

**Statement of Mr Luc Gnacadja
Executive Secretary
United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification
on the
World Day to Combat Desertification
17 June 2011**

A good day to you all as you mark the World Day to Combat Desertification.

2011 is the International Year of Forests. Its call is, “celebrating forests for people.” It is also the 2nd year of the UN decade on Deserts and the Fight against Desertification.

I am certain that the discussions and field trips this week have clarified much better than I could ever do in words, that the challenges of desertification, land degradation and drought while real, are solvable. There is evidence that the drylands present challenges, but also offer opportunities and hope through the rehabilitation of degraded lands, access to science that can support the re-greening of areas such as the Sahel, and by developing the small- and medium-sized enterprises that can build the value chain of the drylands products.

Forests are part of that solution, and perhaps even more so in the drylands areas because their life-support role is that much greater in the drylands. It would not be an exaggeration to assume that without the forests, the trees and the shrubs in the drylands, life here may be impossible.

In fact, 42% of the Earth's tropical and subtropical forests are dry forests. They support the livelihoods of their inhabitants, contribute to poverty eradication and increase food security, benefiting especially the poorest and most vulnerable groups among those affected by desertification, particularly women and children. And yet, they are barely considered in the existing forest investment schemes. Their significance is underestimated.

The arid or dry forests are the buffers to climatic shocks in the drylands and are natural barriers to man-made deserts. Hence, the imperative of investing to preserve arid forests; they keep the drylands working.

Drylands are important, not only because of their physical extent, but also on account of our common food security. Food security and poverty will remain constant challenges for decades to come. 44% of the world's food production systems and 50% of its livestock are in the drylands. Therefore, addressing desertification and land degradation are avenues for success.

For instance, and according to a report released this month on global opportunities for forest landscape restoration, 2/5th of the deforested lands - equivalent to 600 million ha - and 2/3rd of the degraded lands - equivalent to 900 million ha - offer restoration opportunities. Most of them are in the semi-arid and dry sub-humid regions. Agroforestry offers a promising avenue for land restoration, while feeding

the poor. Agroforestry is driving the Greening of the Sahel in West Africa, where land improvement trends have been observed on over 5 million hectares.

Land Degradation over the next 25 years may reduce global food production especially in the drylands by up to 12%, resulting in an increase in the world food prices of much as 30%. For our food security, the availability of land for farming is key in maintaining medium and long-term food supply and prices. We must invest to secure the resource base for food security and improve smallholder agricultural productivity, especially in Africa.

Resources such as those provided under the climate change funding schemes, notably REDD Plus and the Green Climate Fund in-the-making, should be used in this respect, as drylands populations will be the most affected by global warming.

Let us aim to improve soil productivity and do whatever it takes to rehabilitate the land. Some land degradation might be inevitable, but we can still achieve a zero-net land degradation. Offsetting the amount of land being degraded each year by reclaiming and improving an equivalent amount of land is an achievable goal.

With political will at the national level, and cooperation at the international level, this paradigm shift is achievable. But the existing and potential contribution of the drylands will not be realized without investing in the prevention and reversal of degradation of the forests and trees in the drylands. May we never forget that forests keep the drylands working.

Before I conclude, let me return to the outcomes from this First Africa Drylands Week. You have reached some consensus on the actions required at the different levels with regard to policy, capacity building and financing strategies, and the approaches needed to implement them. My secretariat is keen to receive and support your recommendations in the discharge of our mandate of facilitating the process of the implementation of the Convention, and the initiatives contributing to it.

In this case, my secretariat will continue its support towards setting in motion the Great Green Wall for the Sahara and Sahel Initiative, as it has done since the initiative's inception in 2005. I would like to congratulate you all for work well done and thank my colleagues at the FAO for spearheading the First Africa Drylands Week. I am also grateful to the Government of Senegal for hosting this year's global observance event and to all those institutions and individuals that have worked together and tirelessly to make this week and event both a reality and a success. It is a testimony to the power of cooperation.

With these brief remarks, may I wish you all a memorable and transformative celebration of the 2011 World Day to Combat Desertification. Lastly, we would like to hear from you about your day; and we will share with you, the achievements of others, who are also marking this day. I thank you for your kind attention.
