

Check upon delivery

Speech

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UNCCD

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Land Degradation and Soil Loss: A global threat to lives and livelihoods

Let me start with a little observation: we live in a world that increasingly resembles an “*all you can eat*” buffet.

We are encouraged to be as “greedy” as we like. To my mind, the concept of “*all you can eat*” is both amazing and disturbing - at the same time. It sums up much of what is wrong about our relationship with food.

It is amazing in that it demonstrates, clearly, the idea of more. It illustrates massive change in food consumption and global agricultural production patterns.

In the last 40 years, our daily per capita calorie intake has risen by about 450 kilocalories globally (WHO). In East Asia - mainly China - the figure is nearly 1000 kilocalories per capita per day more. And largely as a result of high-yielding crops, fertilizers, pesticides, irrigation and machinery - agricultural production across the world doubled four times between 1820 and 1975¹.

This is disturbing though because growth is not equally distributed. While some have prospered, many have been left behind.

About one-third of the world’s population pays relatively little and can consume more than they need. For the rest of humanity - especially the 900 million people around the world who suffer from chronic hunger - “*all you can eat*” is entirely unattainable.

And despite the global discourse about food security, there is a lack of appreciation among policy makers and the public at large about the food we eat. There are fundamental disconnects. Down to the simplest level - food does not come from restaurants and supermarkets; it comes, first and foremost, from the land.

The intensive agriculture needed to achieve our current consumption and production patterns has severely compromised the land and soil. 52% of the land under agriculture is now either moderately or severely degraded.

¹ Between 1820 and 1920; between 1920 and 1950; between 1950 and 1965; and again between 1965 and 1975 - FAO

Why does it matter now?

As we move towards a global population of 9 billion by 2050 - 80% of the population is anticipated to become global 'consumers' – demanding food, along with energy, water and the other vital products and services that come from the land.

We are at a tipping point where our relationship with the land is both unsustainable and a global threat to lives and livelihoods. Unless we act, under increasing population pressure and climate change – it will only get worse.

With a growing population, the demand for agricultural products alone is expected to double – again - from current levels. Far from seeing more food production, every year 12 million hectares of cropland are lost entirely due to desertification. The IPCC is warning us to expect a 2 percent drop in agricultural output, per decade – as a result of climate change.

We are reducing at a dramatic rate the cropland that is available for food production. We are losing the services that the land provides – particularly water regulation (crucial for periods of drought or flood).

In places like Mali, this could translate into losses of 30% in terms of agricultural gross domestic product. It could mean by 2025, 2.4 billion people may be living in areas subject to periods of intense water scarcity.

The area's most seriously affected are already home to between one and a half billion people - up to 20 per cent of the global population. Many of these people are the very poorest in our global society.

So, we will have some tough choices to make.

To feed people we will either have to convert more than 4 million hectares per year for food production. We can expect that farmers will increasingly be in direct competition with urban dwellers for prime land that has good access to markets. Conflicts will naturally emerge. Or, we may be forced to take this new land from our forests and natural habitats - destroying biodiversity and further accelerating climate change.

The alternative is to grow more with less – less inputs in terms of land, water, energy, and chemical inputs.

I know what my choice would be. But, at the moment, it is a choice we are making blindly. It is a global greed for land – much like the *all you can eat buffet* – without any consideration of the long-term effects.

And land degradation, in particular, can have far reaching implications that we don't often reflect upon.

We might consider the recent flooding in the UK. A more holistic vision of soil management and land use might have strengthened adaptive capacity and reduced the cost to individuals, insurers and governments. British insurers estimate the cost of UK floods over 2 months this winter could be 1.2 billion Euros.

But we are rather shortsighted.

In the EU, more than 1,000 square kilometres are lost every year for housing, industry or infrastructure. About half of this surface is actually 'sealed'. In its *Roadmap for a Resource Efficient Europe*, the Commission pointed out that every ten years the EU paves over a surface area equivalent to the size of Cyprus.

In many regions, European soil is irreversibly eroded, or has lost all its supportive functions including natural buffer zones that would normally absorb some of the shocks caused by natural disasters like floods or droughts - not to speak about the loss of fertile land for agricultural production.

We should also consider how Europe influences land degradation in other parts of the world. Europe's appetite for products that require large areas of land for production - such as meat, dairy, timber and other forestry products - means Europe's land footprint is now around 640 million hectares a year. That is an area equivalent to 1.5 times the size of Europe itself. Nearly 60% of the land used to meet Europe's demand for agricultural and forestry products comes from outside the continent.

Why do our choices matter so much?

Unfortunately, our choices can and do drive poverty and insecurity in all corners of the world. Our choices can and do boomerang back on us - in terms of higher food prices and other types of global volatility.

For example, European Commission research found our increasing demand for biofuels, combined with drought and trade restrictions to drive the 2008 food price hikes. Successive droughts in Australia in 2005-2006 put pressure on the price of wheat initially. Ukraine and other major cereal exporters restricted or banned exports due to declining harvests and to protect domestic consumption.

As a result, the price of wheat nearly doubled, triggering a wave of food price riots in over 30 countries – including across the Middle East.

And this may be just the beginning.

As competition for scarce resources – food, energy and water - intensifies, the projected scale of forced migration in the coming decades will exceed anything previously experienced. Estimates suggest that between 2006 and 2020, 60 million people could have moved from degraded parts of sub-Saharan Africa towards Europe and North Africa.

Slow onset disasters, such as drought and famine as a result of poorly managed natural resources, have already been a major contributing factor for forced migration flows and conflict – in places like the Horn of Africa or Darfur.

Some 40% of intrastate conflicts over a 60-year period were associated with land and natural resources. With 80% of the major armed conflicts occurring in vulnerable dryland ecosystems.

Vulnerable people will have little choice but to fight or to flee.

The frustrating thing is that this rather bleak vision of the future will happen - unless we take action.

So looking forwards...3 next steps might be envisaged.

Recognizing that the use of land is nearly always a trade-off between various social, economic and environmental needs, we need systems to manage land in a way that optimizes the delivery of nature's service among competing demands – here in Europe and worldwide.

Firstly: Sustainable intensification of farming/rehabilitation of the land.

Let us grow more with less.

Increased agricultural production will need to come primarily from improved productivity on existing agricultural land. Securing the productivity of our

existing land resources and minimizing any further degradation of these critical assets is a top priority.

Key is a sustainable intensification of agriculture – the scaling up of sustainable agricultural or land management practices such as organic farming or agroforestry – to name a few - which embrace healthy soil as the foundation for a resilient future.

In Africa, yield increases of up to 128 per cent are common. In Niger, SLM practices have led to an estimated additional production of about 500,000 tonnes of cereals per year - enough to feed 2.5 million people.

As well as closing the yield gap and seeing absolute production increases, agroforestry systems, for example, are well diversified. Edible fruits and leaves can be marketed locally - farmers can supplement their incomes from the sale of firewood. A 10 per cent increase in farm yields leads to a 7 per cent decrease in poverty across Africa.

I think we can be optimistic and ambitious about the scale of the opportunities that exists.

Rehabilitating abandoned agricultural land and bringing back productivity would help boost food security, reduce poverty as well as improve biodiversity values. Estimates indicate that there are up to 500 million hectares of abandoned agricultural land worldwide.

The Economics of Land Degradation has argued closing most of the agricultural yield gap, by bringing back abandoned agricultural land and moving to sustainable land management more widely, could deliver up to USD 1.4 trillion in increased crop production.

Secondly: Putting appropriate targets, incentives and rights in place - for all.

We have a strong vision for a resilient, secure future. Let us translate our ambition into action in the post-2015 development framework.

We need to progressively reduce the population adversely affected by land degradation. And progressively increase the area under sustainable land management. This will mean appropriate targets and economic incentives and governance systems that promote sustainable practices – along with the rehabilitation of degraded landscapes and ecosystems.

Perverse incentives - in farming for things like fertilizers - could be phased out. Weak or unprotected resource and land rights could be strengthened. Giving women the same access men have to agricultural resources in developing countries, for example, would raise farm production by 20-30% and increase total agricultural production by up to 4% in some countries.

Finally: Using the land to better fight and adapt to climate change.

Let us work together to combat land degradation and climate change at the same time.

The impacts of climate change will be felt first and foremost on the ground and not in the air. Developing countries are already struggling to cope. Some societies simply have less capacity to adapt.

The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change estimates that at least US\$83 billion per year may be needed by 2030 to protect the livelihoods of poor rural people in developing countries.

But the practical land-based solutions we are proposing work. SLM would help reduce the burden of climate change. These solutions are based on modern research and many years of traditional knowledge and experience. Sustainable Land Management solutions tend to be technically easy and are low cost to implement. They may be labour intensive – which incidentally will keep young men and women employed - but can be achieved with minimal additional inputs.

At the same time, many of the sustainable land and water management practices that are recommended to increase resilience (and reduce vulnerability) to climate change also contribute to mitigation - largely through carbon sequestration.

By adopting and scaling up SLM practices, soils in currently degraded ecosystems have the potential to sequester up to three billion metric tons of carbon.

To put it simply: there will be no effective response to climate change if we do not address land degradation adequately.

CONCLUSION

So, we all have choices. But if we fail to act, at least in these three areas, our choices will rebound on us. There is an enlightened self-interest in taking coordinated and coherent action so that we do not pass an unenviable global tipping point in terms of production and consumption.

Land degradation is already negatively impacting countries around the world – leaving lives and livelihoods destroyed. By working together and taking only what we need from the land - we can secure lives and livelihoods, reduce poverty and instability and be ready and resilient for the impact of climate change.

Life should not be an *all you can eat buffet*.

As the Mahatma Gandhi once said: “*The world has enough for everyone's need, but not enough for everyone's greed.*”