**The Minister of Agriculture in Zimbabwe, the Hon. Dr. A.J. Masuka,**

**opened the ITGA 2023 Africa Regional Meeting**

 **expressing strong support for the tobacco sector**

Growers’ representatives from four of the leading tobacco producing markets in Africa – Malawi, Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe – met in Harare, Zimbabwe for the International Tobacco Growers’ Association (ITGA) 2023 Africa Regional Meeting. Participants requested the support of their governments in the face of multiple threats affecting tobacco production which brings enormous socio-economic benefits to the region. The key topics discussed during the two-day event were the sustainability efforts of growers within the ESG framework and the pressing challenges in each of their respective markets.

The Meeting was officially opened by the Guest of Honour – the Minister of Lands, Agriculture, Fisheries, Water and Rural Development – Dr. A.J. Masuka (M.P) who highlighted the central role of tobacco growing for Zimbabwe’s economy. Dr. Masuka provided details about the country’s Tobacco Transformation Plan 2025 that is supposed to increase value addition of the crop and improve local earnings. Dr. Masuka aims at record volumes, record earnings and record average prices for tobacco growers. Dr. Masuka stated that the actions of the World Health Organization (WHO) Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) are “ill-informed and ill-timed”. “Tobacco in Zimbabwe is an important crop and we are not making any apologies about it.”

Ryan Swales, the President of Zimbabwe Tobacco Association (ZTA), highlighted the important opportunity this meeting is bringing for the region in debating the pressing issues, but most importantly for Zimbabwe, given the specific challenges attached to the market, predominantly in sustainability.

ITGA’s President Jose J. Aranda made a call to governments to support growers in their sustainable tobacco production efforts as the livelihoods of millions of people around the world depend on it. Tobacco growing brings valuable contributions to local economies in the form of labour, income, and further opportunities for growth. Mr. Aranda also emphasised that tobacco growers operate within a legal framework. “Governments need to look at farmers as their main strategic partners and support their efforts.”

During the Open Session, participants were also able to follow presentations about the current developments in the global leaf market, with focus on Africa production and pricing, the outlook of the regulatory environment and possible implications for growers and a detailed analysis of the ITGA 2023 Market Survey, highlighting the economic, social and environmental challenges for growers in all leading tobacco growing areas. Finally, there were two comprehensive debate sessions with key stakeholders in the four represented markets discussing sustainable tobacco productions and the efforts made to overcome the pressing challenges of the region – cost of production, deforestation, climate change, poverty and lack of opportunities for the youth.

Finally, attention was brought to May 31st, when ITGA carried out the World Understanding Tobacco Farming Day campaign. Mr. Aranda made a call to get the sector together against the demonization of tobacco growing. ITGA is raising awareness about the realities of tobacco farming to stop the unfounded claims by the WHO FCTC in their World No Tobacco Day.

To learn more about the socio-economic impact of tobacco growing visit: <https://www.tobaccoleaf.org/sustainability/worldnotobaccoday/>