Ambassador Salay [DIRCO Director for Humanitarian Affairs], Dr Tax [SADC Executive Secretary], Representatives of the Government of Ethiopia, AU and IGAD, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen. Good morning. My thanks to South Africa and Ethiopia for co-hosting this event, the third of eight regional consultations in preparation for the World Humanitarian Summit to be convened by the UN Secretary-General in May 2016 in Istanbul.

Why do we need the Summit? Humanitarian needs around the world are growing as a result of conflicts, natural disasters and other factors. The number of organizations and people involved in humanitarian response is growing, and we need to think through how best to work together.

Political and other challenges continue to overshadow our work. Differences amongst permanent members of the UN Security Council about how to resolve their political differences in bringing peace and security to some troubled countries around, Syria being the most recent example, has resulted in stasis in the resolution of those crises. We have also seen the growth of non-State actors and terrorist organizations.

We are also witnessing a growth in technology and in social media which means that people can communicate directly with each other and with us.

Governments want to lead response efforts in many countries. How do we support them in capacity development, preparedness and early warning systems?

We need to ensure that people are at the heart of our response efforts, not an afterthought. What do people themselves feel they need? How can we find out and seek to meet those needs rather than imposing solutions?

In the run-up to the Summit, a series of national and regional consultations are taking place with a broad range of stakeholders to look at the challenges in each region, criticisms and comments about humanitarian response efforts and to think through how we can best work together to meet the challenges facing us in today’s world. This is the
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first time we have taken this multi-stakeholder rather than intergovernmental approach, giving you all a voice.

The humanitarian situation in Eastern and Southern Africa is changing. Africa is the world’s most rapidly urbanizing continent. Nearly 4 in every 10 people in sub-Saharan Africa already live in towns and cities, and that figure is expected to rise significantly in the next 15 years. Urbanization, along with population growth, migration, water scarcity, climate change, environmental degradation and conflict, are just some of the issues that we must consider as we redefine humanitarian action.

Across Eastern and Southern Africa many people are contending with multiple risks and sources of insecurity. They are coping with recurrent drought, flooding, conflict, displacement and food price inflation. These challenges are compounded by high levels of poverty, weak governance and infrastructure, and poor access to basic services. This has a devastating impact on people’s lives and livelihoods, leading to profound and protracted humanitarian needs.

It’s often said in this region that all problems come back to water: either there’s not enough, or there’s too much. In both Eastern and Southern Africa, drought is a significant challenge. Eight of the top 10 countries affected by drought globally are in these two regions. Over the next 15 years, it is predicted that due to the effects of climate change, there will be even greater variations in rainfall, exacerbating the problem of drought. At the same time, floods are a growing threat on the African continent. Projections show that by 2030, nearly three times as many Africans will be living in flood-prone areas, compared to 1970. The floods of 2000 in Mozambique and 2007 in Sudan cost peoples’ lives and also caused losses of 420 billion and 300 billion dollars respectively.

How can we best respond to these inter-related challenges? That is what we are here to discuss. Particularly, how do we ensure that we listen to people and put their needs at the heart of our response? How can we best work with and support national governments? How can we better coordinate and utilize the skills, expertise and experience of all the organizations involved in humanitarian response, to best effect? How can we forge stronger partnerships and build a truly global, diverse and inclusive humanitarian system? How can we ensure that preparedness and early warning are an integral part of government and regional response mechanisms?

And, crucially, how can we support communities and build their resilience so that they are best able to deal with the shocks which overwhelm them every year, be it drought or floods?

We have made some progress. For example, in recent years, there have been positive experiences with social safety net programmes that make use of innovations in mobile and electronic cash transfers – this would not have happened without innovations that have come from this region. These programmes can be triggered well before the food security situation in a country deteriorates to emergency or famine levels, and they could hold the key to rapid response and predictable support for people in crisis.

To turn this into a reality, we must work hand-in-hand with communities affected by drought and listen to what they tell us about what they need. A few years ago the
humanitarian community responded to a natural disaster which affected a rural community in the Philippines. We brought supplies as we wanted to help people. What we didn't do was ask people what they needed. When we talked to the women in the village they asked us to fix a bridge which had been washed away. Because once the bridge was fixed they were able to source food and the other supplies they needed. Contribute to sustaining the livelihoods in their community. All we had to do was ask. Good information flow and two-way communication are an essential and integral part of effective humanitarian response. Advances in technology are also helping to drive this change. In 105 countries in the world there are now more mobile phones than people. That means that in many cases, people can tell us where they are, what they are short of and what they need; and we can tell them how they can get it. We must make the best use of this information, asking people the right questions, acting on what we hear, delivering and monitoring the effectiveness of our operations.

At the same time as learning from the past and improving our ability to respond to sudden disasters, we must ask ourselves: how can we prevent the loss of lives and livelihoods caused by recurrent crises? How can we make investments now to mitigate risk tomorrow? Less than 0.5 percent of the $3 trillion spent on international aid between 1991 and 2010 was spent on preparedness and prevention. We must do more. We need to find ways of aligning funding for humanitarian aid and for development with the known risk of humanitarian crisis. Prevention not only saves lives; it’s far more cost-effective than responding to a crisis once it has taken hold.

The Ebola outbreak in West Africa illustrates the difference that investing in development and preparedness can make. If health systems and community outreach programmes had been stronger, the disease would never have been able to spread so far, so fast.

Over the next few days we are here to talk about the issues, challenges, successes and what we can learn from Eastern and Southern Africa. Each region faces a number of specific challenges – natural disaster, conflict, poverty. These are regions where regional organisations are playing a central role in resolving political differences, where countries themselves are at the forefront of response efforts. For example Mozambique which has invested in preparedness and response measures to enable them to respond more quickly and effectively to the annual flooding in the country.

At the regional consultations for West and Central Africa and North and South-East Asia, there were frequent calls for solutions that are adapted to the specifics of the local situation. It is clear that we need to come up with new ways of working that allow for context-specific response in an increasingly interconnected world. At the same time, we must also look beyond our differences and recognize that, for example, the risks and challenges affecting Eastern and Southern Africa are often interrelated and can exacerbate the impact of crisis.

In the lead up to this conference, nearly 3200 people were consulted across Eastern and Southern Africa about the needs, priorities, and ambitions of individuals and organizations affected by humanitarian crises. Several suggestions emerged: making humanitarian action more needs-based and context-specific; strengthening local capacities; bridging the divide between humanitarian and development communities;

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improving financing mechanisms; strengthening legal frameworks; and involving young people in humanitarian preparedness and response. These are a good foundation for our discussions over the next few days.

There is a depth and breadth of humanitarian experience in this room which we need to tap into. I would like to thank everyone here for being here and for bringing your experience and your ideas to this conference. We know what the challenges are. Over the next few days the challenge is to focus on solutions. I hope that your discussions will be action oriented.

I hope that this regional engagement marks the beginning of an ongoing interaction in preparation for the World Humanitarian Summit. And I also hope that we will take action now on ideas and recommendations that emerge over the next few days. Please go back to your respective governments, organizations and communities, consult, suggest ways that the recommendations can be taken forward. And please come to Istanbul with more ideas about what we can

I will end with the words of Fatima Isaaq, a mother from southern Somalia, who arrived at a refugee camp in Mogadishu with her children earlier this year. “We left behind everything to survive,” she said. “There was no food, medicine or supplies. We had no choice but to flee.”

We’re here today to find a better way to support Fatima and the millions of women, children and men living through crisis in Eastern and Southern Africa.

We’re also here to think about how best to reflect the achievements and successes in these two regions in the global narrative. Because it's not all negative. There are many negative stories about this continent. But there are successes and significant opportunities too. Help us to grasp them.

Thank you again for being here, and I look forward to our discussions.