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**Message from Ms Irina Bokova,**

**Director-General of UNESCO**

**on the occasion of the World Day to Combat Desertification**

**17 June 2016**

Protect earth, restore land, engage people.

These are the themes of the 2016 *World Day to Combat Desertification*.

Desertification is a global phenomenon, affecting resource availability and sustainability, impacting on the livelihoods of 900 million peoples across all continents, representing one third of worldwide threats to biodiversity.

This is a threat to both arid and non-arid regions, where land over-exploitation, including intensive farming, forest exploitation for fuel and timber and overgrazing, have turned fertile soils into sterile land.

Extreme weather events – like droughts, winds, floods and climate disruptions – are amplifying the effects and adding new causes to the degradation cycle.

The stakes are high – this is why the goal of achieving Land Degradation Neutrality is so important. This is set out in Target 15.3 of the new Sustainable Development Goals, to maintain and even improve the amount of healthy and productive land resources.

Reaching this new goal calls for engaging women and men.

Guided by this spirit, each from their own perspective, the UNESCO Man and the Biosphere Programme, International Hydrological Programme and Global Action Programme on Education for Sustainable Development, are working to engage

people in sustainable land management practices and agro-forestry, in developing green economies, in consuming responsibly, and in restoring ecosystems.

Desertification is not always irreversible. Land restoration is the ultimate tool, and UNESCO is determined to do everything to restore our ecosystems, as was featured during the *World Congress of Biosphere Reserves*, held in Lima, in March 2016.

Desertification is a global threat that requires global action -- this must start with each of us, with our deeper engagement to protecting our planet for all to share.

Irina Bokova