (20% in some African countries) - half of whom are women - and accounts for 8-10% of the continent’s GDP.

As COVID-19 deforms the global economy, tourism is one of the worst-hit sectors in Africa and African economies are thus probably the worst hit. Across the Continent, hotels are laying off workers while travel agencies are closing, revenues and livelihoods lost. the COVID19 outbreak did not only bring tourism to a stop, but is also severely affecting one of the critical tourism socio-economic enablers and service sectors for many countries and economies across the continent – Aviation. It is very clear that the pandemic is challenging the viability of the continental air transport system as never before in history.

The precautionary measures that have been put in place by most of African countries to contain the COVID-19 pandemic involved closure of important transport infrastructure and services. These include, among others, the closure of major international airports for passenger flights, closure of important transport corridors affecting directly the landlocked countries and interruption of maritime and land transport corridors.
While we applaud the swift actions of our governments to save lives, it is important to note that these measures significantly affected many livelihoods, businesses, individual and national revenues — not to mention African trade and tourism — among many other socio-economic implications. Tourism is the backbone of the economy for many African Member States.

Honourable Secretary General and Ministers
Ladies and gentlemen

In the light of these challenges and pressures, the African Union undertook a series of measures and actions to develop and implement a comprehensive response as well as Post-COVID-19 Continental Recovery Strategy, including the establishment of COVID-19 Fund.

The recommendations of the meeting of the bureau of AU Specialised Ministerial Committee of tourism highlighted the importance of ensuring that our governments use the possibilities offered by the Coronavirus Response Initiatives and stimulus packages, to support tourism establishments and SMEs, including tax incentives and waivers, insurance, bailouts and special businesses support schemes. Indeed, our governments have been deploying various packages in support of both tourism and aviation.

However, this is not sustainable. A plan and actions for a swift recovery should be in place.

In the past months and weeks, we have been extensively convening, discussing and participating with key stakeholders and regional and Global Task Forces and working groups at the highest levels to reflect on and share information and insight on approaches that can support resilience and quick recovery. More than any time before and given the unprecedented situation, collaboration, synergy and collective actions are required. Coordinated tourism Recovery Plans at national, regional and continental levels can not only support the sustainability of our valuable tourism sector, but also help our African Countries resume businesses, work and social life, including tourism sector.

Our actions have to guide and support our countries, competent authorities, industry bodies, economic operators and citizens now and over the coming months through packages that provide reassurances and clarity so that there can be progressive resumption of tourism services — while implementing appropriate health and safety protocols.

The coming months to come should be used wisely and innovatively: business as usual will not save the day.

*Preparedness and resilience by developing and implementing strict health and safety guidelines and measures both for our staff in tourism as for clients and guests.
*The crisis has positively impacted nature and the planet. Let us plan for a green recovery and develop sustainable tourism

*on a positive note, domestic and intra-African tourism is likely to cushion some of the negative impacts of the coronavirus outbreak. It is, hence, necessary that in line with the African Union Agenda 2063, African Member States and RECs we step up efforts to promote and develop regional tourism in our continent.

I would like here to recall that The AFRICAN TOURISM STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK 2019-2028 which was approved last year. This strategic framework, as you know, is one of Africa’s flagship projects aiming at integrating the Continent through tourism and positioning Africa as the preferred tourist destination globally.

**Supporting innovative digital solutions and platforms provide powerful tools, not only to combat the pandemic, but also and especially for helping African tourism businesses to cope efficiently with the new realities for planning purposes, managing the flow of tourists, communication, marketing … It will be a valuable opportunity to seize for a thriving and competitive African Tourism.

This means it is important that we prioritise the investment in people’s digital skills and we support digital innovation, and connecting tourism businesses and actors with existing data spaces at national, regional and Continental levels.

Honourable Secretary General and Ministers
Ladies and gentlemen

Tourism is a sector with proven capacity to bounce back and multiply recovery to other sectors of economies. However, tourism’s recovery is not exclusively dependent on lifting COVID-19-imposed travel bans to encourage a return of tourists. Implementing broad-based recovery and resilience measures including healthcare systems are key to instill confidence and reassurance. Supporting Africa as we face these unprecedented challenges is urgent.

In our meeting today, we should reflect – together with UNWTO, Member States, RECs, African institutions, and the industry stakeholders, – about the African tourism of tomorrow and jointly start building a roadmap towards a sustainable, innovative and resilient African tourism as a pathway to a United, Peaceful and Prosperous Africa!