

DOWN TO EARTH

News & Views on Desertification

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UNCCD



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IYDD Special Edition

The 2006 International Year of Deserts and Desertification (IYDD) offered us a golden opportunity to draw the world's attention to the issue of desertification - and we seized it!

From Algiers to Almeria, from Bamako to Beijing, international meetings took place on major desertification-related issues, addressing strategic areas such as the role of women, youth, and the highly topical subject of forced migration. Going beyond business-as-usual paths, awareness-raising was also achieved through the medium of the camera lens; with the photo exhibition at the United Nations Headquarters in New York and the Desert Nights Film Festival in Rome not only tackling the problem of land degradation, but also underlining the magnificence of the world's deserts and their unique cultural heritage.

This IYDD issue of our newsletter gives a flavour of some of the events in a memorable year; our next challenge is to ensure that the momentum it created continues through the months and years ahead.

Hama Arba Diallo



Honorary Spokespersons

We would like to extend our most sincere gratitude to our IYDD Honorary Spokespersons for their valuable efforts throughout the Year:

H.E. Mr. Cherif Rahmani, Minister of Environment of Algeria and President of the World Deserts Foundation.

"Desertification is a transnational issue and a global problem."

Wangari Maathai, Nobel Peace Laureate and founder of the Green Belt movement.

"Desertification is the new enemy."

Hristo Stoitchkov, Bulgarian international football star and Golden Boot Winner.

"We must not be indifferent to the problem and consequences of desertification."

Former Japanese Prime Minister H.E. Mr. Ryutaro Hashimoto.

"Water issues and desertification are two sides of the same coin."

Mr. Hashimoto was appointed IYDD Honorary Spokesperson in January 2006, a role in which he worked tirelessly and demonstrated the utmost resolve and commitment until his untimely death on 1 July 2006. The memory of the man and the legacy of his work remain as a source of constant inspiration.

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Desert Nights in Rome



Photo © Michael Martin.

THE IYDD saw the Secretariat engaging with a completely new field of communication, with the staging of an International Film Festival entitled "Desert Nights: Tales from the Desert" at the Casa del Cinema in Rome. More than 80 films and documentaries from some 37 countries, particularly those affected by drought and desertification, were screened during the festival, which was held from 1 - 7 December in the prestigious grounds of Villa Borghese.

A statement of support was issued by former United Nations Secretary General, Kofi Annan, who said, "the world of films may seem far removed from the issue of desertification, but Desert Nights connects them with an urgent message: desertification, the loss of productive land, must be halted if we are to protect the livelihood of more than 1 billion people."

IFAD and the UNCCD

By Mr. Lennart Bage, President, International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) *

Desertification and land degradation are not inexorable forces of nature. Although droughts, floods and global warming play their part, desertification is a process that involves human action or inaction, such as deforestation and unsustainable agricultural practices. IFAD's mandate to alleviate rural poverty is therefore inextricably linked to tackling land degradation and promoting the sustainable management of natural resources.

Recognizing the crucial role played by women in reversing desertification, IFAD fosters women's participation in dryland management. The report, "Gender and Desertification: Expanding Roles for Women to Restore Dryland Areas" was presented at the 2006 International Conference on Women and Desertification in Beijing. IFAD supports the UNCCD in the framework of agricultural and rural development through its investment programmes, grants and policy initiatives. Over the past 27 years, IFAD's support for dryland development and combating land degradation has totalled US\$3.5 billion.

At the helm was former Locarno International Film Festival artistic director, Irene Bignardi, who said that desertification is a very important issue to which we can call increased attention with an event like the Desert Nights festival. An honorary committee for the event included such illustrious names as literature Nobel Prize winners Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Wole Soyinka, authors Amitav Ghosh and Tahar Ben Jelloun, and film directors Bernardo Bertolucci, Wim Wenders and Abbas Kiarostami.

Ms. Bignardi explained, "While selecting more than 80 titles from many interesting materials submitted, we realized how, in the imagery of films, the fascination for deserts has been substituted over the years by a new-found awareness focused on the problems and ways of life of the desert and on the phenomenon of desertification; this is especially true when the

film camera has changed hands, from western film-makers to those born and living in desert landscapes."

The films were divided into three categories: fiction films; documentaries portraying real-life stories of dryland communities; and a retrospective of the most celebrated cult movies on deserts, including classics such as Bertolucci's *The Sheltering Sky* and Antonioni's *Zabriskie Point*. While the documentaries shed light on the often harsh struggle of dryland communities, they also succeeded in revealing the vibrancy and optimism that abound in these places.

Also on show was the Italian premiere of the documentary *An Inconvenient Truth*, which follows the story of Al Gore's attempts to make the issue of global warming a recognized problem worldwide. Many of the films and documentaries were screened in the presence of directors, enabling the audience to ask questions and gain personal insights.

The world's most important and famous deserts were represented in all their haunting beauty, from the mighty Sahara to the Chinese Gobi desert; from the Chilean Atacama to Death Valley in the USA and the Kalahari in Namibia. One of the films screened, *Sahara with Michael Palin*, reveals, according to the BBC, "not the emptiness of endless sand dunes, but a huge and diverse range of cultures and landscapes and a long history of civilization."

Panel discussions involving international experts also took place on topics such as 'Deserts in Literature', 'Case Studies on Lake Chad and the Aral Sea' and 'Water as priority of the Millennium'.

The Festival was organized with the support of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Italian Ministry of Environment, and under the patronage of the Italian Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities and the City of Rome.

IFAD provides grants to developing countries for projects with global environmental benefits and which contribute to sustainable livelihoods. The GEF's Operational Programme on sustainable land management (OP15) uniquely positions IFAD to link projects addressing land degradation to poverty reduction and development concerns.

Both IFAD and the GM will continue our efforts beyond the International Year of Deserts and Desertification to focus the attention of the international community on this problem by sponsoring and contributing to key events throughout the year in close cooperation with the UNCCD Secretariat.

* For more information on IFAD, please visit its web-site: www.ifad.org

* A publication on the role of pastoralist women in combating desertification will be released this year with the generous funding of IFAD.



Spotlight on Science

"The Future of the Drylands"

A number of important scientific conferences took place during the course of the Year, the largest of which was held in Tunis in June. Organized by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), it brought together four hundred scientists and policymakers to discuss the future of drylands and to commemorate 50 years of drylands research.

According to Walter Erdelen, UNESCO Assistant Director-General for Science, in the 1950's a great sense of optimism prevailed that we could green the world's deserts. It was believed that techniques such as cloud seeding could bring rainfall to dry areas and that improved irrigation techniques could boost agricultural production. In short, it was thought that poverty could be reduced through technology.

Now, he says, that technological optimism has been replaced by concerns about the human impact on the environment, in particular global warming.

Despite technological advances in genetic modifications of organisms to be drought and pest resistant, drylands countries are still among the poorest in the world

A book commissioned by UNESCO to mark the IYDD entitled 'The Future of Drylands - Revisited', was presented at the conference by Professor Charles F. Hutchinson, Director of the office of Arid Land Studies (OALS) at the University of Arizona in Tucson. Some fifty years after the publication of Gilbert F. White's book 'The Future of Arid Lands,' it takes a critical look at the unintended consequences of past thinking on dryland ecosystems and the socio-economics of dryland development.

'The Future of Arid Lands' had predicted back in 1956 that drylands would receive renewed and sustained interest in coming decades, whereas drylands have been plagued by underinvestment, despite the loss of arable land at an alarming rate. Mr. White had also suggested in his book that perhaps the greatest challenge was to translate our knowledge into action at the level of individual farmers and resource managers, and encouraged us to think regionally rather than locally. The authors of the new book state that we now understand the challenge is a global one; and that we need to foster global partnerships for development in line with the Millennium Development Goals.

UNESCO environment expert, Thomas Schaff, pointed to another constituency that needs to join the battle - tourists. "The tourism sector can bring financial benefit to the local people if it is managed in a responsible and adequate way. Tourists should be made aware of the life of the local population and they should be shown how to economise water and share it," he said. The conference also attracted Italian actress Claudia Cardinale, UNESCO goodwill ambassador promoting ecology, who called attention to the critical need for water in the ecological balance. "Water must become an element of peace and exchange rather than of conflict," Cardinale said, pointing as an example to the deforestation of the Amazon region of Latin America.

A total of 64 scientific papers in eight thematic sessions were dedicated to relevant dryland issues. The discussions culminated in the adoption of a 'Declaration on Research Priorities to Promote Sustainable Development in Drylands' - the Tunis Declaration. It calls for putting science at the service of drylands research and development and identifies twelve research priorities. It requests the scientific community to make its findings available and understandable to decision-makers and local dryland communities, and calls upon governments to use sound scientific knowledge to formulate and implement policies, laws, regulations and action programmes vis-a-vis environmental issues.

For the full Tunis declaration, please see: http://www.unesco.org/mab/ecosyst/drylands/docs/E_Tunisdeclaration.pdf

"Deserts and Desertification - Challenges and Opportunities"

Israel played host to a conference in November jointly organized by the UNCCD and the Jacob Blaustein Institutes for Desert Research at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev.

Dryland biodiversity and the ecosystem, agro forestry, and the impact of climate change on drylands were among the topics under discussion. Israel's UNCCD Focal Point and Ecology Professor, Uriel Safriel, cited the possibilities offered by deserts; for example, replacing agriculture with aquaculture, promoting eco-tourism, and encouraging urban development like in Las Vegas or Riyadh. He added, "The message coming from here is that desert drylands are opportunities for mankind, not curses."



Conference participants visiting an aquaculture facility in the Negev desert.

Participants in the conference visited solar energy and development centres, desert eco-tourism sites, aquaculture facilities and algae growing centres. They were also invited to a 3rd century BCE Nabatean desert caravan site and 6th century Byzantine community remains, allowing them to experience ancient desert cultures, migration habits and water cistern preservation techniques.

Palestinian Authority General Director of Water & Environmental Development, Nader al Khateeb, said that despite the political climate, "even politicians who can't agree on major issues agree on environment."

For more information, please visit: www.desertification.bgu.ac.il

"Climate and Land Degradation"

"Under the scenario of climate change, droughts, flash floods, dust storms, famine, migratory movements, forest fires, all linked to desertification, are likely to increase, and so will their impact on global food security," WMO Secretary-General Michel Jarraud told the opening session of an international workshop held mid-December in Arusha, Tanzania. "It is vital that we redouble efforts to assess the climate."

Organized by the WMO and UNCCD, discussions during the four-day meeting centred upon how to promote more effective use of weather and climate information for reducing land degradation.

With only 11 per cent of the Earth's surface considered prime land for feeding a global population expected to reach 8.2 billion by 2020, early warning systems for climate change are crucial in fighting land degradation. The Seventh Session of the Conference of the Parties (COP-7), held in October 2005 in Nairobi, Kenya, decided that the priority theme for discussion by the Committee on Science and Technology at its eighth session would be "The effects of climatic variations and human activities on land degradation: assessment, field experience gained, and integration of mitigation and adaptation practices for livelihood improvement."

UNCCD Executive Secretary Hama Arba Diallo said early warning systems would become more and more critical in the context of global warming, and highlighted the importance of developing further collaboration with WMO in the battle against desertification.

Measures taken by WMO to address weather, climate and water-related issues to meet UNCCD requirements include implementation of observance systems, enhancement of prediction capabilities, and support to Parties and regional institutions with drought-related programmes.

To read the workshop statement, please go to: www.wmo.ch/web/wcp/agm/wocald/Workshop-Statement.pdf

Almeria: Desertification and Migration Issue Revisited



HRM Queen Sophia of Spain presiding at the opening ceremony of the conference.

The overall issue of migration is currently capturing worldwide attention. Last September, the United Nations General Assembly held a high-level dialogue on international migration and development, which former Secretary-General Kofi Annan acknowledged had become a global issue: "We are all in this together. More countries are now significantly involved in, and affected by, international migration than at any time in history." While the high-level dialogue highlighted some of the undeniably positive aspects of the phenomenon, environmentally-driven migration tells the other side of the story, with often tragic consequences.

The International Organisation for Migrations (IOM) has identified desertification as one of the major causes of individual as well as mass migrations. Tentative estimates indicate that at least 135 million people could

be forced to leave their lands. Further estimates show that some 900,000 people emigrate each year from Mexico to the USA - the equivalent of over 2,000 people per day - the majority from farm communities facing desertification and drought. This increasingly urgent topic of desertification-driven migration was the theme of an international conference last October in the Spanish city of Almeria. It had also hosted the First International Symposium on Desertification and Migration in 1994, and is itself no stranger to these related issues. Many Europeans are completely unaware, in fact, that desertification is happening so close to home. Spain, especially its southern regions, has always been one of the driest parts of Europe. The most important causes of the problem are drought, intensive farming of either crops or cattle, tourism and the booming construction industry, which especially affects coastlines. In regions such as southern Almería, 70 percent of the land is affected.

Held under the patronage of HRM Queen Sophia of Spain, who opened the event,

this Second International Symposium on Desertification and Migration sought ways of tackling a problem which shows no signs of abating. A major factor which was highlighted is the important three-way link between poverty, desertification and migration.

Distressing images of boatloads of people risking their lives under treacherous conditions in a desperate bid to reach Europe have become all-too-common. Their goal: to have the opportunity to earn a decent living which the parched soils back home can no longer offer.

Many of the conference participants were from North and West Africa; countries of origin of many of these environmental refugees, and from where emigration to Spain has intensified during the last decade, increasing from 1 million (in 1995) to 4.8 million in 2005 (or 11.2%).

In his address to the conference, UNCCD Executive Secretary Hama Arba Diallo said that the potential for political instability from drought, famine or forced migration as a result of desertification is enormous. He stressed that most migrants fleeing drought and desertification don't want to leave their countries, but are forced to do so; a fact which policy makers often fail to underline.

Several policy proposals were adopted, one of which calls for international and multidisciplinary scientific analyses on the

link between desertification and migration. Another deals with new international initiatives, such as the creation of an International Panel to Combat Desertification (IPCD), to assess global knowledge and develop proposals for bottom-up policies and measures.

Noting that Spain has experienced the greatest impact from desertification and migration of all the EU countries, participants suggested that it develop a research body to create policies on the interrelationship between desertification and migration.

Also proposed was a joint Spanish-Mexican-German initiative within the OECD to study these linkages and promote solar energy in drylands in the most affected countries. Spain and Germany have already been cooperating in this field since 1981 through the "Plataforma Solar de Almería" (PSA).

Close to one-third of developed countries have restricted immigration from developing countries, and strengthened border controls have been introduced. A salient point made during the event, however, putting the issue into perspective, was that no nation can build a wall around itself high enough to deter the forces that further degrade the land and accelerate poverty.

To read the conclusions, please visit: www.sidym2006.org



Montpellier: Civil Society Calls for Action

"We affirm that desertification isn't a fate, that it can and must be fought, and that the time for determined action has come!"

These were the resolute words summing up the Montpellier Appeal to Combat Desertification, launched on 22 September at the Forum on Civil Society and Desertification held in Montpellier, which was attended by more than 200 organizations from around the world working on issues of sustainable development in drylands. The initiative for the event was based on the feeling that the time had come to define civil society's role in implementing national and international programmes of action in dryland areas.

Last September, former United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan told more than 2,500 representatives of NGOs gathered in New York for their last annual meeting before his term ended in December, that he looked back "with some pride and satisfaction on a decade in which UN-civil society interactions have both widened and deepened. From debt relief and the fight against disease to good governance and human rights, the global NGO revolution has helped move the agenda and given new life and new meaning to the idea of an international community."

With regard to the fight against desertification, Hama Arba Diallo, Executive Secretary of the UNCCD, affirmed at the opening of the



conference that civil society clearly has a major and multi-faceted role to play, and that the meeting would explore ways to develop more efficient strategies for involving civil society in these efforts.

The conference was divided into six workshops, prepared beforehand by means of an electronic discussion forum, and which covered three important issues: Firstly, how to increase the priority given to drylands on the national and international political agenda; secondly, how to develop the potential of economic activities in the drylands; and thirdly, the role and strategy of civil society organizations and their national and international networks.

The full text of the Montpellier appeal is available on the website under: http://www.desertif-actions.org/files/Desertif_DeclaMtpl_EN.pdf

Algiers: Desertification and the International Policy Imperative

Algiers hosted the final event of the International Year, a conference entitled 'Desertification and the International Policy Imperative', convened by the United Nations University (UNU) with ten partner agencies. In his opening speech, President Abdelaziz Bouteflika of Algeria said it was "more important than ever" to put into practice measures agreed at the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro to tackle desertification and preserve non-renewable resources. H.E. Mr. Cherif Rahmani, Algeria's Minister for Land Management and Environment, and IYDD Honorary Spokesperson, gave recognition to "the people of the deserts" participating in the conference and noted Algeria's leadership role in combating desertification.



The basic tenet of the conference was that proper policies are needed to protect existing vegetative cover from unsustainable land management practices. These in turn can be strengthened by creating viable alternative livelihoods for dryland populations and directly linking them to national strategies to combat desertification and for poverty reduction; and that more can be achieved through greater synergy among the major environmental conventions. Since environmental management approaches for combating desertification, mitigating climate change and conserving biodiversity are interlinked, joint implementation of the conventions can increase their effectiveness to the benefit of dryland people.

The major benefits of a global effort to restore badly-depleted soil resources in developing countries were highlighted by Professor Rattan Lal of Ohio State University. Apart from improving land productivity for crops, it could sequester 1.9 billion metric tons of carbon dioxide annually, reduce erosion and enhance soil biodiversity. Furthermore, a modest improvement in soil quality in developing countries could boost food

production by 20 to 30 million tons per year - enough to feed the number of people being added to their populations annually.

A major item on the agenda was the question of policy challenges. According to conference organizer Zafar Adeel, Director of the UNU's Canadian-based International Network on Water, Environment and Health, bad policies are as much to blame for aggravating desertification as climate change. Examples include agricultural intensification in dry areas and the settlement of nomadic populations, which have worsened desertification by disturbing fragile soil and plant resources and exacerbating salinization.

United Nations Under Secretary-General and Rector of UNU, Hans van Ginkel, urged governments and international development agencies to make desertification a top priority in policy-making. "A wealth of experience in combating desertification has been amassed around the world, but is routinely ignored by policy-makers," he said, adding that he hoped the conference would mark a true change in the way forward.

Participants were also reminded of the potentially huge implications of land degradation in terms of human migration. Janos Bogardi, Director of the UNU Institute for Environment and Human Security in Bonn, pointed out that migrants uprooted primarily by environmental factors now exceed the number of political refugees, while there is an overwhelming expectation that the number of people on the move due to environmental reasons will grow.

The conference ended with two signing ceremonies. In the first, high-level representatives endorsed a proposal initiated by Algeria and Arab ministers requesting that 2010-2020 be named as a decade of deserts and desertification at the next session of the United Nations General Assembly. In the second, six partner research institutes affirmed their commitment to support an international master's degree programme for drylands at the United Nations University.

For more information, please visit: <http://www.inweh.unu.edu/inweh/drylands/IYDD.htm>

Bamako: Giving a voice to young people

"Desertification and the environment are especially critical issues for young people, because as the future generation, they will manage the scarce natural resources as well as suffer the severe consequences of environmental degradation." With these words from UNCCD Executive Secretary Hama Arba Diallo, the International Conference on Youth and Desertification got under way in Bamako, Mali, in early September.

Continued environmental degradation and its related effects, such as poverty, unemployment and forced migration, are hitting young people hard. According to the United Nations, 'World Population Prospects: The 2004 Revision,' 62 per cent of the population in Africa is less than 25 years old, revealing the magnitude of young people directly or indirectly affected by desertification. With the livelihood of the majority of the population in developing countries dependent on agriculture, prospects for the young are bleak.

A main focus of the conference, therefore, was access to proper employment. Nancoma Keita, Minister of the Environment of Mali, took the opportunity to appeal for support in combating desertification "in order to give hope to millions of people suffering its effects and who have no choice but to migrate or to add to the problem through over-exploitation of resources in order to survive."

The UNCCD has already put into place youth and environment management initiatives to combat desertification and poverty in a number of African countries. Similar pilot initiatives have also been launched in

Argentina and China, and are in the process of being launched in the Caribbean countries. Areas of activity include treeplanting, market gardening and eco-tourism.

It was emphasized during the conference that investment in the sustainable use and management of the natural environment could yield many economic opportunities, thus providing young people with a sustainable livelihood while preserving the natural environment.

The full involvement of young people in the fight against desertification was another central objective of the meeting, an issue that was also recognized in Chapter 25 of Agenda 21, adopted at the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development. The participants therefore called on governments to ensure full involvement of young people in the management of natural resources and in the decision-making process. They also called for governments to give priority to creating youth employment as a matter of national urgency.

The launch of a youth camp at the forest of the Madinga Hills also took place, attended by the high level participants. On the final day of the Conference, six young representatives, one from each region, were received by the President of Mali, Amadou Toumani Touré, and briefed him on the outcomes of the meeting.

The Bamako Statement is available on the website under: http://www.iydd.org/documents/iydd_docs/bamako_report.pdf



Opening ceremony of youth camp at the Madinga Hills, Bamako, Mali.
Photo © Piero Gagliardo

New York: Round Table of Experts discusses way forward for the Convention

Efforts to implement the Convention are taking place in a rapidly evolving environment, with drought affecting other climatic zones, including in developed countries and urban areas, while the social and economic effects of desertification, in areas such as health and forced migration, are more apparent than ever.

With this shifting set of circumstances come new challenges which need to be addressed if the Convention is to successfully pursue its goals. It is against this background that a Round Table of Experts, chosen on their personal capacity, was convened on 1 and 2 November in New York to discuss ways and means of assessing the UNCCD process and to identify challenges ahead.

The Round Table marked out a number of priorities for the next decade. For example, that more attention should be given to better integration with climate change, biodiversity and freshwater programmes; capacity-building of civil society organizations and communities; the role of women; long-term education programmes on raising awareness; and recording and protection of traditional knowledge. It also recommended setting a limited number of clear, legally binding targets for implementation of the Convention, and stating quantifiable objectives, time frames and innovative mechanisms for raising financial resources.

The outcome of the meeting is available on the website under: www.unccd.int/convention/NYroundtable/docs/outcome-eng.pdf

World Environment Day and International Biodiversity Day focus on Drylands



Desertification Exhibition Train at Algiers Station.

Deserts and Desertification was the selected theme for the 2006 World Environment Day, which was hosted by Algeria. With the majority of its territory covered by the Sahara, the world's largest desert, and as a committed partner in the fight against desertification, Algeria was a highly appropriate choice as host country. "Don't Desert Drylands!" was the ringing slogan adopted to mark the day,

signalling an urgent appeal to the international community.

UNCCD Executive Secretary, Hama Arba Diallo, attended the celebrations in Algiers, thanking H.E. Mr. Cherif Rahmani, Algeria's Minister for Land Management and Environment, for his tireless efforts in the fight against desertification. He affirmed

that it was due in large part to his initiative and commitment that 2006 had been designated International Year of Deserts and Desertification, and that as IYDD Honorary Spokesperson he had played a pivotal role in conveying its message and in promoting the related events.

"Desertification is hard to reverse, but it can be prevented," former Secretary-General Kofi Annan said in his message to mark the day. "Protecting and restoring drylands will not only relieve the growing burden on the world's urban areas; it will contribute to a more peaceful and secure world."

In a landmark report issued the same day entitled 'Global Deserts Outlook', UNEP noted the threats and opportunities in the world's twelve desert regions. The report states how the world's deserts are facing dramatic changes as a result of global climate change, high water demands, tourism and salt contamination of irrigated soils. According to UNEP Deputy Executive Director Shafqat Kakakhel, however, far from being barren wastelands, deserts emerge as biologically, economically and culturally dynamic, while being increasingly subject to the impacts and pressures of the modern world.

UNEP also issued guidelines for the increasing numbers of desert tourists to preserve the environment; from drinking purified, as opposed to mineral water in plastic bottles, to using gas rather than firewood for cooking. "Tourism based around desert nature can, if sensitively managed, deliver new prospects and perspectives for people in some of the

poorest parts of the world," Mr. Kakakhel said.

Underlining the connection between desertification and the Millennium Development Goals, Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika urged the adoption of a World Charter on Deserts to help achieve the first Millennium Goal of halving poverty by 2015.

The International Day for Biological Diversity, held annually on May 22, also reflected the IYDD in its theme for 2006 - "Protecting Biodiversity in Drylands." Mr. Ahmed Djoghlaif, Executive Secretary to the Convention, said "If implemented, the Convention's programme of work on the biological diversity of dry and sub-humidlands can encourage conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity in drylands. It is within our power to substantially reduce the rate of loss of biological diversity in drylands by the year 2010 and make a substantial contribution to poverty reduction, for the sake of all life on earth."

Mr. Djoghlaif stated that the CBD activities launched during the IYDD represented the strengthened commitment of the CBD to the preservation of life and livelihoods in the unique and vulnerable drylands of the World.

*For further information on the CBD, please visit its web-site: www.biodiv.org

*For more on the UNEP publication 'Global Deserts Outlook' please see: <http://www.unep.org/geo/gdoutlook/>

Beijing: Women on the Front lines Combating Desertification

Beijing was the setting mid-year for a major international meeting on the role of women in combating desertification. The city had previously hosted the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995, which recognized that women are most affected by the impact of environmental degradation. In its Platform for Action, the 1995 Conference called upon the international community to take strategic action in overcoming gender inequalities in the management of natural resources and environmental protection, and urged governments to vigorously address women's rights and gender equality as core development concerns.

The fundamental importance of women's equal participation in the economic and political development of communities and countries has now been fully recognized as a central element of development. As former United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan put it: "Gender equality is more than a goal in itself. It is a precondition for meeting the challenge of reducing poverty, promoting sustainable development and building good governance".

The UNCCD's bottom-up approach in tackling desertification, which emphasizes the involvement of the local community, specifically underlines "the important role played by women". The significance of the issue was also highlighted by the choice of Women and Desertification as the 2005 theme to celebrate the World Day to Combat Desertification and Drought.

In his statement to commemorate the day, Kofi Annan said: "...women living in dry lands tend to rank among the poorest of the poor, with little power to bring about real change. The United Nations Convention on Desertification and Drought underlines the important role played by women in ensuring implementation of the Convention. Yet, with ownership and decision-making over land and livestock remaining predominantly in the male domain, women are often excluded from participation in land conservation and development projects, from agricultural extension work, and from the overall policy-making process."

It has indeed been widely acknowledged that women have a special potential for promoting rural development because they work with natural resources on a daily basis. However, rural development projects and food-for-work schemes that targeted women exclusively still had only limited success. It became clear that when countering soil degradation and rural poverty, focusing on women alone would help little if the basic structure of inequality between men and women remained unaddressed.

For this Beijing meeting on women and desertification, experts in the fields of gender issues and sustainable development, and representatives of civil society came together with high-level country representatives and other eminent personalities to share experiences and discuss questions such as:

- What has changed in rural women's conditions, ten years after the Beijing Conference?
- Do women still have a special role in combating desertification?
- Does it matter for land management whether the decision-maker is a man or a woman?

Following an opening ceremony attended by approximately 400 people and a roundtable discussion with ministers from Bulgaria, Algeria and China and other governmental representatives, participants broke into thematic working groups, which came up with a number of proposals. These were incorporated into the Beijing Statement, which was adopted at the end of the conference.

The Statement addresses institutional issues, including ways to use the intersessional intergovernmental working group (IIWG) to follow up on the Beijing discussions; main priorities for action, including water and resource management, energy, food security, health and education; funding mechanisms; monitoring; and implementation mechanisms. Participants also recommended that the Beijing Statement be placed on the COP-8 agenda and that a follow-up meeting should take place in two years.

The Beijing Statement is available on the website under: http://www.iydd.org/documents/iydd_docs/bsfrev4.pdf



Photo © Michael Martin.

Photo Exhibit

The Beauty of Deserts - The Challenge of Desertification

A major photo exhibition entitled "The Beauty of DESERTS - The Challenge of DESERTIFICATION" opened its doors to the public on 30 October at the United Nations Headquarters in New York. US Congressman Donald Payne and Mostafa Tolba, former UNEP Executive Director, participated in the opening ceremony.

A selection of striking images by German photographer and author of "Deserts of the World", Michael Martin, as well as the winners of the first UNCCD photo contest, and photographers from the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) depicted the day-to-day struggle of people living in the drylands as well as the fragile beauty and proud cultural heritage of the world's deserts. Photo captions provided an informative insight into the global issue of desertification as well as daily life in the desert. The month-long exhibition was organized by the Secretariat of the UNCCD, in collaboration with the Governments of Algeria and Italy and IFAD.

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