



***Statement of Luc Gnacadja, Executive Secretary of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification on the Occasion of the World Day to Combat Desertification***

17 June 2009

During this year's commemoration of the World Day to Combat Desertification, I invite you to a walk with me down memory lane because exactly 15 years today, we began the journey to make the Convention to Combat Desertification a reality, when it was adopted in 1994 in Paris.

But in fact, the journey had begun much earlier with the World Commission for Environment and Development that was established in 1987. The Brundtland Commission, as it is widely known, made this perceptive statement: "if human needs are to be met, the Earth's natural resources must be conserved and enhanced." What was crystal clear to the Commission then remains true today: we will not know human security until we are able to conserve our land and water in a manner that enables people everywhere to escape poverty in order to ensure sustainability.

This is why concluding and adopting the Convention to Combat Desertification on 17 June 1994 was a critical step towards attaining that vision. Since then, 193 countries have made that commitment legally binding.

Fifteen years later, however, we are far from attaining that commendable purpose. I think of a little boy called Ousman born in Sudan six years after the historic event in Paris. Now nine years old, Ousman lives and studies in the Abu Shouk Camp for displaced people near El Fasher, North Darfur. He, like many other children in the drylands, is not living at home, where he was born. Ousman is the face of the millions of people now living in the conflict-ridden drylands that stretch from the Atlantic Coast of Africa through the Sahel all the way to the Horn of Africa on the East, then across the Red Sea into Central Asia through Yemen, Afghanistan and Pakistan. He is the face of the children living in the drylands of many African and Middle East countries. Ousman is the embodiment of the increasing number of migrants, staging daring forms of escape from degraded lands throughout the world. Various studies estimate that global environmental change could drive anywhere from 50 to almost 700 million people to migrate by the year 2050.

These developments have brought with them new forms of insecurity beyond their territories as poor, desperate people could easily become the new bearers of arms. Fifteen year old Zaw Tun, from Myanmar, for example, was forced to join the army because his parents could not raise USD500. As with Osman's family in the Sudan, Zaw Tun's family are directly dependent on the land and water for their survival and economic well-being. Without productive land and water availability their food security is threatened; their poverty grows, and migration becomes unavoidable.

These stories bear testimony to the strong link between human insecurity, poverty, land and water. Three out every four poor people in the world live in the rural areas under conditions that are not very different from those of the Tun family in Myanmar. They depend directly on natural resources for their livelihoods. Soil, water and forests are the primary sources of their subsistence and commercial activities.

Worse, scientists warn us that the effects of climate change are exacerbating the situation of the inhabitants of the drylands. They suggest that droughts will become more intense and last longer. There will be more incidences of extreme weather events such as floods. The consequences are the loss of the very plants and animals that the rural communities have depended on for their livelihood. Tragically, these people living in the drylands are not responsible for climate change. Their carbon footprint is the lowest in the world. And although natural factors affect their land and water, they are now the victims of our own consumption habits. Clearly, we as an international community are still a long way from realizing the vision defined in the Brundtland Report and in the UNCCD Treaty.

Securing our common future demands that we pay greater attention to the proper management of our land and water. It demands that we pay attention to the relationships between land and water and the global challenges we face today of climate change, food insecurity, forced migrations, poverty and conflict. In commemorating the World Day to Combat Desertification this year, we call your attention to land and water with reference to where we began the journey and what we hoped for, so that we can re-align our plans going forward.

There is a well-known Chinese saying that the journey of a thousand miles begins with one step. In 1987 we made the first step towards sustainable development; we expressed resolve to conserve our land and water. In 1994 we affirmed that commitment by signing the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification. In 2000 we passed yet another milestone by determining to make poverty history by 2015.

Over the next ten years, we at the UNCCD have made the commitment to promote sustainable land management in order to attain this goal. The conservation of land and water are at the heart of our agenda elaborated in the 10-year strategic plan and framework to enhance the implementation of the Convention (2008-2018) that was agreed by all the Parties to the Convention in Madrid, Spain, in 2007.

In that regard, the next Conference of the Parties to be held in Buenos Aires from 21 September to 2 October 2009 will act on ways and means to mobilize resources through partnership with a view to address the issues of desertification, land degradation and drought by improving the livelihood of affected populations and the conditions of affected ecosystems in order to generate benefits for all.

I invite those of you who would, to journey with us in finding enduring solutions for the 1.2 billion people whose lives are at stake in the drylands, whose insecurity triggers global challenges that threaten our own security. More than anything else, our future is bound together by land and water. Therefore, their destruction is our destruction. A dwindling of their productivity is a diminution of our collective security. Together we can make a difference. I wish you all very joyful celebrations as we begin the next mile of our journey with hope and determination for a secure common future.