

**Conference on Desertification and Land Degradation
Ghent, Belgium - June 17, 2013
World Day to Combat Desertification**

**Desertification: To Care or Not to Care
Realizations of the UNCCD since its Establishment in 1992**

**Keynote Speech by
Luc Gnacadja, UNCCD Executive Secretary**

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, Dear Friends and Colleagues,

Good morning!

It is with great satisfaction that I address you. I would like to congratulate Prof Gabriels, the University of Ghent and all the organizers for having chosen to mark the 2013 world day to combat desertification and mitigate the effects of drought by holding the Conference on Desertification and Land Degradation in order to further harness science, technology, knowledge and lessons learnt through implementation actions from many regions of the world.

Desertification, land degradation and drought (or DLDD): to care of not to care?

How can you not care? More than 1.5 billion people (by a 2008 estimate) are living on degrading land and 3 of every 4 of these, are poor.

How can you not care, when more than 1 billion people are food insecure and we are losing around 12 million hectares of productive land every year due to desertification and drought alone, costing us the opportunity to produce 20 million tons of much needed grain?

How can you turn a blind eye to the over 1 billion people living in the drylands with little or no access to renewable water resources, and 20% of global grain production is using water unsustainably?

How can you stand by and watch the human face of climate change in the form of its impacts on drylands populations, from Pakistan, to Mali, Somalia and right into Europe?

How can you not care when global assessments indicate that the percentage of total land area that is degraded has increased from 15% in 1991 to 25% in 2011?

Today, I would like to share with you both my great concerns and hope about our common fight to roll back desertification and mitigate the effects of drought in all its manifestations, as the world observes and considers progress made. Obviously, while having one day of observance is understandable, we still need 365 days of action on the ground to effectively turn the tide of DLDD issues.

Desertification, along with climate change and the loss of biodiversity, were identified as the greatest challenges to sustainable development during the 1992 Rio Earth Summit. Adopted 19 years ago on 17 June 1994, the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) is the sole legally binding international agreement linking the environment, development and the promotion of healthy land and soils.

The negotiators of the Convention had the foresight to include a clear mandate, as expressed in Article 2 of the Convention Text, which puts forward a long-term vision

integrated with specific strategies. These include actions that improve land and soil productivity at the local level, and supported by policies and institutions focused on the rehabilitation, conservation and sustainable management of land and water resources, with the ultimate goal of improving living conditions.

Over the past two decades, the Convention and its Parties have been delivering on its mandate. I would like to share with you few of those achievements as the Convention approaches its 20th anniversary, sketching them around three majors periods; first, from 1994 to 2007; second, from 2008 to 2013; and third, my hope and expectations from 2013 onward.

The UNCCD entered into force in December 1996 and became one of the most universal Conventions, ratified today by 195 Parties. The number of country parties which have declared themselves affected by desertification processes increased rapidly from some one hundred to 168. To date, 113 parties have prepared national action plans, and sub-regional and regional action plans to foster cooperation and coordination have also been established in the regions.

But those action plans have lacked effective implementation at all levels due to three major reasons:

1. the lack of understanding of DLDD processes which also led to the insufficient mainstreaming of DLDD issues in sustainable development, poverty alleviation and food security in national strategies and platforms
2. the weak scientific basis and monitoring mechanisms to support the implementation
3. insufficient investments to address DLDD issues at all levels.

In 2007, capitalizing on lessons learnt, Parties moved the Convention into a new phase with the adoption of the 10-year strategic plan and framework (2008-2018) to enhance its implementation by forging global partnerships to reverse and prevent desertification and land degradation.

The UNCCD has been moved into the realm of measurability of implementation and effective monitoring, with approved performance and impacts indicators now being used by Parties and stakeholders to monitor and report on implementation. The work of the Convention's institutions and subsidiary bodies namely, the Committee on Science and Technology or CST and of the Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention or CRIC, has been strengthened and articulated around result-based management principles.

- In 2009, the Convention held its 1st Scientific Conference in Buenos Aires on monitoring and assessment, then subsequently, this past April, in Bonn, we hosted our 2nd Scientific Conference on the economics of land degradation and the benefits of sustainable land management in drylands. These conferences and the important work of the subsidiary bodies have helped to strengthen the scientific base of activities to address both the biophysical and socio-economic challenges in our drylands.
- In 2010, the United Nations General Assembly declared the United Nations Decade for Deserts and the Fight against Desertification, which runs from January 2010 to December 2020 to promote action that will protect the drylands.
- Last year (June 2012 in Rio de Janeiro) at the UN Conference on Sustainable Development or Rio+20, while considering DLDD issues in the context of 'The Future We

Want', world leaders called for a paradigm shift in the way we perceive and address desertification, land degradation and drought; and I would like to invite you further to ponder those five paragraphs (205 to 209) of 'The Future We Want'. They stressed "that desertification, land degradation and drought are challenges of a global dimension and continue to pose serious challenges to the sustainable development of all countries, in particular developing countries." The world leaders recognized the need for urgent action to reverse land degradation in view of this, and undertook to strive to achieve a land-degradation neutral world in the context of sustainable development, in order to also catalyse financial resources from a range of public and private sources.

The reasons for hope are laid in the fact that by all global assessments of land degradation, land improvement is taking place mainly in the drylands of the world and for the main part, those gains are the result of grassroots level initiatives such as the ongoing farmer-managed natural regeneration movement across the Sahel in Africa.

The most affected communities are not standing by, but are leading the way to drought resilience, food and water security. While we pondered and planned the actions to take in the Sahel, for instance, affected communities in Niger and Burkina Faso invested in agroforestry and regenerated over five million hectares of farmland from 1975. In the latter half of this period, villagers in the Tahoua region of Niger saw a dramatic rise in the water table by as much as 14 meters,¹ and were less vulnerable to the most recent droughts in the region.

From 2013 onward and, more specifically today, as the Convention's 195 Parties prepare for their 11th Conference to be held in Namibia this September, they continue to work hard to alleviate poverty in the drylands, to maintain and restore the land's productivity, and to mitigate the effects of drought.

Many promising decisions are to be negotiated at this 11th COP, such as a possible target-setting mechanism for the Convention and options to put in place national drought management policies. Other important issues to be considered include the mid-term evaluation of the 10-Year Strategy.

To care is to act on two fronts: On the frontline, that is on the ground, we must help local communities adopt and scale up sustainable land management practices, including the restoration of degraded lands, as these have the greatest potential to transform livelihoods and safeguard the future for the coming generations.

This is the purpose of the Land for Life Award and for which I have the honor of announcing this year's winners on the occasion of the 2013 World Day to Combat Desertification.

The first prize award of USD40,000 goes to Foundation for Ecological Security, a non-governmental organization in India, which was ranked top of the 137 applicants from 62 countries. Poor land governance is one of the leading reasons for the emergence of desertification and land degradation in many parts of the world. FES has found an innovative solution to this problem and for large-scale commons.

The second place was a tie between *Consejo Civil Mexicano para la Silvicultura Sostenible* (CCMSS) from Mexico for its work in The Amanalco Valle Bravo Basin in central Mexico and

¹ Africa Regreening Initiatives, Wednesday, 25 January 2012 Update #2.

World Vision Australia for popularizing Farmer Managed Natural Regeneration in the Sahel Zone of Africa.

As for *Consejo Civil Mexicano para la Silvicultura Sostenible (CCMSS)*, as you know, the most sustainable solutions to our environmental problems are those that find a balance between resource conservation, improving livelihoods and income generation, and CCMSS has found that balance.

I have seen first-hand the impact of the work of World Vision Australia, in the Sahel. The value of traditional and indigenous knowledge systems in environmental management today is often questioned, but in FMNR, the power of traditional knowledge systems that are combined with conventional science truly comes alive. The scale of land rehabilitation in this region and the impact it has had on the well-being of the local people is nothing short of phenomenal.

These three winners exemplify the type of leadership and initiatives that make a difference at the grassroots level. They have succeeded in improving livelihoods while fostering good land stewardship. Much of what they do is simple, but transformational.

Still on the frontline, the UNCCD also hosts the Drylands Champions programme which honors exemplary stewards of the land. These are individual champions, designated by national governments, who have pioneered new solutions or revitalized traditional methods to bring life back to the drylands.

On the policy front, short term action is needed. First is to turn the global aspiration of a land-degradation neutral world into a reality. We need to make sure that this ambitious goal does not remain a platitude, but is supported and encouraged by operational and deliverable targets with clear roadmaps at the national, regional and international levels. How do we translate the commitments made at Rio+20 into global goals that inspire action on the ground?

The Sustainable Development Goals currently being negotiated will tell us what is important but it will be the concrete targets agreed upon that will set the level of ambition for countries. One such target is that of Zero Net Land Degradation which would ensure that the amount of healthy and productive land remains stable or increases. The momentum for goals and targets addressing land degradation is increasing so let us work together to capitalize on this opportunity.

Second in terms of policy, lets us not forget the other side of the equation – drought. We must better prepare for and manage the risks associated with drought. A recent high level meeting on national drought policy held in Geneva lays out a road map for addressing this issue. Global partnerships are required and the UNCCD stands ready to assist countries with their national plans and measures.

If you care...Don't Let Our Future Dry Up through inaction! Take action on whatever front you can.