

Message of Monique Barbut
Executive Secretary, UN Convention to Combat Desertification
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Water and Energy

No one can do without water and energy. In 15 years, their demand will rise dramatically as the global population reaches 9 billion. We will require 30% more water and 45% more energy by then. Water and energy come from land-based natural resources that are both limited and declining in quality and quantity, particularly in the drylands. How shall we meet this challenge?

We can improve our efficiency. This is necessary, but not sufficient to meet the current deficit and future demand, especially with the changing consumer habits. As it is, over 1.3 billion people lack electricity. Another 700 million lack improved water supply and are in need of adequate and sustainable access to energy and water. We must do more than improve efficiency.

Following the past practice of clearing new areas to meet the demand may also be feasible, possibly in the very short-run. With this trend, however, we must prepare to deal with the consequences of ecosystem degradation that are already evident and new ones, all at significantly greater cost. Challenges that include internal displacement, forced migration, conflict and crop failure that are growing, emerging ones such as food spikes, unemployment and loss and damage, and much more.

Now, let me offer a third alternative that is cheaper, sustainable and reachable within the 15-year gap we have. Land underpins water and energy provision. Land degradation plays a big part in these deficits and it is progressing at 30 to 35 times of the historical rate. But if we restore the land, we can recover the degraded ecosystems and increase the pie to draw on for water and energy. By coupling it with efficiency gains, present and future generations can hope to meet these and other challenges. This is possible but we need a global target.

Subsistence and small-scale farmers and herders in many parts of the world have demonstrated the effectiveness of land use practices that zero-in on conserving soil and water. With little external assistance, communities in some countries in the Sahel region have restored millions of hectares in less than two decades.

In the face of climate change, there is an urgent need to pursue, relentlessly, the large-scale restoration of ecosystems. We can go farther, faster with the addition of initiatives such as the government-led restoration of the Loess Plateau in China, the multi-stakeholder Great Green Wall for the Sahara and Sahel Initiative and the private sector initiative, under the Bonn Challenge, to restore 10 million hectares of degraded forest. It is critical to restore the natural ecosystems that provide us with water and energy. Time is not on our side.