

Speech of Monique Barbut
Executive Secretary, UN Convention to Combat Desertification
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Your Excellency Mr. Wang Yang, Vice Premier of China,

Your Excellency Mr. Zhang Jianlong, Minister of China State Forestry Administration

Mr. Wang Wenbiao, Secretary-General of Kubuqi International Desert Forum,

Distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen,

As the Chinese Proverb goes *“the frog does not drink up the pond in which it lives”*.

Yet, that is exactly what human beings are doing. The land is our pond. It provides us with the food we eat. 99% of the calories humans eat come from land. It gives us the water we drink. And the plants we use for fuel, for building materials and medicines. Yet we are drinking the pond dry.

Demand for land is growing as the population gets bigger and richer. If productivity stays the same, at least 4 million hectares of land will need to be converted for agriculture, every year, to satisfy demand.

At the same time, supply of land is falling. 10 to 12 million hectares of land are degraded, annually, to the point they are no longer productive. While drought and other climate change impacts mean median crop yields may fall by 2%, every 10 years, for the rest of the century.

But agriculture is not the only area of concern.

Land is also used for urbanization and infrastructure. In the developed world, between 2 and 7% of land is now under concrete.

We can take the Chinese example to see what such a lack of productive land might mean for wider policy.

China boasts roughly 20% of the world's population but only 7% of its arable land. And 40% of China's land is degraded to some extent. If the productivity of land decreases further, opportunities for rural land-dependent communities will evaporate.

If there are fewer opportunities in rural areas, people will move to the cities.

Over 10 million rural Chinese people already migrate to cities every year.

China now has more than 40 thousand square kilometres of urban built up areas.

China may, in the future, struggle to find enough productive land to grow food, to provide water and other services for its people.

But, I do believe there is a solution.

Land can come from the rehabilitation of degraded land and the sustainable management of land currently in use.

Examples from around the world show us that when communities adopt sustainable land management, their standard of living increases.

The transformation of the Loess Plateau shows millions can benefit. While here in Kubuqi, Elion's investment has helped restore 6000 square kilometres. Solar energy generation has taken off. The area is now an ecological tourist attraction with around 200,000 tourists visiting each year.

So how do we replicate that kind of result here and at global scale?

Well, you need vision certainly. You need flagship projects such as “The Green Silk Road” - designed to restore 1.3 million hectares - that inspire and engage. You need an intelligent policy framework and partnerships, especially with affected communities.

With the right support and incentives, land-dependent communities could help turn degraded land into a productive asset in as little as two years. The approach is the essence of sustainable development. It offers millions of people real opportunity. It delivers the basis for food, energy and water security. It helps build resilience in the face of climate change. It reduces carbon emissions AND sequesters carbon in the soil.

And worldwide, there are huge opportunities. There are 2 billion hectares of degraded land worldwide with the potential for restoration. 75% of that is in working landscapes. The restoration of just 500 million hectares could store up to 30% of global carbon emissions - buying us valuable time for energy transition. And with the costs of restoration in the range of a 150 dollars a hectare, it is cost-effective. It makes policy and business sense.

So where do we go from here?

We hope every country will commit to Land Degradation Neutrality at the UN General Assembly Summit on the sustainable development goals in September.

Land degradation neutrality combines good land management and a massive scaling up of restoration activities.

Achieving land degradation neutrality would also help us adapt and mitigate climate change.

This message should be heard loud and clear by delegates meeting, in Paris in December, to agree a new climate deal.

Chinese vision and leadership on both areas occasions will be crucial.

With that in mind, I would like to thank Mr. Wang Wenbiao, Secretary-General of Kubuqi International Desert Forum, his team and the Forum Steering Committee for their inspiring leadership and for organizing this important gathering for the fifth time.

Together, I believe, we are starting to refill the pond. I wish you an enjoyable and successful Forum.