

UNITED NATIONS



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THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

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MESSAGE ON WORLD DAY TO COMBAT DESERTIFICATION

17 June 2011

The people who live in the arid lands, which occupy more than 40 per cent of **our planet's land area**, are among the world's poorest and most vulnerable to hunger. Frequently, they depend on land that is degraded and where productivity has shrunk to below subsistence levels. In the world's efforts to meet the Millennium Development Goals, the challenges facing these "forgotten billion" men, women and children deserve special attention.

This year's observance of the World Day to Combat Desertification falls during the 2011 International Year of Forests, declared by the United Nations General Assembly to educate the global community about the value of forests and the extreme social, economic and environmental costs of losing them. This effort is particularly relevant for drylands, where dry forests and scrubland provide the backbone of arid ecosystems.

Forty-two per cent of the Earth's tropical and subtropical forests are dry forests. Unsustainable land management and agriculture are a significant cause of their depletion – and of the land degradation and desertification that inevitably follow. Sadly, it is only after these ecosystems are compromised that many communities or authorities become fully awakened to the importance of dry forests to society's well-being and prosperity.

The management, conservation and sustainable development of dry forests are central to combating desertification. The ongoing greening of the Sahel and other success stories around the world show that degraded lands can be reclaimed by agroforestry and other sustainable practices. We need to scale up these interventions and disseminate their results widely.

We also need to reward those who make drylands productive, so they will prosper and others will seek to emulate their example. Resources currently under development under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change -- such as REDD Plus and the Green Climate Fund – can go a long way towards improving the resilience of dryland populations, who stand to be affected first and worst by climate change. Too often, investing in drylands has been seen as unproductive or risky, instead of a necessary avenue for improving the well-being of local communities and national economies. Our challenge is to change market perceptions so drylands cease to be investment deserts.

This September, the General Assembly will convene a High-level Meeting on Desertification, Land Degradation and Drought on the eve of the 66th session of the General Assembly. Next year, world leaders will attend the Rio+20 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development. I urge governments and their partners to use

these events to bring greater focus to the quest for solutions to this urgent challenge of sustainable development.