

News Release 03/09

Address the Plight of the Poor, Scientists Urge Governments

Buenos Aires, 23 September 2009. Scientists have called on governments to address the plight of the poor. The experts claim the poor, who are struggling for survival, will not be able to respond to the concurrent global economic, food, energy and population crises and the drought, high temperature and dust storms associated with climate change.

William Dar, who is chairing the 1st Scientific Conference of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), taking place in Buenos Aires, Argentina, said these developments could “send the poor back to the development bottom,” adding that innovative ways to harness science can enable developing countries to transcend a looming “perfect storm.” Sustainable land management, the experts say, might be the way out.

Over 2 billion people live in the dryland areas of the world, with 1.2 billion classified as poor. The World Development Report 2010 released by the World Bank less than a fortnight ago estimates that developing countries, which are already beset by poverty and hunger, “face 75-80 per cent of the potential damage from climate change.”

Mahmoud Solh, Director-General of the International Centre for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas (ICARDA), said the world’s food security situation is in danger, as most regions of the world show a growing gap between their food needs and capacity to produce it. Desertification, land degradation and drought, he said, have partly contributed to this situation, and that these phenomena are closely tied to poverty, among other factors.

Argentinean scientist Elena Abraham also noted a link between marginal lands and poverty, but showed that the productive capacity of livestock in the drylands can be increased by as much as 300 per cent through sustainable land management, without the use of pesticides, and with improvement to the ecosystem.

Solh said drylands have various economic values, citing the plant genetic materials held in its seed banks because they “can withstand drought, heat or salinity.”

Klaus Kellner, Chair of the Committee on Science and Technology of the Convention, called on scientists to provide decision-makers with “cutting-edge science to monitor and assess dryland degradation” in order to improve the conditions of the people and ecosystems in these regions.

Luc Gnacadja, Executive Secretary of the UNCCD, said there is a need to know where desertification, land degradation and drought are happening, how severe they are, how people and ecosystems are affected, and the economic cost that their recovery entails.

The Scientific Conference is a response to a call made by the Parties to the Convention two years ago for scientific advice in tackling the threats of desertification, land degradation and drought. The Parties are interested in improving the livelihoods of local communities and environmental systems, and reaping the benefits of these ecosystems.

The Scientific Conference, taking place from 22-24 September 2009, is expected to provide Parties with the tools to measure and assess trends in desertification, land degradation and drought.

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For more information contact:

Marcos Montoiro
Awareness Raising, Communication and Education Unit
UNCCD-Secretariat
Hermann-Ehlers-Str. 10
53113 Bonn, Germany
Cell: (+54-911) 15-6200-0438 (in Argentina)
Email: mmontoiro@unccd.int
Web: <http://www.unccd.int>

About the UNCCD

Developed as a result of the Rio Summit, the UNCCD is a unique instrument that has brought attention to land degradation in some of the most vulnerable ecosystems and affected populations in the world. Thirteen years after coming into force, the UNCCD benefits from the largest membership of the three Rio Conventions and is recognized as an instrument that can make an important contribution to the achievement of sustainable development and generate global benefits.