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While very new to the post of **UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD)** Executive Secretary, Assistant Secretary-General Luc Gnacadja has first-hand knowledge of the UNCCD processes, and has been an active participant in UNCCD meetings. As former Minister of Environment, Housing and Urban Development in Benin, and having been for several years head of delegation to the Conference of the Parties to all three Rio Conventions, he brings considerable knowledge and enthusiasm to promote synergistic approaches at the country and international levels to combat desertification. It is a "true global challenge" along with climate change and not limited only to the local and national levels.



"I am moved by what I have to do," said Mr. Gnacadja, who spoke recently with iSeek to help raise awareness of UNCCD among United Nations staff.

The trio of Rio conventions, **UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)**, **Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD)** and **UNCCD** are interlinked, as are their action plans. In fact, Mr. Gnacadja feels there is no way to proceed with one action plan without the others.

Although desertification seems to imply that it refers only to

deserts, ASG Gnacadja emphasized that in the context of the UNCCD convention, desertification is the degradation of arid and semi-arid land to the point of losing its capability for agricultural productivity. In all, desertification is land degradation and all countries are affected to different extent.

ASG Gnacadja pointed out the extent of this worldwide problem, with 100 countries affected, including one-third of United States land, one-fifth of Spain and one-quarter of Latin America and the Caribbean. Africa is known to be the most affected continent, with two-thirds of its land desert or dry land. "In China, hundreds of millions of people are suffering from the impact and affect of desertification," said Mr. Gnacadja, adding that worldwide, there are 1.2 billion people whose lives are at risk.

Worsened by climate change, desertification is one of the greatest environmental challenges of our time. Mr. Gnacadja quoted from Winston Churchill, saying, "If you will not fight when your victory is sure and not too costly, you may come to the moment when you will have to fight with all the odds against you, and only a precarious chance of survival. There may even be a worse case: you will have to fight where there is no hope of victory."

The UNCCD is unique in a number of ways. It is the sole convention on land management while at the same time the most universal convention, with 192 constituent parties. In addition, as mentioned by Mr. Gnacadja and referring to a Joint Inspection Unit review [[ICCD/COP\(7\)/4](#)], compared to its two sister Conventions in terms of financial and human resources, "UNCCD is undernourished," For instance, he mentioned that the secretariat of the Convention on Climate Change has a much higher budget and a staffing of over 200 members while the UNCCD secretariat has just 35 staffers servicing 192 Parties to the Convention.

Headquartered in Bonn, Germany since January 1999, the UNCCD's most recent eighth session of the Conference of the Parties (COP 8) took place in Madrid, from 3 to 14 September 2007. As the COP did not complete consideration of its Programme and Budget agenda item at that session, the First Extraordinary Session of the COP in New York on 26 November shall agree upon the level of increase of the Convention's budget for the biennium 2008-2009. Mr. Gnacadja sees this not so much as a budget increase, but as a way to mostly compensate for losses due to exchange rate differences between the euro and the US dollar. He stated that only one party opposed the consensus on the draft decision.

Looking forward to Bali

For Mr. Gnacadja, the 24 September High-level event on climate change was "an opportunity to rate what we have been doing so far as far as advocacy is concerned." He noticed that a very low percentage of heads of state "mentioned the linkages -- the nexus -- between climate change and desertification and the urgent need for us to implement the action plans in a very synergetic way. It means that we still have a long way to go." His hopes are that

following the climate change momentum will come the momentum for the desertification issue and that for developing countries, the best way to adapt to climate change shocks, to mitigate its effects and to strengthen their resilience is to ensure that their land is sustainably managed by various activities such as reforestation and afforestation in the framework of the UNCCD implementation.

The thirteenth **United Nations Climate Change Conference** will take place from 3 to 14 December 2007 in Bali. He expects that in Bali, all the tools and instruments that will help implement the three Rio Conventions in an integrated way will be enforced not only at the policy level, but that there will also be agreement to use them, especially the financial tools, "to channel them through the most relevant convention."

"The Convention is a two-legged convention to undertake challenges on the national and local levels but also on the global level. And I hope that in Bali we will really agree to make such a shift."

Undertaking climate change challenges through desertification will help improve the livelihood of the affected population -- sharing growth with the poorest -- while at the same time meeting the common goal of tackling climate change. Mr. Gnacadja is hoping for agreement on this at Bali.

Partnerships

At the Madrid COP 8, a "true milestone" and "turning point" was reached with the agreement by all parties, for the first time, on the way to implement the convention with a new ten-year strategy. "We have a common ground on how to move forward for the ten years to come." One of the strategic objectives is building partnerships, with a bottom-up approach. "Our role at the country level is to bring on board all the stakeholders," and work through all UN agencies to join forces.

Mr. Gnacadja says that "meaningful resources" need to be provided by the parties to undertake the ten-year strategy.

The UNCCD is an important instrument directly linked to attaining two of the Millennium Development Goals, specifically the first one, eradicating extreme poverty and hunger, and the seventh, ensuring environmental sustainability. "If you are able to improve sustainable land management," he said that we can quickly help those who are striving to survive on a small portion of land.

Poverty has a gender, and it's female. Most of poor people are female, children and rural. The map of poverty coincides with the map of degraded land in developing countries.

Architect – Best profession worldwide

While very passionate on the issues related to the Rio conventions, by education and training Mr. Gnacadja is an architect, which he

considers "the best profession worldwide." He explained that being an architect is relevant to his current work because architecture is "about building somebody else's dream."

When he was a delegate to the Conference of the Parties, Mr. Gnacadja received service from the Secretariat. Now that he is working in a different seat as Executive Secretary, he is being called to service Parties which constitutes quite a challenge.

In all his roles, he brings his audience on board by knowing them, speaking their language and providing them with facts that are relevant to them.

He considers himself a servant to those affected by desertification, but is able to step into their dreams, bringing along his abilities, expertise and competencies to build what is needed to help resolve the problems.

Combating desertification is addressing the issue of adaptation to climate change, of mitigating its effects, and strengthening the resilience of countries.

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