

**Speech of Monique Barbut  
United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD)**

**Land as an accelerator to achieving SDGs**

**On the occasion of the  
Tokyo International Symposium  
“Combating Desertification: Towards Land Degradation Neutrality”**

Tuesday, 7 February 2017  
13h10-13h35  
U Thant International Conference Hall,  
United Nations University  
Tokyo, Japan

Mr. Yoshihiro Seki, State Minister of the Environment, Government of Japan,

Professor Ryota Teshima, President of Tottori University,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

*“Kon-nichiwa (Hello)”.*

I am very happy to be here with you today. This is an excellent opportunity to discuss our **common concerns** about desertification and land degradation.

I can imagine your reaction to that statement. You are probably thinking, “what common concerns?”

And I am sure for many people in Japan – as in much of the developed world, desertification sounds and feels very far away from everyday life. After all, Japan is not turning into a desert. And the only place in Japan where you have a desert, you now have Starbucks. So you have no issue with it anyway.

But putting the joke aside, let me be clear - desertification is not about the Tottori, the Gobi or the Sahara desert.

Desertification essentially means the degradation of land until it becomes desert like. It means losing productive land. And it can happen anywhere. In fact – land degradation outside drylands accounts for 78% of its total and is undoubtedly a global issue, affecting developed countries as well as developing ones.

Losing productive land leads to a reduction in everything that societies need to survive. It is the exact opposite of sustainable development.

Let me explain how it impacts Japan.

Japan produces food on 4.5 million hectares of arable land. That is just 12% of the land area of the country. It is quite a small area from which to feed a population of 127 million. So, in fact, Japan is less than 40% self-sufficient in food. The majority of what you eat every day comes from overseas.

For your food - you rely not just on your own land management but how land is managed all over the world.

Globally, at least double the size of Japan's arable land is lost every year due to land degradation and desertification. That is in countries that supply food to your supermarkets.

As the new UN Secretary General António Guterres' said in his remarks to the General Assembly on taking the oath of office, *"climate change, population growth, rapid urbanization, food insecurity and water scarcity — have increased competition for resources and heightened tensions and instability"*.

With a global population expected to reach close to 10 billion by 2050; there is going to be increasing competition for productive land. As the amount of land per person falls, the market takes over. You may not have to worry directly about food security here in Japan but it will impact the price you pay for products.

But it isn't just a matter of overall food supply - or even prices in Japanese shops - that should concern you.

Worldwide, land degradation hits the poorest and most vulnerable communities hardest. About one billion people in developing countries live in

extreme poverty; two-thirds of them live in rural areas. Their poverty is often a direct consequence of land degradation, declining soil fertility, unsustainable water use and drought.

The cumulative impacts of productive land loss and resource scarcity is overwhelming the capacity of a number of governments to meet the basic needs of their people. And you are seeing its consequence on television every day.

The situation is particularly telling in Africa. Africa is experiencing an unprecedented demographic explosion. The population will nearly double from 1.1 billion in 2016 to an estimated 2 billion people in 2050. Since 1950, an estimated 65% of all agricultural land in Africa has been affected by degradation to some degree.

These trends, occurring together, is alarming. Agriculture is the basis of most African economies -accounting on average for more than a third of GDP. Up to 80% of the people rely on natural resources for their survival. And in the next few years, more than a quarter of the continent may become unproductive.

Already, over 67 million people living in the vulnerable Sahel region live with the effects of land degradation and desertification.

While, one-third of the African population is already living in drought-prone regions.

In rural areas where people depend mostly on agriculture, land degradation is a driver of forced migration. As conditions become drier with climate change, an estimated 60 million people are at risk of moving from the desertified areas of sub-Saharan Africa within the next thirty years.

And losing productive land is driving people to make risky life choices. Such large population movements are a potential threat to international peace and security, particularly if there are existing social and ethnic tensions. As competition for scarce resources – food, energy and water - intensifies, vulnerable people will have little choice but to fight or to flee.

If we carry on as business as usual. If we ignore the crucial role that productive land plays in our survival. Instability and conflict will be the new

normal. Japan cannot be a bystander. We have a common concern and a common interest in stopping what has become a cycle of degrade, abandon, migrate and degrade again.

As William Shakespeare put it in King Lear *“the wheel [must] come full circle.”*

Perhaps because of the threat a collapse in terrestrial ecosystems poses, healthy and productive land is increasingly recognized as vital for any global effort to achieve sustainable development for all.

Restoring land will increase food security and the income of the land users at the same time. This in turn helps avoid an unnecessary mass movement of people. It reduces potential fighting over resources in degraded areas.

The Sustainable Development Goal 15 “Life on Land” and target 15.3 on land degradation neutrality (LDN) in particular is creating a vital link between land and other critical development challenges.

**Land degradation neutrality turns the vicious cycle of degrade, abandon and migrate into a virtuous cycle.**

In a practical sense, land degradation neutrality means the amount and quality of useable land resources remains stable or increases. We can do this by avoiding degrading practices on land we are using now and reversing past degradation.

To achieve SDG 15.3 on land degradation neutrality, we need to rehabilitate and restore at least 12 million hectares of degraded land annually.

In order to support countries into translating the SDG 15.3 into action, the UNCCD's Science Policy Interface developed guidelines for setting, implementing and monitoring national – voluntary – targets.

This scientifically driven approach is now being used by the UNCCD's Global Mechanism in more than a 100 countries. The programme is being supported by 10 bilateral and multi-lateral partners.

What they are seeing is that land rehabilitation and restoration - in particular - is a cost-effective, job creating, accelerator of change. When land degradation neutrality is achieved at scale, we will have more healthy and productive land everywhere, for everyone. The interconnected nature of peace, development, environment and rights mean the pay-offs for all the SDGs are set to be dramatic.

Let me give you a few examples.

Restoring lost or degraded land helps fight climate change. That is SDG 13: Climate action. Land is the second largest carbon sink, after the oceans. Restoring the soils of degraded ecosystems has the potential to store up to 3 billion tons of carbon annually. This is equivalent to storing up to 30% of annual CO2 fossil fuel emissions. It also helps communities adapt to a changing climate. Sustainably managed land is more drought and flood resistant and is more resilient to erosion.

At the same time, land rehabilitation gives people and communities their livelihoods back. The total employment effect of the restoration economy ranges from 10 to 40 jobs per 1 million US dollars invested. To set this into perspective,

the oil and gas industry supports approximately 5 jobs per 1 million US dollars invested. That could certainly help achieve SDG8: Decent work and economic growth. Restoring just 12 per cent of degraded agricultural land could boost smallholder's incomes by 35-40 billion US dollars per year [SDG1: No poverty] and feed 200 million people per year within 15 years [SDG2: Zero hunger].

While in the sidelines of the recent Climate Change meeting in Marrakesh, African leaders endorsed the *Triple S initiative on Security, Stability and Sustainability in Africa*. The initiative will highlight how restoring degraded lands and the promotion of programs for youth employment and education, along with formalization of land tenure, could provide alternatives to migration and even radicalization on the continent.

While when rehabilitation happened in the Batodi region in Niger, underground aquifers rose by up to 14 meters. Women in the area are now fetching water in wells that are half an hour, not half a day, away from their homes [SDG5: Gender equality, SDG6: Clean water and sanitation]. The cost of the land restoration was low at between 25 and 65 US dollars per hectare.

But again, it is not just about food and water.

Renewable energy relies to a great extent on healthy and functioning ecosystems. The sustainable management of land and water is the only way to ensure a reliable energy supply especially for the world's poor [SDG7: Affordable and clean energy].

Further, by 2030, almost 60 per cent of the world's population is projected to live in cities. Every year, 19.5 million hectares of agricultural land is converted to spreading urban centers and industrial developments. Rapid urbanization is exerting pressure on fresh water supplies, sewage, land and soil resources, biodiversity, and public health. SDG11: Sustainable cities and communities will be achieved by securing a healthier relationship between urban and rural areas.

The SDGs are designed to be universal in nature, and as I hope you have seen, **Japan is not immune from the impact of land degradation.** So many of the benefits I have outlined could be directly relevant to you here in Japan too.

For example, the Japanese government aims to increase the food self-sufficiency rate to 45%. It will be tough when nearly 30% of agricultural land in Japan is already degraded. Meeting food self-sufficiency targets means not just food production increases but should also mean land restoration and rehabilitation in Japan.

Can Japan become land degradation neutral?

I know it is “**I-u wa yasuku, okona-u wa gatashi** (easier said than done)”. But Japanese culture is full of wisdom. The country has been contributing to the global fight against desertification through a number of significant international efforts such as Tokyo International Conference of African Development (TICAD).

Knowing this, I am confident that achieving land degradation neutrality can become part and parcel of your contribution to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals as much as to achieving Japan’s own prosperous future.

In conclusion, I would like to extend my sincere appreciation to the Ministry of Environment and Tottori University for their wonderful cooperation in the organization of this event.

Thank you for your attention.