

1 September 2003

ENGLISH

Original: SPANISH

## **CALL OF CULTURE**

*Havana, 30-31 August 2003*

Mankind has entered upon one of the most difficult periods in its history, and the next few years will be decisive for all the peoples living on the planet.

Over the past century, when we still had more than enough time to foresee and confront most of the serious problems overwhelming us today, many years were wasted in fighting wars, dividing up the world, plunder and exploitation.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, enormous progress had been made in science and technology, and there were still abundant areas of virgin land, extensive forests, water and mineral deposits that could have been used sustainably. The air and seas were not so saturated with pollutants and chemical waste as they are today.

In less than a century, much of the hydrocarbon reserves that it took nature hundreds of millions of years to lay down have been squandered and spewed into the atmosphere and oceans. The drive for profit above all else, with no morals, ethics or foresight whatsoever, has already had devastating consequences for present and future generations.

Nature is mankind's greatest inheritance. We men and women of culture cannot remain impassive in the face of the challenge to conserve and manage our natural resources properly - in particular water, on which life itself depends.

ICCD/COP(6)/INFORMAL/7

HAV.03-238

GE.03-70464 (E) 030903 030903

We, writers and artists from a variety of geographical and historical backgrounds, have gathered in Havana at the invitation of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), born of the 1992 Earth Summit, and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), with the firm and noble purpose of ruminating on the growing poverty that afflicts the dispossessed of this world and appealing to every creative artistic and literary spirit on Earth to speak out against it, thereby promoting the sustainable development of fragile ecosystems.

Our objective is to foster an inclination to preserve the natural world, to create a forum for thought and action, a place where we can ruminate and exchange ideas on the role of the arts and culture in the fight against underdevelopment, poverty and environmental degradation, particularly desertification and drought. This is an economic, social and environmental problem that primarily affects the countries of the Third World and threatens the survival of the human species.

In striving to overcome hunger, poverty, desertification, enmity and injustice, all peoples on earth are brothers.

Despite a deteriorating environment and poverty, Third World countries still have the key assets of natural and cultural diversity that are essential to global stability and the continuation of life on our planet; there will need to be systematic give-and-take between developing and developed countries to preserve and make sustainable use of that diversity, with suitable financing mechanisms to reward the environmental services rendered by nature in Third World countries to the global biosphere system.

In areas under threat of desertification, such as those identified in Africa, Asia and Latin America, socio-economic relief is vital: so also is South-South unification into one system with different focal points for emergencies relating to environmental sustainability, from frozen deserts to lush forest land to the depths of the sea, all of which, without exception, stem directly or indirectly from environmental decline which is also causing desert encroachment and desertification under the influence of global and environmental change.

The regional and global networks of the various international cultural and environmental programmes must join forces to launch sustainable models for the conservation and management of natural resources in different environmental zones, allocating a suitable proportion of the benefits to the indigenous communities that generate them. These benefits should include instruction, training in extrapolating from experience, and capacity-building.

The essential task of this forum will therefore be to stimulate the search for areas where activities and projects harnessing creativity within different fields of art and culture converge and can work together, helping to improve the quality of life in the most degraded parts of the planet: producing art for the people and with the people.

Our aim is to espouse positive arguments and creative initiatives and stimulate alternative, innovative insights into the challenges facing a world influenced, and increasingly scarred, by neoliberal globalization, developing countries' external debts, and irrational patterns of exploitation, production and consumption in the wealthiest countries whose adverse consequences constantly hamper efforts to arrive at environmental balance, development and social justice.

Given the urgent need to stave off the destruction of the planet, we must reconsider the way in which the various branches and agencies of the United Nations system operate.

For 30 years now we have witnessed United Nations agencies, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, with their structural adjustment policies and overt support for transnational corporations, undermining sustainable agricultural practices in places like Africa and making a policy of financing large dams that damage ecosystems; their backing for transnational agricultural corporations introducing foreign, environment-unfriendly crops and transgenic seeds has ruined local farming, increased desertification, drought and famine, and sapped national public benefit schemes.

We must call these agencies, with their financial policies and activities that negate and contradict the best practices promoted by UNICEF, UNESCO and the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification itself, to account.

Although the 1992 Rio Earth Summit made a public commitment to decreasing the rate of environmental degradation and social impoverishment, the figures presented at the Johannesburg summit a decade later are more alarming than ever:

- The very survival of 1 billion people in over 100 countries, who depend on the land for most of their needs and tend to be among the poorest people on the planet, is at risk;
- Some 60 million people are expected to abandon the desert-stricken areas of sub-Saharan Africa for the north of the continent and Europe between 1997 and 2020, but at the moment the flow of migrants to Europe amounts to 450,000 people;
- Between 70,000 and 90,000 Mexicans leave their homes and farmlands every year in search of a better life as immigrants to the United States; today, total migration to the United States and Canada is only 600,000 people;
- A quarter of the land in Latin America and the Caribbean is desert or arid;
- Since the 1950s, sandstorms and increasing desertification in China have devastated approximately 700,000 hectares of cultivated land, 2.35 million hectares of grazing land, and 6.4 million hectares of forest, woodland and wooded areas;
- A fifth of the land in Spain is at risk of desertification;
- More than 30 per cent of the land in the United States is suffering from soil degradation.

Overall, desertification affects 250 million people and a third of the earth's surface, roughly 4 million hectares of land. Fertile soil is increasingly being degraded all over the world by overcropping and overgrazing, deforestation, inadequate irrigation and overexploitation. This phenomenon is especially pronounced in some parts of sub-Saharan Africa and South America, resulting in the loss of arable land, peasants migrating to the cities, and the collapse of many rural communities, especially in developing countries.

Some 70 per cent of the 5.2 million hectares of drylands used for agriculture are already degraded and threatened by desertification.

On a planet that is 70 per cent water, only 2.5 per cent of the total is fresh water and only a fraction of that is accessible, since nearly two thirds of it is in glaciers and snow cover. Although water is essential for a minimum quality of life, it is estimated that at present 1.1 billion people do not have access to drinkable water. Twelve million people die every year for lack of water or from drinking polluted water.

Underdevelopment, a consequence of our colonial past and the prevailing unjust, unequal international economic order, is the principal cause of desertification and poverty. Poverty drives those who live off the land to overexploit it in order to obtain food, energy, shelter and income. Unfortunately, research has placed the blame for desertification on its victims, without analysing the underlying causes that drive them to overwork the land. It is underdevelopment and poverty that force those living in Third World countries to extract all that they can from the land in the interests of short-term survival.

Despite the commitment that all entered into at Rio, few developed countries honour their specific responsibilities, forgetting that, sooner or later, the effects of environmental degradation will reach them as well.

It is not pleasant to be the bearers of such bad news. The news must, nevertheless, be brought to everybody's attention. If not, not only shall we not find the answers, but the problems will continue to grow worse.

As exponents of the arts, we cannot remain transfixed by these uncomfortable facts or continue to smother under euphemisms the starkness of the current situation and worsening trends of which we are well aware. It is time for a radical change in pace and direction from today's complacent acceptance of, not to say connivance at, programmed destruction, environmental catastrophe and unmitigated cruelty.

The world will be at permanent risk of a relapse into barbarism, of nuclear holocaust or of geological cataclysm until the weapons of culture and technology are set aside for the sake of

mankind's common interests. Poverty makes people vulnerable, and there is a danger that gross inequality will spawn new threats to peaceful coexistence on the planet. Famine is perhaps the most fearsome threat of all, destroying human life and condemning millions to impotence.

It is no accident that hunger-stricken population groups live in parts of the planet that were for centuries subject to colonial depredation and an inhuman trans-Atlantic slave trade that carried off millions of their offspring, and that today they face serious environmental damage and high population growth, for all these phenomena are closely interlinked and it is only by paying attention to the intricate bonds that connect them that we shall be able to come up with solutions.

Economic and social pressure is growing, with a consequent increase in poverty around the world. In 1960, incomes in the wealthiest countries were 37 times as large as in the poorest countries; today, they are 74 times as large. The three richest people on the planet today own assets equivalent to the combined GDP of the 48 poorest countries.

We are sure that, among the many strategies that must be followed, the movement that we, men and women of culture aware of the gravity of these problems, are launching today, placing our knowledge and talents at the service of a new environmental awareness, will be an effective one. We have a moral obligation and commitment to address the pressing problems of our societies and future generations, and are thus moved to take up the human and professional challenges and act accordingly.

We are not facing these challenges alone. The time has come for artists, intellectuals and writers to join forces with other parts of the scientific community and civil society, national and international bodies and Governments in taking concrete action to improve the present state of affairs. Global awareness of the direct and indirect natural, political and economic causes particular to each nation or stemming from the current international economic order also requires global involvement. The present and future inhabitants of the planet will be all the better citizens if they have internalized the notions of solidarity, equality among individuals and nations, and the need to protect all that lives and supports life on earth.

We need fresh inspiration for culture, a new design, a different outline. We intend to make it as visible and palpable as a house - a house for everybody, a home for everybody.

We must pledge ourselves to strive for a maximum of transparency in accomplishing these objectives. It is our vocation to forge a collective awareness that will prompt our societies to apply sustainable models for the conservation and management of natural resources, with special emphasis, in our case, on forests, land and water.

The extraordinary synthesizing power of the artistic message, its ability to blend reason and emotion, enables it to rise above narrow approaches and attain a system-wide scale from where it can prod, motivate and steer both public opinion generally and the specific entities in society that are directly and indirectly involved in finding solutions.

A well-known saying has it that “if you are not part of the solution, you are part of the problem”. The artists and writers gathered here desire and agree to be part of the solution. Along with other scientific and professional groups in this world ravaged by war, famine, environmental degradation, inequality and lack of solidarity, we want our actions and commitment to help bring to life the poet’s words: “Where danger grows, there grows redemption”. Or as José Martí would have said, “Nature is more beautiful when the light of freedom also shines upon the world.”

-----