

## 17 June 2013 World Day to Combat Desertification



*The theme of the 2013 World Day to Combat Desertification is drought and water scarcity. To mark this day, the UNCCD and partners are calling on civil society, governments, schools, the media and others to organize events and awareness raising activities on the themes of water scarcity and drought preparedness.*

### **Water - precious resource**

Freshwater is valuable. Of all the water on Earth, only 2.5 per cent is freshwater. And of all this freshwater, the total usable supply for ecosystems and humans is less than 1 per cent.<sup>i</sup> When demand for water exceeds available supply, it results in water scarcity. This is why the World Economic Forum, in their Global Risk Report 2013, suggests that decreasing water supply is among the top five risks, both by likelihood and impact, that humanity faces over the next ten years. Increasing water scarcity and drought, in part as a result of climate change, will have potential catalytic negative social and economic impacts on food security, energy availability, political stability and peace.

Freshwater is renewable, but depends on the continued healthy functioning of ecosystems.<sup>ii</sup> Some 70 per cent of the freshwater available globally is held in the soil and is accessible to plants, and only 11 per cent is accessible as stream flow and groundwater.<sup>iii</sup> Globally, agriculture accounts for at least 70 per cent of freshwater use, up to 90 per cent in some fast-growing economies.<sup>iv</sup> But unsustainable agricultural practices pollute fresh water sources and cause land to become degraded. Land degradation in turn lowers water tables, resulting in water shortages and salt intrusion in coastal areas, and worsening the effects of drought on affected populations and ecosystems. It is predicted that the effects of desertification, land degradation and drought may expose almost two-thirds of the world's population to increased water stress by 2025.<sup>v</sup>

### **Drought in the drylands**

When land degradation occurs in the drylands, it is called desertification. Drylands are particularly vulnerable to water scarcity. The projected intensification of freshwater scarcity will cause greater stresses in drylands. While each person needs at least 2,000 cubic meters of water for human well-being and sustainable development every year, on average, people in the drylands have access to only 1,300 cubic meters. This is one of the reasons that some of the people living in the drylands are the poorest in the world. The increasing frequency, intensity and duration of severe drought episodes are putting additional pressure on an already over-stretched drylands water system.

Droughts have a critical impact on agricultural production and have contributed to soaring food prices and shortages worldwide. In 2012, landholders large and small, in food exporting countries and poor countries, were hit hard by drought. But it is people in the drylands, especially small holder farmers and the landless poor in rural areas in the developing world, who are most likely to go hungry and even lose their lives. The prolonged droughts in the Horn of Africa (2011) and the Sahel (2012) resulted in humanitarian crisis, leaving millions hungry and malnourished, especially children.

### **Preparedness saves lives**

But drought does not have to claim lives. Unlike earthquakes and other natural disasters, drought is predictable, and the effects can be mitigated. Desertification is also predictable, avoidable and often reversible through the restoration of degraded lands where feasible. But maybe it is because drought and land degradation creep up on mankind slowly and silently, that the world is fooled into underestimating their economic, social and humanitarian impacts until it is too late.

There are many strategies that can be adopted to help save lives and livelihoods in drought-affected communities. By reframing policies in terms of drought preparedness and risk management, as opposed to disaster response, investments can be made that are much more cost-effective and life-saving than sending humanitarian aid after a crisis has occurred. Through social and economic interventions among vulnerable communities, capacity and resilience to withstand the effects of drought can be strengthened. By encouraging sustainable land management, establishing early warning systems leading to early actions and incentivizing alternative livelihoods to agriculture and pastoralism, the effects of drought, especially among the world's poor, need not be so devastating.

At the recent United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) held in 2012, world leaders called for collective action to achieve “a land-degradation neutral world”. A land-degradation neutral world is one where land degradation is avoided, degraded land is restored and healthy soil is protected, preferably within the same eco-system. When soil is healthy, it holds more ground water, and the effects of drought are less severe.

### **Call for your action**

The goal of the 2013 World Day to Combat Desertification is to create awareness about the risks of drought and water scarcity in the drylands and beyond, calling attention to the importance of sustaining healthy soils as part of post Rio+20 agenda, as well as the post-2015 sustainable development agenda.

This year's slogan, “Don't let our future dry up” calls for everyone to take action to promote preparedness and resilience to water scarcity, desertification and drought. The slogan embodies the message that we are all responsible for water and land conservation and sustainable use, and that there are solutions to these serious natural resource challenges. Land degradation does not have to threaten our future.

To break the downward spiral of desertification, poverty and water/food insecurity in the world's drylands, the risks of water scarcity and drought must be integrated into the sustainable development agenda at all levels. A key element of integrated water resource and drought risk management is a comprehensive and participatory process, one that includes all stakeholders, and avoids the institutional silos that can sometimes thwart sustainable natural resource management. The 2013 World Day to Combat Desertification is aligned with the appeal of the International Year of Water Cooperation, which calls for joint efforts to mobilize resources for sustainable solutions to water scarcity and the effects of drought.

The 2013 World Day to Combat Desertification campaign will kick-off during the High-level Meeting on National Drought Policies (HLMNDP) to be held from 11-15 March 2013 in Geneva, Switzerland. HLMNDP is organized by the UNCCD, World Meteorological Organization, FAO and other partners.

The goal of the 2013 World Day to Combat Desertification can be achieved through the following three operational objectives:

**1. Call for a Land-Degradation Neutral World**

Raise awareness among the public that avoiding land degradation and restoring degraded land not only keep ecosystems working, but contribute to freshwater and food security. Organize events and activities that introduce the concept of a land-degradation neutral world, a world where degraded land is restored and healthy soil is protected, preferably within the same ecosystem.

**2. Prevention and Preparedness**

Promote actions at the local and national level to reduce the impacts of drought, including proactive mitigation and planning measures, preparedness and risk management, public outreach and resource mobilization.

**3. Promote the Policy Outcomes of the High Level Meeting on National Drought Policy**

Ask your policy makers how they will implement the outcomes of the High-level Meeting on National Drought Policy, which will focus on the importance of establishing national and local drought policies. The high-level meeting will be held on 11-15 March 2013 in Geneva, Switzerland.

You can also organize your event for the Day as an observance of the United Nations Decade for Deserts and the Fight against Desertification (2010-2020) and the International Year of Water Cooperation (2013), which all focus on water security and the importance of global cooperation.

Join us in observing the 2013 World Day to Combat Desertification. Help spread the word by planning events and telling others about the Day. The following resources will be available from the 2013 World Day to Combat Desertification web-page: <http://www.unccd.int/en/programmes/Event-and-campaigns/WDCD/>

- Logo
- Fact sheet
- Awareness raising materials
- The video “Liloe’s Story”, for a land degradation neutral world <http://unddd.unccd.int>

For further information, contact:

Awareness Raising, Education and Communication Unit  
United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD)  
P.O.Box 260129, 53153 Bonn, Germany  
Web-site: [www.unccd.int](http://www.unccd.int)  
Email: [arce@unccd.int](mailto:arce@unccd.int)

<sup>i</sup> <http://www.unwater.org>

<sup>ii</sup> Facts and Figures from the United Nations World Water Development Report 4 (2012).

<sup>iii</sup> Global Environment Outlook GEO 4. Environment for development (2007). Nairobi: United Nations Environment Programme. [http://www.unep.org/geo/GEO4/report/GEO-4\\_Report\\_Full\\_en.pdf](http://www.unep.org/geo/GEO4/report/GEO-4_Report_Full_en.pdf).

<sup>iv</sup> Facts and Figures from the United Nations Water Development Report 4 (2012).

<sup>v</sup> Global Environmental Outlook 4 (2007). UNEP [http://www.unep.org/geo/geo4/report/04\\_water.pdf](http://www.unep.org/geo/geo4/report/04_water.pdf)