



Opening remarks by UNCCD Executive Secretary Mr. Ibrahim Thiaw

On the occasion of the Virtual meeting of the COP 14 Bureau
Friday, 26th June 2020, 12h30 – 14h30

Mr. President,

Dear Bureau members,

Thank you for joining this virtual meeting.

I sincerely appreciate your engagement with the UNCCD, particularly during these extraordinary times as the world faces the COVID-19 pandemic. As COP bureau members, you are UNCCD's most important voices. As the health of humanity depends on the health of the planet, we need your continued guidance and leadership for an effective response and a sustainable and inclusive recovery anchored on land-based solutions.



I would like to recognize and thank our COP presidency, for its unfailing support. I would also like to seize the opportunity to congratulate Costa Rica and Carlos Manuel for his selection as the next CEO and Chairperson of the Global Environment Facility (GEF). It makes us proud and we look forward to continuing working closely with him in his new capacity.

Mr. President,

As we are meeting today, the diverse and severe impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic continue to unfold and to cause suffering. The COVID-19 has deepened pre-existing inequalities, exposed vulnerabilities in social and economic systems which have, in turn, amplified the impacts of the pandemic. And as ever, the poorest and most vulnerable suffer most.

This crisis is placing development gains at risk and throwing us even more off track in our efforts to achieve Land Degradation Neutrality and the Sustainable Development Goals. Experts have acknowledged that rebuilding to pre-crisis levels of employment and output may take years.



At the same time, governments, organizations, communities, and people are stepping up in extraordinary ways. Helping address the COVID-19 crisis is also a priority of our Convention. We are committed to playing our part.

The role of the COP bureau is, therefore, critical in steering us in the right direction and keeping us moving towards the global common good.

I would like to briefly address three key issues which will be discussed in more depth during our discussion.

First, the importance of land-based solutions for healthy people as our motto “healthy land; healthy people” is truer today than ever.

Second, the concrete solutions we need to harness to help address today’s crisis, including actions taken by UNCCD. In that regard, I am very pleased that environment and land degradation are central to the Saudi G20 Presidency and I look forward to Abdu Al Sharif’s presentation.



Third, the importance of integrating land- and nature-based solutions as a fundamental part of our response to the pandemic through a Social Contract for Nature.

Mr. President,

First, allow me to underscore once more that land is the foundation for all life on Earth. This was echoed by all, throughout our very successful celebrations of Desertification and Drought Day last week. I am proud to inform you that our total outreach neared 70 million people. Thank you all for your contributions and for amplifying our voice.

How land is used and managed influences nature, food, water, energy, climate, and even our health. Land degradation elevates human health and safety risks, including the emergence of novel infectious diseases.

Land - and all the services ecosystems it provides, is therefore key to a more prosperous and resilient future. By understanding the true value and potential of land for people and the planet, we can safeguard and



secure a more prosperous and resilient world where the needs of people and nature are in balance.

Mr. President,

This brings us to my **second point**. The pandemic has derailed many plans and programmes. It has shifted our focus away from long-term planning to immediate needs. It has also brought to the fore the importance of implementing solutions at sufficient scale.

On that basis, UNCCD undertook an assessment of its work programme with a view to reflect the realities of the COVID-19 crisis.

The objective was threefold:

- First, to better adapt our work to the changing external environment.
- Second, to better address the needs and priorities of our Parties and see in the current context, how to best deliver on decisions taken at COP14.
- And third, to ensure that we continued to have the best conditions to do our job under challenging circumstances.

During this exceptional time, we have remained committed to



delivering our mandate, providing high quality support to you and to all our Parties.

Allow me to here to thank all of you and our Parties for your support in that process which has proven extremely useful. This is a testimony of your commitment and leadership.

Mr. President,

Faced with an increasingly uncertain future, as a global community, it is crucial that we take steps to reduce the risk of future pandemics and find ways to recover the lost resilience in our global systems.

Protecting and restoring natural ecosystems is crucial for avoiding the well-understood risks of the emergence of novel infectious diseases. In addition, avoiding future degradation and reversing harm from the past can accelerate progress on all 17 SDGs in the face of both the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change. Poverty -SDG 1- is now projected to increase for the first time since 1990 (UNU-WIDER, 2020).

It is of utmost important that we bring the world's attention to the potential of land to address today's crises by creating jobs, protecting



vulnerable communities and steering the economic recovery towards a more sustainable and inclusive path. With your support, we can bring to light the concrete solutions we need to harness and take to scale.

This brings me to **my third and last point**. As I have said earlier, COVID-19 has derailed many plans. But at the same time, the pandemic has underscored the need to think long term, build resilience and limit the impact of future crises. I firmly believe that with the COVID-19 crisis also comes an opportunity.

With the world's fragilities and inequalities so painfully exposed, we ought to build back better. We have a duty to move away from the business-as-usual mindset, to go further and take active steps to align recovery with sustainable development.

Recognizing that the future of human society, economic prosperity and nature are inter-dependent, UNCCD Parties can help shape a new Social Contract for Nature. One that would allow us to build a fairer, greener and more resilient future that leaves no one behind.



The choices we make as we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic and as the economies open again will lock in our development pathway for decades to come. To be successful, a Social Contract for Nature must enjoy the consent and engagement of the majority and offer economic choice. With the pandemic, it has become critical that we better align economic value with social value.

Getting the economic and social recovery process right for the long term are part and parcel of a successful Social Contract for Nature. And a compact with future generations. This is more important than ever as big financial decisions about the future are being made at all levels.

I am pleased to report that our sister Conventions - UNFCCC and CBD, have agreed to join forces on a Social Contract for Nature. It is being elaborated as an invitation to assume greater collective responsibility and action to improve human health, protect and restore nature, and mitigate and adapt to the impacts of climate change while providing for



overall human wellbeing. It is being built around three key principles: rights, rewards and responsibilities of land management.

I encourage you all to support this call for action.

Mr. President,

Dear Bureau members,

As our Parties are listening and the whole world is watching, we need to continue advocating environmental action to drive transformative change for people and the planet.

I call on you to help us seize this moment of crisis to jointly shape our future for the better. I call for a new Social Contract for Nature.

Thank you again for joining us today, and I look forward to a productive meeting.

Thank you.