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EARTH DAY 2020
KEYNOTE ADDRESS ON AGRICULTURE & CLIMATE
CHANGE

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THURSDAY, 23 APRIL 2020
3:05-3:20 PM

Dear friends,

We are all living through a difficult period at the moment, so thank you for taking the time to engage in this important event.

Fifty years ago today, Americans mobilized the world to demand a new contract with nature.

Earth Day was born.

The very name of this day, of our planet, tells us a lot about who we are as a species.

We are creatures of the earth, the soil, the land.



Without healthy and productive land, we could not live.

Can you even imagine a planet on which nothing grew? No crops. No grass. No trees. It is unthinkable.

And yet we, the people of the earth, do not treat the land with the respect it deserves.

As humanity grows larger and wealthier, agriculture, urban spaces and infrastructure are eating into the land.

- Almost three quarters of all land has been transformed from its natural state, and the pace of conversion is accelerating.



- Two billion hectares of once productive land, an area larger than South America, has been degraded, adversely affecting billions of people.
- The health and productivity of existing arable land is declining, accelerated by climate change.

This has caused many problems and is storing up more for the future.

An inability to feed growing populations. Falling biodiversity and shrinking ecosystems, hitting the planet's ability to provide basic services. Accelerating climate change.

Our unhealthy relationship with the land, with nature, is also in part responsible for the COVID-19 crisis.



COVID-19 is an infectious disease caused by a virus that spilled over from a wild animal to humans.

It has wreaked havoc on lives, livelihoods, economies and communities.

It signals that our social contract with nature is a global priority now, more than ever before.

It tells us that land health, ecosystem health and human health are tied together.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Since Earth Day was created, we have put in place many systems and processes to try and arrest the decline of land.



We have the Rio Conventions on biodiversity, desertification and climate change, and its Paris Agreement. We have the Global Goals. These are all milestones to be proud of.

If we are being honest, though, we have to say that the world has yet to deliver on the promises made under these agreements.

We need to mobilize the world to forge a stronger, healthier and more productive life in harmony with nature for years to come.

Today, as part of these efforts, we are going to specifically look at agriculture and climate change.

In this regard, let me offer three insights.

Insight one



Agriculture is hugely vulnerable to climate change, but it is also a major contributor to greenhouse gas emissions.

In fact, when fully accounted for, emissions from agriculture are much higher than generally reported.

Agricultural emissions are not 23 percent, but 37 percent, of all emissions when you add the pre- and post-production costs.

Costs such as refrigeration, food transportation or fertilizer production.

Insight two

Globalization means that land degradation today is driven, primarily, by poor land uses to provide for distant, not local, consumers; for example, urban or foreign consumers.



This removes the oversight consumers had over their local ecosystems, ensuring they functioned well. This disconnect is aiding agricultural emissions.

Insight three

Land-based mitigation actions are effective now, not later because this potential falls with every year of delayed action.

What's more, harnessing that potential now brings additional benefits that go beyond mitigation.

Enhancing land anywhere enhances health and life everywhere.

Ladies and Gentlemen,



Fundamentally, the challenge we face with agriculture is one of land management.

We need to produce more food for growing populations while reducing emissions.

We need to do so without further expanding and degrading land.

To do so, we need to sustainably manage the land.

With this in mind, please allow me to lay out **four pathways** to a meaningful social contract with nature in the context of agriculture, land-use and climate change.

The first pathway is treating land as a limiting factor in our development and land-use planning processes.



Much of human development has been built on the idea that the planet is limitless.

A field stops producing? Slash and burn the forest to create a new one.

Cities getting overcrowded? Expand out into the countryside.

Roads are too busy? Widen existing roads or build new ones.

We can't keep doing this.

If natural land continues to be converted for agriculture to feed a projected global population of 10 billion, only 10 per cent of natural land will be left by 2050.



Continuing with business as usual will increase land emissions while stripping the land's capacity to sequester carbon.

All development must be based on the idea that land is a limiting factor.

This brings us to the second pathway, which is, improving the use of existing land

As demand for agricultural land grows, tradeoffs among competing objectives in land grow too.

But we must not burn our way to prosperity and damage the land systems we live off.



Instead, let us forge global partnerships that promise a more prosperous future by ensuring we plan and use our land well; doing the right things in the right place at the right scales.

For example, planning urban spaces so that they don't encroach on agricultural land.

And by ensuring we only use the land we have already converted.

We need to incentivize agricultural techniques that keep land heathy or recover lost productivity – such as conservation agriculture and agroforestry.

Sustainable land management techniques keep land productive, produce more with less, and slow land conversion.

The third pathway is recovering what has been lost.



We are gearing up for the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration.

I have more good news. The land-degradation neutrality targets nations are setting under the convention I head foresee great restoration plans.

The restoration of land is central to healthy agriculture, a cooler planet, restoring biodiversity and re-igniting economic growth at a time of great economic turmoil.

Let me explain with an example.

The Great Green Wall for the Sahara and Sahel Initiative involves 11 African countries. It's an 8,000-kilometer long ecosystem innovation along the southern border of the Sahara Desert: from Dakar, Senegal, on Africa's west coast; to Djibouti by the Red Sea, on the east.



This programme is sequestering carbon in the soil – up to 250 million tonnes of carbon – through new vegetation cover and increased organic matter.

But it's doing a whole lot more. It's improving access to water, food and energy for communities that typically lived off wild plants, trees and animals.

Partnerships with ethical supply chains from Europe and the United States are helping poor households to produce, sustainably, goods for local and global consumption.

Local governments are creating jobs for the young people that terrorists preyed on. And rural women are owning land.



Inspired by this model, parties to our convention are replicating it widely, in what they often refer to as achieving land degradation neutrality.

The fourth pathway is encouraging more responsible consumption and production

What we buy, where we buy it and how we use it has a massive impact on the land.

One-third of all food produced each year is lost or wasted. This is a footprint of 1.4 billion hectares, close to 30 per cent of the world's agricultural land area.

But it isn't just food. Food with a large environmental footprint and throwaway fashion are also damaging the land.



Changing our diets and shopping behaviours can free up land and lower carbon emissions. Dietary change alone can free up between 80 and 240 million hectares of land.

We must change attitudes to consumption and production – as the UNCCD is doing with this year’s Desertification and Drought Day in June, by encouraging people to look at sustainable use of food, feed and fibre.

But personal choices will only matter where they are backed by full transparency in the value chain, allowing consumers to make the right choices. Business must step up too.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Time is running on, so let me conclude with a challenge to young people, who are the torchbearers of sustainable development.



Children, young people and millennials make up 77 percent of the global population. You are the future.

But even if this future is one of cities and technology, you are still people of the earth. Without land, you will have nothing.

What personal choices will you make for the recovery effort from COVID-19 and for a healthier planet?

I urge you, and everyone else, to recommit to what Earth Day is all about and mobilize the world to create a healthier future for all.

Thank you!