

Global Youth Initiative for Combating Desertification

Youth in Action for Combating Desertification

8 September 2017, Ordos, China

We, the youth delegates around the world attending the Youth Forum of the thirteenth session of the Conference of the Parties (COP 13) to the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) in Ordos, China, would like to extend our gratitude to the Government of China for its support of our involvement in combating desertification and land degradation, its generous funding and its hosting of the Youth Forum.

With this Declaration, we intend to put forth our shared vision and build a roadmap towards strengthening young people's engagement in the fight against the desertification impacts of climate change and the unsustainable use of natural resources. We aim to emphasize our commitment, starting from our respective countries, and contribute to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in particular target 15.3 on land degradation neutrality (LDN) by 2030.

I. Background

We are aware that 40% of young people are either unemployed or have poorly paid jobs. Limited education opportunities and poor working conditions make young people more vulnerable to extremist ideologies and hinder countries' growth and their chances of developing sustainably.

We believe that the current economic and education opportunities are not inclusive. Considerably more can be done to promote conservation practices and protect our limited resources. According to the Business and Sustainable Development Commission 2017 report, 71 million jobs could be created in the food and agriculture sector alone, while land restoration strategies will ensure healthy ecosystem production, generating around \$1 trillion a year.

We recall: the Convention text of the UNCCD, underscoring the importance of capacity building among all individuals, especially women and youth, with the cooperation of non-governmental organizations and local organizations. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development acknowledges the need to empower youth and also to recognize and facilitate their agency in implementing the SDGs.

II. The roles of youth

We, the major stakeholders and future leaders of our world, when empowered, have the potential to contribute to and solve the urgent global challenges we are facing.

We, who grew up and continue to grow in a changing world, are fully prepared to confront and adapt to current and future challenges, particularly those concerning social, economic and environmental issues.

We can play a fundamental role in the decision-making process, providing constructive feedback and serving as a bridge between decision-makers and civil society.

We are the new forces to drive change, with fresh ideas, innovative technologies, inventive methods and the means to eradicate poverty and pave the way for a new sustainable economy.

III. The commitments of youth

We acknowledge and value this opportunity to ensure the voices of young people are heard at the COP. We aim to motivate the public by making the SDGs more tangible and relevant from the local perspective, and to inspire people to become positive drivers for the sustainable change in their everyday lives. In order to understand and fully face up to our responsibilities, we have set ourselves the following specific challenges:

- (a) Applying ourselves to pursue ways of catalyzing change within our own spheres of influence (online and offline);
- (b) Acquiring and enhancing our knowledge and technical and vocational skill to contribute to the relevant job markets, particularly those related to land restoration and sustainable land and water resources management;
- (c) Actively participating in relevant youth platforms (online and offline);
- (d) Campaigning and promoting research and policies that support the implementation of SDG 15.3 on LDN;
- (e) Providing constructive feedback and suggestions to all Parties on how better to encourage youth from different regions to take part in land and climate dialogue;
- (f) Designing innovative and creative solutions to contribute to the implementation of LDN;
- (g) Establishing social and professional networks and alliances that promote and support the implementation of LDN in order to address land as a key element to solve climate change issues;
- (h) Actively promoting youth initiatives and the empowerment of young women in the area of sustainable land and water management;
- (i) Getting personally involved in volunteering activities related to conserving land and water resources, and pro-actively participating in and promoting awareness and engagement among our peers on the sustainable restoration and management of degraded environmental resources.

IV. The call for stakeholder support

To meet all the above challenges, we, the global youth, call on all national and international governmental and non-governmental organizations, associations, academia, businesses and Civil societies, including youth-led civil societies, and United Nations agencies to pursue the following commitments:

- (a) **Investing in equal and quality education, both formal and non-formal, for all youth, particularly young women, and building strong awareness of environmental issues, land**

and social rights from a young age;

- (b) **Equipping young graduates and high school leavers with knowledge and practical skills,** which are useful for succeeding on the green jobs market, particularly in the land restoration and conservation of land and water resources sectors.
Potential featured activities include: organizing and supporting relevant educational, vocational or technical training and digital technology skill-development, which are directly linked to the job market. This also includes special educational and practical programmes (e.g. afforestation and irrigation techniques and the sustainable use of agriculture inputs) targeting a variety of youth groups;
- (c) **Establishing apprenticeship programmes and young innovator programmes that promote the growth of young talent, offering the chance to learn and be creative,** particularly in the area of sustainable land and water resource management. This would encourage and enable young talent to turn ideas into businesses. Low-interest loans, funds and resources for youth programmes could be provided by trade unions, employer organizations and the private sector;
- (d) **Investing in and supporting young researchers in producing fresh research and insights, connecting local, national and global knowledge to address the gaps in land issues** by setting up research funds or financing young researchers;
- (e) **Investing in the circular and green economy and science and technology, and implementing policies that promote sustainable land and water use and management, for example renewable energies.** This branch of the market is in need of incentives to grow and develop, creating new job openings in these areas;
- (f) **Working towards a revival of farming and agriculture-related occupations,** making the agricultural sector more modern and appealing to young people, subsidizing the farming economy, ensuring land access and rights, and providing young people with incentives, expertise and funds to launch new enterprises;
- (g) **Sharing knowledge, including indigenous agricultural practices, and consulting with younger people to help analyze problems from a different angle and promote youth involvement in decision-making on environmental matters.** This could be achieved through the organization of regular meetings, workshop seminars and youth conferences at local, national and international level;
- (h) **Supporting and facilitating both online and offline spaces/platforms for national and international dialogue, consultations, social media campaigns and volunteering activities,** reaching out to marginalized communities, inviting young people to work together and promoting their roles as advocates and partners in supporting SDG 15.3 on LDN and contributing to building sustainable peace for future generations:
 - (i) As host country of this Youth Forum, for example, China could be the starting point for such platforms. The Youth Initiative to combat desertification and land degradation will be a platform to promote and facilitate the support of SDG 15.3 among young people in order to voice their ideas to decision-makers.
 - (ii) United Nations Volunteers and other United Nations agencies could also take this opportunity in China, making use of relevant volunteering projects of the All-China Youth Federation or other similar projects in other regions. Through these initiatives, Chinese and international young volunteers could be mobilized to carry out relevant

volunteering service activities related to restoring degraded land and water resources globally.

- (iii) Youth involvement could also benefit from academic societies and institutions actively sharing (or disseminating) their research outcomes with young people or youth-led organizations in order to promote the circulation of information and knowledge.
- (iv) Offline facilitation of knowledge and technology transfer, that is, the latest agricultural technologies, will benefit the young people in underprivileged rural communities.

V. Final remarks

Finally, we invite the parties of COP 13 to take steps to implement the outlined recommendations. We call upon the Parties to **include the Youth Initiative in their discussions and take it into consideration in the decision-making process** to ensure that future generations have the tools to effectively confront impending social and environmental issues and the means to protect mother earth.

COP13 to the UNCCD is a starting point and stepping stone to motivate and engage other youth locally and globally to conserve and restore our limited land resources.

It is not enough to want change: we have to be the change we want to see. Alone we can walk but, together, we can run. As such, unity is highly essential to obtain the stated objectives and we are eager to take the necessary steps to build a more sustainable and fairer future for all. We look forward to 2030 and beyond, where many global challenges will be overcome with the achievement of SDG target 15.3.