

‘Over 2 billion people impacted by land degradation’

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July 08, 2019 16:18 IST

Between 1981 and 2003, nearly a quarter of global land got degraded, says UNCCD Secretary Ibrahim Thiaw.

*The great Roman Empire collapsed because of, among other things, the desertification caused by deforestation and land degradation. Today, 169 countries in the world face the impact of land degradation. In the 25th year of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), a progeny of the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, New Delhi will be hosting the 14th edition of its Conference of the Parties (CoP-14) from September 2 to September 13. In an interview held in Ankara, Turkey, UNCCD's Executive Secretary **Ibrahim Thiaw** explained the significance of the Delhi conference and also outlined the Convention's strategies to stall the progress of man-made deserts. Edited excerpts:*

How do you view the upcoming Delhi conference?

It is going to be the most successful CoP so far. Top leaders of many countries are attending. Close to 200 countries are sending their representatives and there will be around 5,000 delegates. This is a global conference focussing on land restoration agenda, which is so vital for achieving the global Sustainable Development Goals and climate resilience. India's Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change is the official host and we are getting good support and cooperation from the Indian government.

The CoP is the supreme decision-making body of the Convention. It is held every two years. The last one [COP-13] was hosted by China and the one before that [COP-12] was held in Turkey. The CoP reviews the implementation of the Convention by different countries, formulates strategies, approves budget for the next two years, coordinates its work with other international agencies and NGOs, and so on. At the New Delhi conference, India will be elected president for the next two years.

Land degradation and desertification are among the big environmental issues in India. For example, wind and water erosion and the loss of vegetation near the Thar desert are threats to the local environment.

Desertification is a natural phenomenon, isn't it?

By desertification, we do not mean the natural expansion of existing deserts in the world. When we say desertification, we mean the degradation of land in arid, semi-arid and dry sub-humid areas. It is a gradual loss of soil productivity — which makes raising of food grains and other crops impossible. When land degradation happens in drylands, it usually creates desert-like conditions. It drives millions of people out of their own lands each decade, destroys livelihoods and cultivable lands, chokes water sources, kills off animals and plants, and causes huge damage to economies. At least 169 countries are affected — including India, China, vast swathes of Sahel in Africa and even countries in Europe.

Desertification of this kind happens because of, on the one hand, the over-exploitation like over-cultivation and overgrazing and, on the other hand, because of prolonged droughts, floods and other climatic causes. For instance, between 1981 and 2003, nearly a quarter of global land got degraded. And, 20% of this was cropland.

There are some two billion hectares of land that need to be restored back to health. Restoring and protecting the degraded land is a massive challenge. It is a challenge for anyone who wants to eat, drink or breathe.

Why is combating desertification so important? Can degradation of land be reversed?

Restoration of the health of the degraded land in drylands is important because about 34% of the earth's land surface and half of the farmlands are in these drylands. Over 2,000 million people live there, in addition to more than half of the world's livestock. Most of the dryland residents are poor and water shortage is acute. Child mortality rate is very high. Poverty is both a cause and consequence of desertification.

Land degradation in drylands can be reversed, though gradually and with planning and care. Sustainable land management is the key. I am told that good agricultural practices are starting to reverse land degradation in some parts of Andhra Pradesh in India. Land degradation and desertification are global problems and that can be reversed through international cooperation. That is what the UNCCD is striving to do.

Does climate change have a role in desertification?

Yes, of course. They feed on each other. Climate change speeds up the process of desertification while desertification fuels climate change. It is a vicious cycle.

What are the effects of desertification on people?

Desertification is a global issue that threatens development and political stability and even triggers sociocultural and religious conflicts. It affects humans, cattle, plants, crops, water resources and ecosystems in a variety of ways. Vegetative cover vanishes from degraded land, making it uninhabitable for both humans and animals. It may take centuries for nature to repair degraded land.

Forced migration and conflicts over land and water are the telling effects. Millions of people in Africa have left their lands. People in the degraded lands migrate to faraway places because of the shortage of food, water, jobs, income and security. Many cross the borders *en masse* and end up in alien places. In many countries, land productivity loss has forced the exodus of people from villages to the cities. This has in many cities caused ethnic and religious conflicts as well as sociocultural tensions. The damage to livelihoods is extensive.

Forced migration is the worst that can happen to a country's economy. It is usually the young, skilled and trained people who desert a desertified region — doctors, nurses, teachers, mechanics and others. This is a big drain on the country of origin. At the same time, the migrants rarely find jobs that match their skills and training and are underutilised and underpaid in the host countries. For the host countries, the migrants are a huge burden on their resources and social equations. So, forced migration causes damage to the country of origin, the country of destination and the migrants.

And, you can see that many violent conflicts in the world, especially in Africa, are rooted in the issue of access to land and natural resources like water. For instance, in Nigeria, more lives have been lost in conflicts over access to land and water than in attacks by terrorist groups such as Boko Haram.

What are some of the ways in which UNCCD help countries fight desertification?

UNCCD, along with the Convention on Biological Diversity and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), emerged from the 1992 Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit. It is an agreement for ensuring global action against land degradation. It is the only legally binding international agreement that links environment and development to sustainable land management. So far 196 countries — plus the European Union — are legally bound to the Convention.

The Convention requires individual countries to draw up their national action programmes (NAP) using a bottom-up approach — from the local community up. Local communities play central roles in design, development and implementation of NAPs. It also ensures the participation of local NGOs, women, youth and farmers who are all victims of the degraded lands. UNCCD also encourages the use of the latest technology, along with traditional ones, to combat degradation. It also partners with other international organisations to get help to the local communities.

What are your expectations from the Delhi conference?

We have great expectations about CoP-14. I believe it will be a turning point in the efforts for restoration of degraded land. There will be discussions and agreements on several critical issues like, for example, land tenure. Land tenure is a crucial issue in restoration because if you have no right on the land, you painfully restore and rebuild, then you will not be interested anymore. I also expect a boost to the efforts for the Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN) initiative. The LDN, for which 122 nations are already setting targets, aims to stop land degradation or 'bleeding of the land' and accelerate the restoration of degraded land, which is the 'treatment of the land', by the year 2030.

You seem to favour private investment in the land restoration effort?

Yes, private investors' role is very important. Governments alone cannot do the massive work of restoring the degraded lands. Restoration is not just about planting of saplings. It requires long-term sustained effort and financial investments. Private investors naturally expect returns on their investments. And, here comes the importance of land tenure. If a government is willing to lease out a plot of degraded land to a private company for 50-60 years, the company would definitely be interested in restoring and developing the land. The private involvement could be in the form of public-private partnership as well. The point is to create economic returns from land restoration.

This idea will be controversial in India where privatisation of public assets is taboo.

I understand this fear. But the alternative policy option of keeping the land barren as people starve also raises moral questions. The solution is to imagine creative public-private partnerships that work in the local context and avoid the pitfalls. This is achievable.

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