

Nineteenth Meeting of the Forum of Ministers of Environment for Latin America and the Caribbean

MINISTERIAL SEGMENT

Address of the UNCCD Executive Secretary to Ministers of Latin America and the Caribbean

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Desertification is a silent, invisible threat to livelihoods. It is destabilizing communities on a global scale. And it is as deadly and destructive here in Latin America as it is in other parts of the world.

This Region is famous for its rainforests and mega diversity. But you are actually about one quarter desert and dryland¹; *[from southern Ecuador across the Peruvian shoreline to northern Chile, to the Altiplano of the Andean mountains, 70% of Argentina and the tropical savannahs of northeastern Brazil. In the northern part of Latin America, Mexico and Central America it is no different; an increasing population percentage lives in dryland areas.]*

Here, like elsewhere, livelihoods and options for survival are declining. Small-scale farmers and poor, land-dependent and indigenous communities face hard choices. And the effects of extreme events caused by climate change are undermining development. The increasing number of internally displaced people who are forced off their land to overcrowded cities [and other countries] is overburdening public sector services.

To my mind though, this technical dryland tag is a distraction from the real problem. In a vast region of around 600 million inhabitants – with more than 110 million living below the poverty line - the pressure on natural resources will drive land degradation and biodiversity loss.

Large parts of Colombia, Venezuela and Peru are highly degraded. In Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Haiti and Jamaica, soil erosion and water shortages are intensifying. Severe

¹ 20,533,000 km²

droughts and land degradation have made the countries in Central America extremely vulnerable to natural disasters.

Land degradation in this region is too important to be treated with less attention than climate change and biodiversity.

But it is more than just an environmental challenge.

The United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) and the Global Mechanism of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) worked together to measure the future economic costs of land degradation, taking into account different climate change scenarios.

Preliminary findings show that the annual cost of desertification/land degradation ranges between 6.6 to 14% of Agricultural Gross Value of Production (AGVP).

This is a matter of concern for every household and the future economic growth and development of this region.

Yet, putting rural and agricultural development on the right path now is only a matter of political choice. Today, it is possible to switch to good land management practices that sustain current or higher levels of agricultural production, deliver multiple additional benefits and reinforce your obligations to the other multilateral environmental agreements.

If land degradation is a crucial rate-limiting step to any efforts to eliminate poverty and to achieve sustainable development - Then, UNCCD implementation is a mechanism that will help populations to get out of poverty, adapt to climate change,

secure biodiversity and build resilience to drought. It is a mechanism that will reduce the risk of forced migration and even conflict over dwindling natural resources and secure sustainable agricultural production.

Implementing the Convention is an exciting challenge in Latin America and the Caribbean, and some great examples of good practices exist.

In drought planning, for example, in 2012, the state of Ceará in Brazil suffered its worst drought in nearly five decades. Yet, some communities that used to succumb to the effects of drought were resilient this time. Proactive actions by the State and Federal governments, which targeted the vulnerable and included private sector investment and early warning, paid off. The communities avoided losses and did not overuse the land.

So there is good news if governments at all levels work hand in hand with stakeholders.

In particular, I wanted to acknowledge the contribution and potential this region has in advancing this work.

Three UNCCD COPs have been held in this region so far. [Mexico has offered to host the third international scientific conference under the auspices of the UNCCD and LAC scientists have organized two international conferences on desertification in the past.] I also commend the progress in sharing knowledge, through initiatives like the tripartite agreement between France, Brazil and Africa and the work led by Peru of documenting scientific and traditional knowledge and techniques.

This support is invaluable. It also underscores the relevance of this Convention for the region.

I hope UNCCD implementation continues to gather pace in the region - and that we can work on three important challenges.

Our first challenge is to ensure every Party in this region fulfils its reporting obligations for the coming reporting cycle.

To make this possible, the UNCCD reporting approach has been radically simplified. Also, I have agreed with Braulio and Christiana that we will develop common indicators for future reporting rounds. These should be available before the climate change COP in Paris in 2015 where I hope that land management as a means of adapting to climate change will finally be properly recognized.

Second challenge: I recognize that for faster progress, more resources are needed. I know there has been some frustration in this Region about the limited level of GEF investment, compared to other Regions. **Why is this?** Partly it is a question of tactics and partly political priority that has been placed on land degradation issues. I am ready to work with you to turn that around – together making the case not just with the GEF but within your own Ministries of Finance and with the private sector.

Third Challenge: On land management, the gaps are becoming more apparent as our understanding of ecosystem functioning increases. It is clear the sustainable management and restoration of natural ecosystems provides crucial regulating and supporting services - for food and other income generating activities.

Practical actions to address the loss of productivity in our land and soil should be implemented across the board. The top priority should be to secure the productivity of existing land in order to avoid or minimize further degradation. At the same time, degraded and abandoned land should be rehabilitated to reinstate full productivity potential and to slow the rate of ecosystem conversion.

This is the fundamental idea behind the outcomes of the Rio +20 Conference – the *Future we Want* – where world leaders committed to *strive to achieve a land degradation neutral world*.

This was an aspirational goal that now needs to be translated into meaningful, measurable targets – at national and sub-national level. The on-going Sustainable Development Goals process will be vital for that. This Region has played a role in leading the SDG process so far and I encourage you to help secure a meaningful ecosystem based target that can be implemented at national and sub-national level in the coming months.

These land-related targets are directly relevant to the achievement of a number of the envisaged SDGs², such as poverty eradication, food security, access to water and sustainable natural resource management. Land is an amalgamation of soil, water and biodiversity, and its stewardship is closely linked to communities, policy frameworks and governance structures. Targets on land should strive to capture these linkages. And drive action and implementation on the ground.

² The Report of the High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda

There is much to be done. So let us get to work.

Reversing the effects of land degradation and desertification through sustainable land management (SLM) is achievable but progress is slow. To my mind, it is the logical, cost-effective next step for national and regional environmental and development agendas in this Region.

Let's work together to reimagine and be ambitious about the potential of UNCCD to deliver for Latin America and the Caribbean at the most basic level –for poverty elimination, for access to water, for the rights of indigenous people and local communities, to help communities become resilient to the effects of climate change, to stop the loss of this Region's precious biodiversity.