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**Message from Ms Irina Bokova,**

**Director-General of UNESCO**

**on the occasion of the World Day to Combat Desertification**

**17 June 2015**

*“No such thing as a free lunch. Invest in healthy soil”*

The theme of the 2015 *World Day to Combat Desertification* underlines the fragility of the world's dryland areas and the communities they sustain.

Since 2000, we have seen significant progress towards the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger – but these challenges remain deep and prevalent in the dryland areas of developing countries, where water retention is poor as a result of natural processes and human actions.

Food security is not only a matter of food production and distribution -- it requires sustainable food systems, which, in turn, depend on sustainable ecosystem management, supported by research, education, and the application of appropriate technologies. Finding lasting solutions is a key challenge for the success of the new global sustainable development agenda. All of these questions stand at the heart of the 21<sup>st</sup> *Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP21)*, which will be held in Paris next December.

UNESCO is supporting Governments to build resilience across the board against the impacts of desertification. Over the last four decades, we have contributed to global efforts to combat desertification through such scientific programmes as our Man and the Biosphere Programme and International Hydrological Programme. This work has included long-term studies, monitoring as well as site-based actions.

Across the world, UNESCO University Chairs in desertification are cooperating to advance dryland studies and training in technological innovation, in order to improve the management and sustainable use of dryland resources. UNESCO led a recent initiative in the Lake Chad basin, to promote integrated natural resource management and ecosystem restoration. More than fifty UNESCO Biosphere Reserves, from nineteen countries around the world, include dryland ecosystems. Some of them, like the Oasis of South Morocco, the Hunshandake Sandland-Xilin Gol Biosphere Reserve in China and the Dana Biosphere Reserve in Jordan, have accumulated deep and sound experience in combatting desertification and in promoting new and community-based dryland agricultural economies. As illustrated by the exhibition “Behind Food Sustainability” that UNESCO is organising during EXPO 2015, the relationship between communities, food, and the environment, as well as cultural and natural diversity, is essential today.

Desertification and land degradation pose a threat to food security, stability and peace. In response, we must act quickly, resolutely and on multiple fronts. This concerns the communities directly affected – but it is important for all of us, across the world.

Irina Bokova