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Berne, 15 April 2014**

Land Matters: Ignoring Land and Soil At Our Peril!

Introduction

Let me start with a short story you will all know. William Tell refuses to bow down before the evil bailiff Gessler's hat. Gessler forces him to shoot an apple off his sons head with a crossbow. He hits the apple and saves the child. And prepares a second arrow to shoot the bailiff - if the child is hurt! In popular legend, William Tell is a hero taking a stand against those who would undermine human dignity; against tyranny and oppression.

The message is universal. When pushed into a corner, when your freedom and liberty are under pressure; when your family and your future are threatened – you take a stand.

On degrading land, freedom and choice is rapidly eroded. Access to productive land and soil underpins our ability to feed our families and regulate our climate. For more than a billion of the world's poorest people, land is their only tangible asset. There is no single "bailiff" who dispossesses them - but land degradation and desertification are undermining the dignity and resilience of communities nonetheless. Populations affected by land degradation are exposed to the tyranny of a changing climate and the oppression of increasing food insecurity, poverty and conflict.

At what point would you take a stand?

In an interconnected world - planning for 9 billion people under a 2 degrees – plus - climate change scenario, competition for access to finite natural resources will become more intense. Competition will be most fierce for those resources that provide us with our basic needs - food, energy and water. We will all be affected.

1. Food will be less plentiful or more expensive;
2. Social instability and conflict will be more common place;
3. Economic growth and development will be restricted;
4. Our resilience to climate change and loss of biodiversity will decline.

So we ignore land and soil at our peril.

Let us take each of these issues in turn.

1. How does land degradation affect our food supply?

Perhaps we can use the William Tell story - again....to illustrate. Imagine the world as an apple!

- *Cut the apple into quarters. 4 equal parts. 3 parts are covered by water.*
- *If we take the final quarter, we need to cut it in half. One half is covered with mountains, deserts or ice. We cannot use it.*

- *Take the remaining part. Cut it into quarters again. 3 of these 4 parts are too rocky, wet, hot or infertile (increasingly it is covered with roads or cities).*
- *Only 1/32nd of the apple remains.*
- *The peel of this section represents the 10-15 cm of fertile topsoil that must feed the earth's population.*

The Economics of Land Degradation estimates we wasted 3.4 tonnes of that fertile topsoil - for every person on the planet - in 2011 alone.

It is shocking, isn't it?

Even more so, if you consider the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) estimates, world food production, in terms of calories, will need to rise by at least 70 % from current levels by 2050. A challenge when 24 % of the world's usable lands are either moderately or severely degraded. It is even worse for land already under agricultural production - the figure rises to 52%.

This is affecting people - now.

Overall, 1.5 billion people are already directly affected by land degradation. And 900 million people around the world suffer from chronic hunger. Ironically many, if not most, of these people are the rural - land dependent - poor.

And population growth means the share of productive land available per person will continue to decrease. In 1960 there was about half a hectare of farmland for every human. Now there is less than a third of that.

We have little choice but to grow more with less – fewer inputs of land, water and chemicals - if we want to survive and thrive.

2. So how does land degradation affect our security?

Land degradation is part of a toxic mix that is turning hungry people into vulnerable communities - prone to instability, migration and conflict.

A recent Clingendael report “Terra Incognita”, supported by the Netherlands government, described land degradation as a - underestimated - “*threat amplifier*”. It takes whatever underlying social weaknesses that exist and magnifies them.

It is not surprising to me, then, that:

The spike in food hikes in 2008 - alone - triggered riots in over 30 countries. Drought in food producers like Australia put pressure on the price of wheat. Ukraine and other major cereal exporters restricted or banned exports due to declining harvests and to protect domestic consumption. The global price of wheat nearly doubled. Further speculation caused the price of rice to leap from about \$350 to \$1000 per tonne.

In countries where social safety nets or alternative sources of income were lacking, underemployed and disenfranchised youth were the obvious targets for unrest or eventual radicalization.

In the past, we have tended to see natural resource conflict in terms of “high value” products like oil. At least 40% of the intrastate conflicts over the last 60 years were associated with natural resource disputes. But our breadbaskets are disappearing and we see a trend emerging: in Darfur, in the Horn of Africa and the Sahel, but also in North Africa, the Middle East and parts of South Asia – conflict over food and water is happening much more frequently.

If we fail to reduce the underlying threats, estimates suggest that tens of millions of people may move from the affected areas of Africa towards Europe and North Africa - as many as 60 million people in a 15 year period.

Future trends are even less encouraging.

By 2025, up to 2.4 billion people worldwide may be living in areas subject to periods of intense water scarcity. Yet only a handful of countries have a national drought management policy. Following the High Level Meeting on drought held in Geneva in March last 2013 – and supported by SDC - we are working with WMO and FAO to try to address this shortfall.

To my mind, sustainable land management must be an important part of any drought planning. With SLM, it costs between US\$25 and US\$65 to rehabilitate a hectare of degraded land in Niger - a country that suffers from recurrent droughts. The humanitarian assistance of USD161 million Niger received in 2011 could have secured between 3-7 million hectares [of its total arable area of 15 million hectares].

Early intervention – that reduces risk of drought and food insecurity and prevents social conflict - is far cheaper than relying on relief and military means to respond to the resulting crises.

3. So how does land degradation affect economic growth and development?

Land is the source of livelihoods for at least one third of the global population - 500 million small scale producers support the livelihoods of 2 billion people. The Economics of Land Degradation Initiative estimates the annual economic losses due to deforestation and land degradation are estimated at 1.5-3.4 trillion Euro in 2008, between 3.3%-7.5% of the global GDP.

As a result of future land degradation and climate change, yields could fall by up to 50% in some African countries in the next 10 years. In some countries, economic simulations project that, as a result, agricultural GDP losses could be as high as 30% in Mali and 20% in Burkina Faso.

The developed world is not immune. The droughts in the US and declining output/migration pressures in large parts of the Mediterranean basin are a case in point.

Developed countries are also a large part of the problem. Europeans for example “seal” a surface area equivalent to the size of Cyprus every ten years. Europe’s land footprint is now around 640 million hectares a year, and growing. Nearly 60% of the land used to meet Europe’s demand for agricultural and forestry products comes from outside of the continent [and is driving degradation].

That is why I welcome Switzerland's 7% set-aside agri-environmental scheme that gives the landscape the value it deserves and helps you offset your global footprint. Without schemes like that, declining land availability and production will mean higher prices and a slower pace of growth for all.

- **But there are economic opportunities too!**

Land underpins a basket of ecosystem services. These services are the means to promote quality of life and economic growth here and poverty reduction globally. A 10 percent increase in yield on African farms would mean a 7 % reduction in poverty. If we can create a positive cycle, 80% of the global population could become global 'consumers', emerging from poverty, by 2030.

And there are more than 500 million hectares of abandoned agricultural land that could be brought back into production or used to recover important ecosystem services such as clean air or water regulation. In total, there are up to 2 billion hectares of land which still hold the potential for restoration and rehabilitation. According to the ELD, we could close the agricultural yield gap with sustainable land management if we take projects like this to scale. We could generate an extra 1.4 trillion Euros in agricultural sales.

The type of support that SDC has provided Parties to the UNCCD to help preserve water and fertile land; to train managers of scarce resources and to support institutional reform will be vital in securing these gains.

- **But there are some critical bottlenecks – particularly related to tenure.**

Only 30% of the land in developing countries is regulated by some form of land registration system. At any time, land investors and owners risk losing land they depend on to more powerful neighbors, to private companies – domestic or foreign – and even to members of their own family. Like William Tell before them, in rural societies, the poorest people often have weak or unprotected rights. Women are particularly vulnerable because their land rights are often temporary or obtained through kinship relationships with men or through marriage. Giving women the same access men have to agricultural resources in developing countries would raise farm production by 20-30% and increase total agricultural production by up to 4% in some countries.

4. Finally, can sustainable land management build resilience to climate change and curb biodiversity loss?

Good land stewardship and governance is fundamental to the objectives of the UNCCD - in fact for all three Rio Conventions.

[Mme Calmy-Rey, as President of the Swiss Confederation, recognized these linkages when she addressed the 66th Session of the United Nations General Assembly in 2011.

"We should think about land when we talk about climate and about biodiversity when we talk about soil degradation. Unfortunately, of these three problem areas, soils are often disregarded in discussions on sustainability, despite the vital functions they perform that are essential to life and the survival of our planet"]

Land contributes to half of the CBD Aichi targets.

By adopting and scaling up SLM practices in degraded soils or desertified ecosystems, up to three billion metric tons of carbon per year could be sequestered. That is the equivalent of up to 11 billion tons of CO₂ emissions (annual CO₂ emissions from fossil fuel burning are roughly 32 billion tons).

The same SLM interventions are perhaps the only way to strengthen climate change adaptation and resilience for the very poor. Failure to act on adaptation means [according to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change] at least US\$83 billion per year by 2030 to protect the livelihoods of poor rural people in developing countries.

Far from being complicated and expensive - knowledge about SLM already exists – it is cheap and low tech. We are working with WOCAT (World Overview of Conservation Approaches and Technologies) – housed here at the University of Berne - to bring good practices to the world. I am excited to announce that we are just about to sign an agreement to make their database the primary recommended database on SLM practice globally.

So, we should not see climate change, biodiversity and land degradation as crises that are somehow in competition. With our colleagues at UNFCCC and CBD, we are developing common indicators of progress. Practical solutions that transform lives and reduce vulnerability are possible. And, as we move towards the CBD Conference of the Parties in October this year and Climate Change negotiations in Paris in 2015, we need to break further out of our silos.

- **We are at a crossroads where the “future we want” is ours to win or lose.**

As Pierre Corneille – the 17th French writer - put it “*When there is no peril in the fight there is no glory in the triumph.*”

At Rio +20 countries set out a vision for “a land degradation neutral world”. As we move forward, I hope every country will come to understand the real value of land to a range of policy issues and can set an ambitious agenda.

Business already knows that is time to act. We are working with the private sector – in particular Swiss based Syngenta and the World Business Council for Sustainable Development - to develop a Soil Leadership Academy. The Academy will help inspire policy and decision makers to make smarter choices about how they manage land and soil resources.

Land is the obvious foundation on which to build a partnership among diverse stakeholders. We can lay the groundwork for our common prosperity and security. We need practical measures that build resilience to drought and famine, which offer rights, employment and economic development and that help populations prepare for climate change. So that social instability can be avoided. So that those oppressed are not forced to take a stand! Certainly, the international community has the means to reverse land degradation trends. And reversing the effects of land degradation and desertification is the logical, cost-effective next step for sustainable development. Global targets aimed at preventing future land degradation, scaling up SLM good practices, rehabilitating abandoned land and restoring

natural ecosystems should find a home within the Sustainable Development Goal framework in 2015.

The SDGs will be an important blueprint for refocusing investment flows and development assistance to more effectively address the challenges of poverty, food insecurity and environmental degradation. Working together, if we do that, we can strengthen human dignity and secure the rights, liberties and freedoms we should all be able to count on in the post 2015 world.

We ignore land and soil at our peril. In the SDGs and Climate Change negotiations – we must get it right. In this fight, we must triumph. As the Anglo Saxons put it and as William Tell might appreciate – there are no second chances. **We do not get to take a second bite of the apple.**

