

It had been a long June night in Paris, ten years ago. The negotiation of the Convention to Combat Desertification should have been concluded by midnight but at that moment, the final plenary had not yet even started. Difficult talks on the elusive financial provisions were still locked in disagreement. As Chairman, I could only tell the weary delegates that we were at the end of the road, that a deal had to be struck before the only morning. With the help of the great number of Ministers assembled there, at UNESCO Headquarters, difficulties were overcome, and the Paris Convention was saved, as dawn broke on June 18, 1994. However, the original plan was to conclude by June 17, and that remains World Day of Desertification.

With the present ten year perspective, many negotiators might agree that the final draft could have been different, that certain problems could have been solved in other ways. But the Convention, negotiated at great speed, has nevertheless stood the test of time, and demonstrated its usefulness to the international community as one of the Rio Conventions, alongside Climate and Biodiversity, that had been signed at the Earth Summit in 1992.

The world to-day is very different, and many of our hopes and expectations at that time remain to be fulfilled. But the fundamental ideas behind the Convention retain their strength and relevance. What were the driving forces behind the success of an endeavour that quite unexpectedly emerged out of the negotiations for Agenda 21?

One was Africa. It was African Ministers of Environment that first called for a Convention, in the late autumn of 1991. And the African region remained all through the negotiating process a stimulating and supporting force. Key negotiators, such as René Mongbe of Benin, Mohammed Mahmoud El Ghaout of Mauretania or Bolong Songko of Gambia, gave invaluable contributions all through the intense months of negotiations. And behind them was the constant support and interest of African Heads of State and Ministers. Africa rallied the whole Group of Seventy-seven to this cause and enabled a regional initiative to become a global Convention. For me, the CCD will always remain a symbol of the ability and strength of Africa, the vision of a better future, beyond present conflicts and disasters.

Another decisive element was the Rio process itself. It enabled the idea of a Convention to become embedded in the broad framework of a new diplomacy for sustainable development, based on an increasing understanding of the nature of global threats to the very survival of mankind, such as climate change and the loss of biodiversity. Among these problems are also the need for food security for a growing world population and the close relationship between water and land management.

But Agenda 21 and the Rio Declaration were not only the expression of lofty principles: the negotiations also brought to the surface of international negotiation concerns for public participation, bottom-up approach, and the combat of poverty. These ideas are reflected in the text of the Convention; during the negotiation the active presence of hundreds of grassroots NGO's, not least those representing women's groups, made an important contribution to the process.

Of course we have not come far enough. The international environment of the beginning of the 21st Century has not been favourable to multilateral action on the ground, designed to turn Agenda 21 or the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation into concrete reality.. In particular, the basis for the aid flows needed to support populations in the drylands has not lived up to legitimate expectations. And the credibility of an international instrument is

dependent on its implementation: if people on the ground do not feel that a Convention or a Protocol does not really change their life, it remains an empty shell.

However, on this tenth anniversary, I remain optimistic. All through the difficult implementation of the Convention, since it entered into force in 1996, many countries and other stakeholders, as well as the Secretariat, have constantly struggled to keep the basic ideas alive and much has indeed been achieved: the establishment of national and sub-regional programmes of action, and the important reforms carried out on procedures and structures, just to mention a couple of examples. My good friend Arba Diallo has seen this process through from the beginning. It was a privilege for me to collaborate with him all the way to the first Conference of Parties in 1997, and beyond. His efforts have kept the Convention on track and I feel confident about the future.

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