Conference

Climate change – can soil make a difference?

Brussels, Thursday 12 June

Opening address of Luc GNACADJA
UNCCD Executive Secretary

Excellences Mesdames et Messieurs les Ministres,
Monsieur le Commissaire à l'Environnement de la Commission européenne,
Mesdames et messieurs les experts et chercheurs,
Distingués participants,

Je voudrais avant tout propos, féliciter la Direction Générale de l'Environnement de la Commission européenne pour cette remarquable initiative, et vous remerciez cher M. Dimas, Commissaire européen à l'environnement pour m'avoir invité à présider cette conférence. Je crois qu'elle sera une contribution majeure dans la dynamique nécessaire pour opérer un véritable changement de paradigme dans l'approche actuelle du combat pour faire face aux changements climatiques qui menacent notre existence même.

Ce changement de paradigme est une nécessité, une exigence et une urgence.

Pensez donc ! Au cours des quinze dernières décennies, l'humanité a créé une machine infernale en dégradant à la fois le sol et l'atmosphère qui à leur tour se dégradent réciproquement. Et pour briser ce cercle vicieux nous n'avons à ce jour orienté nos attentions que vers l'atmosphère. C'est une démarche insuffisante voire même une voie sans issue !

Il y a urgence à atteindre des objectifs plus ambitieux de réduction de nos émissions de gaz à effet de serre.

Il y a donc nécessité à y associer tout le monde y compris ceux qui ne sont pas la cause du problème qui menace néanmoins de les emporter en premier, je veux parler des populations des pays en développement.

C'est par conséquent une exigence que d'utiliser tout le potentiel humain ainsi que celui de la nature pour relever les défis des changements climatiques.

So, can soil make a difference?

In order to cope with the challenge, we need to solve a multitude of problems simultaneously. The burden of poverty must be reduced, particularly in the rural areas. Ways and means for effective adaptation to and mitigation of climate change, as well as for cutting further release of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere must be identified and implemented. Provision of adequate and affordable food must be ensured.

In this context, the global importance of enhanced land and soil management is becoming increasingly clear.

As we shall soon hear from a number of experts, carbon as plant organic matter is sequestered in soils. Consequently soils contain more carbon than is contained in

vegetation and the atmosphere combined. This has important implications to considerations on climate change.

We will also hear about various methods that significantly enhance carbon sequestration in soil while improving soil properties. Although these methods are widely recognized by the scientific community, they are yet to be applied at a large scale, and thus provide major opportunities in increasing carbon sequestration.

Indeed, interlinkages between soil and climate change are significant and should be better reflected in policy-making processes.

Increased attention to land and soil in the negotiation tables on climate change would not only enrich the substantive and conceptual debates on effective means for carbon sequestration. It would also provide a new and a highly interesting platform for developing countries to engage into the adaptation and mitigation agendas, considering that for many of them soil is the single most important capital and asset for development.

Bringing agricultural land use into the realm of implementation mechanisms on climate change could re-define the concept and the content of international development cooperation. The current country-driven system would be complemented by collaboration arrangements between private sector stakeholders, with rural areas in developing countries among the beneficiaries. The political implications, as well as the increase of volume in financial and technological transactions targeting agriculture, as well as the improvement of the livelihood of the most vulnerable could be enormous.

However, there are yet many questions to be solved in better linking soil and climate change, particularly those concerning monitoring methodologies.

Distinguished participants,

The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), is the sole multilateral environmental agreement (MEA) on land and soil degradation. It is one of the so-called Rio Conventions, thus a ‘sister convention’ to the conventions on climate change and biodiversity.

A positive resolve to stimulate UNCCD implementation was expressed last September in Madrid, as Parties to the Convention adopted the 10-year strategic plan and framework to enhance the implementation of the Convention (2008-2018). The new strategy targets the use of effective and practical approaches to sustainable land management with synergy as a systemic approach.

The main strategic objectives are:

- To improve the livelihood of affected populations;
- To improve the productivity of affected populations;
- And thirdly, my favorite, to generate global benefits;
- To mobilize resource to support the implementation of the Convention through building effective partnerships between national and international actors.

The decision adopting the Strategy also called for managerial and systemic reforms toward RBM (result based management) in the UNCCD processes. Those reforms imply inter alia:

- Under the CST (Committee on Science and Technology), a commonly agreed and globally recognized baselines and indicators to monitor desertification, land degradation and drought;
- Under the CRIC (Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention), new and standardized reporting guidelines for all parties and stakeholders of the Convention.

So, I trust this conference's outcomes will be valuable inputs for those reforms in progress and for improving the synergies in the implementation of the Rio Conventions.

To all of us, I wish a very fruitful conference.

Thank you.