



## World Day to Combat Desertification 17 June 2009

### Theme: Conserving land and water = Securing our common future *Background note*

The 2009 World Day to Combat Desertification focuses on the theme: Conserving land and water = Securing our common future.

For much of the previous century and particularly since the end of the Cold War, the world has been undergoing a paradigm shift that sees security expanding beyond the notion of protecting sovereign nations from hostile acts. Security now is a more encompassing notion of assuring people the freedom from want and it recognizes sustainable development as part of this process.

Desertification, land degradation and drought (DLDD) threaten this human security by depriving people of their means of life – by taking away food, access to water, the means for economic activities, and even their homes. Failing policies and climatic change are putting more pressure than ever on the soil. When secure water and food supplies cannot be guaranteed, people frequently migrate to areas where they believe they can find them. The most recent estimates put the number of the environmentally displaced from anywhere between 17 and 24 million people around the world. It is projected that for the period leading up to the year 2050 there will be 200 million environmentally induced migrants.<sup>1</sup>

#### **Responding to destabilized soil security**

The soil security concept claims that the processes of desertification and land degradation as well as prolonged periods of drought greatly affect the livelihood of people, and in extreme cases put the life of these people in danger. Land degradation can, in worst-case scenarios, undermine national and regional security should people be forced to leave their homes. Whether and when this may pose a threat to internal, domestic, national or regional security depends on the specific context, but research has documented the correlation between desertification and conflicts. Such evidence makes it even more obvious that DLDD is a global concern although their occurrence is limited to a territorial scale.

In order for the international community to address effectively the issue of soil security, two different but inter-related concepts need to be understood. One is to **securitize the ground**, and the other is to **ground security**.

**Securitizing the ground** aims at raising the global political awareness of the effects of DLDD on people's lives. Desertification means land degradation in drylands resulting from climate variations and human activities among others. In many dryland countries, combating desertification and promoting development are virtually one and the same due to the social and economic importance of natural resources and agriculture. Combating desertification therefore needs to be recognized as an entry point to address poverty reduction and ecosystem protection. If these points are fully recognized, it is a natural consequence that soil security will become part of national and international development policies. This will help in giving soil security the attention it deserves.

**Grounding security** refers to proactive short-, medium- and long-term strategies for coping with soil insecurity and related effects from global climate change and the loss of biodiversity. To implement these strategies, the *Desertification Synthesis* of the 2005 Millennium Ecological Assessment recognizes the

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<sup>1</sup> Brown, Oli. 2008. *Migration and Climate Change*. IOM Migration Research Series 31. Geneva: International Organization for Migration.

primacy of local approaches and good territorial governance but it recommends also taking both regional and global approaches. On a regional scale, ecosystem management should be strengthened. Investments in human and social capital will improve knowledge about how ecosystems function and how they should be managed, which results in a better understanding of resilience, fragility and the local flexibility of ecosystems. On a broader, more global scale, the vast amounts of technology, engineering capacities and knowledge in the world shall be better shared and deliver benefits to all partners.

### **Global partnership as best method to fight effects of DLDD**

A UNCCD study on the subject recommends a two-way approach. On the one hand, policymakers and institutions need to act at the global level to promote the longer-term sustainability of ecosystem services. Their cooperation with regional organizations and national actors would ensure concrete measures to enhance soil security. Equally important is the active involvement of the stakeholders in a bottom-up approach. Particularly women must get involved with their expertise of local soil conditions. Women possess the primary social networks within families and communities. They educate children in resource management and are responsible for soil management. To optimize the fight against desertification, land degradation and to mitigate the effect of drought, women must fully participate in decision-making at all levels in national, regional and international institutions. Further, scientific and technical knowledge must be used to raise awareness about environmental degradation and climate change.

Now it is time that soil security gains the attention as a security issue. Global partnerships between scientists, international agencies, civil society organizations and governments are key to recognize desertification, land degradation and drought as a mounting threat to security. It is clear that soil insecurity triggers human insecurity. The UNCCD is at the forefront of the international effort to combat desertification, land degradation and the mitigation of drought, promoting territorial development as a factor of social cohesiveness. One of its strategic goals is to improve the lives of affected populations. By securitizing the ground and grounding security, their lives can be improved, and the world's common future secured.

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### ***About UNCCD***

Developed as a result of the Rio Summit, the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) is a unique instrument that has brought attention to land degradation to some of the most vulnerable ecosystems and people in the world. Twelve years after coming into force, the UNCCD benefits from the largest membership of the three Rio Conventions and is increasingly recognized as an instrument, which can make an important contribution to the achievement of sustainable development and poverty reduction.