

Africa Drought Conference

Windhoek, Namibia, August 15-19 2016

High-level Segment Opening Speech by

Monique Barbut, UNCCD Executive Secretary

Excellencies,

Dear Friends and Colleagues, Distinguished Participants, Ladies and
Gentlemen.

It is a great pleasure to be here.

Allow me to welcome you to this High-level Segment of the Africa
Drought Conference. I would like to thank the Government of Namibia for
hosting us and the organizations that supported participation at this event.

Let us start with some good news. Sort of.

The strongest El Niño in 35 years is coming to an end.¹

In 2015/2016 this “El Niño effect” led to drought in over 20 countries².

There were [scorching temperatures](#), water shortages and flooding around the
world. Worst hit were eastern and southern Africa³

¹ <http://media.bom.gov.au/releases/267/el-nino-ends-as-tropical-pacific-ocean-returns-to-neutral/>

² List compiled from: <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2016/may/22/southern-africa-worst-global-food-crisis-25-years> and <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2016/may/30/el-nino-is-over-but-it-leaves-nearly-100-million-people-short-of-food>.

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2016/may/22/africa-worst-famine-since-1985-looms-for-50-million>

To understand what that means for people, you just have to look at the numbers about food insecurity⁴. 32 million people in southern Africa were affected by food insecurity as a result. Across Africa, 1 million children required treatment for severe acute malnutrition.

And though the worst of the drought is coming to an end, predictions are high (at about 75%) that La-Nina will arrive later in 2016. La Nina - El Niños opposite number - is known for the flooding it brings.

There may not be much relief for policy makers and people across Africa before the end of the year.

But then, if will be over, we can breathe again. We can go back to business as usual - right?

Well...if you will allow me...for Albert Einstein...one of the definitions of **insanity** is *“doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results”*.

Going back to business as usual fits this definition of insanity very well.

- We know the next El Niño droughts are likely to return regularly. Probably as often as every two to seven years.
- We know that the extent and severity of droughts will increase. This is because of climate change **and** unsustainable land use. Scientists have estimated that the fraction of the land’s surface regularly experiencing

⁴ https://docs.unocha.org/sites/dms/Documents/OCHA_ElNino_Overview_13Apr2016.pdf

drought conditions is predicted to increase from less than 5 percent today to more than 30 percent by the 2090s⁵.

- We know we will miss our targets on water scarcity (6.4, 6.5 and 6.6) under the sustainable development goals⁶.
- We know poor people, who tend to be wholly dependent on natural resources like water and land to provide for their families, will suffer.

Unless we change our approach, when drought comes and the rains fail, the future of the 400 million African farmers who rely on rain fed subsistence agriculture, for example, is put in jeopardy. Rain-fed agriculture accounts for more than 95% of farmed land in sub-Saharan Africa. And water scarcity alone could cost some regions 6 percent of their GDP.

Unless we change our approach, people are going to be increasingly forced to decide whether to ride out a drought disaster and then rebuild. Or simply leave.

It is a form of madness that we force our people to make these difficult choices.

Especially if the cycle of drought disaster and recovery could be broken.

⁵ WMO(2011): Towards a Compendium on National Drought Policy, p. 9.

⁶ <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg6>

Progress is starting to happen. Mexico, Brazil, Vietnam and Morocco, to name just a few countries, are now implementing drought plans with a strong emphasis on risk mitigation and preparedness. And in the areas where land has been restored in Central and Eastern Tigray in Ethiopia, ecosystems and people seem to have fared better in recent El Nino related droughts than areas where no restoration has been undertaken.

But because by 2050, one in four people – up to 2.5 billion people - will be living in a country at risk of water scarcity, more needs to be done. EVERHWHERE. We must better prepare and manage drought risks proactively.

Africa has already done a lot⁷ but needs to stay on its toes.

UNCCD is proposing three important pillars for your consideration:

Firstly, Early Warning Systems.

Declaring a drought too late can have a devastating impact on lives and livelihoods. Yet when you declare a drought it can often be very subjective and highly political.

Africa would benefit from an effective Early Warning System (EWS) in all countries. The system would need good data and - equally important - local and traditional knowledge. It would guide you by providing timely information that you can use to reduce risks and to better prepare for an effective response.

⁷ i.e. The Sahel and Sahara Observatory (OSS), IGAD's Drought Resilience Sustainability Initiative (IDDRSI), the Southern Africa Development Community – Community Climate Service Center (SADC-CSC) or the African Drought Risk and Development Network (ADDN).

Secondly, vulnerability and risk assessment

Of course, no amount of early warning will work without action to protect the most vulnerable.

Some people and some systems are more vulnerable to drought as a result of social, economic, and environmental factors. So it is important to combine better forecasts with detailed knowledge on how landscapes and societies respond to a lack of rain. Which communities and ecosystems are most at risk? Why are important sectors like agriculture, energy, tourism, health vulnerable?

Then turn that knowledge into early intervention.

I assure you, it would be highly cost effective. Before the cost of a single late response is reached, you can “overreact” up to six times.

In Niger and Mozambique for example, the cost of an early intervention and resilience building efforts would lead to a cost reduction of 375 million US dollars in Mozambique and 844 million US dollars in Niger when compared to late humanitarian response to drought.⁸

Finally, drought risk mitigation measures

We can identify measures to address these risks head on. Things that

⁸ Department for international development : The Economics of Early Response and Resilience Series, https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/226255/TEERR_Two_Pager_July_22.pdf

can be done at a very practical level to reduce drought risk, started right away and that deliver real and tangible benefits to your communities.

African countries could consider the development of sustainable irrigation schemes for crops and livestock or water harvesting schemes, you could boost the recycling and reuse of water, explore the cultivation of more drought tolerant crops, expand crop insurance schemes and establish of alternative livelihoods that can provide income in drought-prone areas.

Investing in improved land management, for example, can improve on-farm water security by between 70 and 100%⁹. This would result in higher yields and more food security. In Zimbabwe, water harvesting combined with conservation agriculture increased farmers gross margins by 4 to 7 times and increased returns on labour by 2 to 3 times.¹⁰

This is the type of proactive drought risk management - that could save lives and the livelihoods of millions of people – is something which we all should aspire to.

Conclusion:

With this conference, Africa can recognize that the traditional approach of “responding” to drought is not viable any more. It has proved to be

⁹ Bossio, Deborah et al (2010): Managing water by managing land: Addressing land degradation to improve water productivity and rural livelihoods, p. 540.

¹⁰ Winterbottom, R. (et al.): Improving Land and Water Management. Working Paper, Installment 4 of Creating a Sustainable Food Future. World Resources Institute, 2013, p. 18.

ineffective far too often. Instead, Africa could lead a proactive drought revolution.

By investing in early warning systems and addressing their vulnerabilities head on, well-planned and coordinated drought action will have a positive ripple effect across sectors and across borders.

Nelson Mandela once said *“We must use time wisely and forever realize that the time is always ripe to do right”*.

The time is ripe. And taking proactive action against drought is the right thing to do.

Thank you.