



United Nations
Convention to Combat
Desertification

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Opening Speech

High Level Segment

COP 13

Monique Barbut, UNCCD Executive Secretary

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Your Excellency, Zhang Gaoli, Vice Premier of The People's Republic of China

Your Excellency, the President of Namibia

Your Excellency, The Vice President of the Comoros

Honorable Ministers,

Colleagues and Friends

We are fortunate to be here in China to experience the magnificent, vast landscapes and unique history and culture of Inner Mongolia. I certainly find inspiration in this amazing place. And in the five thousand years of history, philosophy and wisdom that China has to offer.

The ultimate Chinese philosopher - at least for many of us - is Confucius.

Of wisdom and learning, he said....." ***xué xí yǒu sān dào : sī zuì shàn***
, xué zuì yì, xíng zuì kǔ"ǚ



There are three ways to learn wisdom: Reflection is noblest; Imitation is easiest; and Experience which is the bitterest”.

And we have learnt from **bitter experience** that if we ignore issues of land degradation and drought, the consequences are frightening.

- The amount of good quality land is declining with an average of 20% of all arable land degraded worldwide – in some places this is devastating agricultural productivity and rural incomes.
- The quality of the air we breathe is affected by sand and dust storm particulates.
- While 20 countries have declared drought emergencies in the last 18 months alone. An unprecedented 81 million people are needing food aid in 2017 - at least in part as a result of these droughts and conflict.

And under business as usual scenarios, there is no future relief.

The population is growing. There are an extra 200,000 mouths to feed every day. Environmental degradation and natural disasters are pushing



millions to abandon impoverished and desertified rural lands. Nearly 25 million people were displaced just in 2016 by events such as droughts, floods, wildfires and landslides. While there are 500 million hectares of former agricultural lands abandoned worldwide – interestingly much of this in the so called “developed” world.

But it is the poorest people in the world who suffer most. They are all too often desperate, smallholder farmers and land users. They provide up to 80% of the food in some regions but manage on tiny plots of land, over which they have little or no control.

When their land degrades and their options run out - they are moving in search of opportunity and greener pastures elsewhere.

Our experience, so far, is that many will find themselves in the world’s vibrant and growing but somehow disconnected cities. In the cities, they will remain vulnerable. Of the 10 million extra people added to the urban population of Sub-Saharan Africa each year, around half will be stuck in slums for the rest of their lives.



Excellencies, this is the COP where we need to learn from bitter experience. But then we must move forward.

Confucius suggested two other routes to learning and wisdom, of course.

Imitation – which Confucius suggests is the easiest approach.

Certainly, in this regard, there are some low-hanging fruit and easy wins.

By using our land resources rationally there is enough for everyone to live well. If we stop the loss of productive land – and replenish the supply by rehabilitating what has been degraded - the land can become the source of our future prosperity and stability.

In China – there are some wonderful examples of this replenishment already taking place. Once degraded, impoverished lands are being reborn. From the Loess Plateau to Kubuqi – close to Ordos - the land is coming back.



6,000 square kilometers of Kubuqi alone has been rehabilitated – in an inspiring partnership between the people, the private sector and the government. 102,000 people have been lifted out of poverty. Ecosystems and populations are not just surviving but thriving.

I know many of you can draw on similar inspiring examples of good practice from Tigray to Honduras. There are wonderful stories of gender sensitive approaches; innovative drought preparedness systems and inspiring new technologies emerging.

If we embrace the new science and knowledge – these inspiring good practice examples. If we make them investment ready and take them to scale, we can transform our relationship with the land.

We can provide a steady stream of green and land-based employment for vulnerable rural people; build resilience to climate change and drought; promote harmony between city and country and control often chaotic migration and urbanization trends.



Last but certainly not least, we can secure our supply of healthy air, water and food – wherever we live and despite what climate change throws at us.

But we have to be willing to share our wisdom. To imitate – by this I mean adapt not copy - the best of what each of us has to offer.

According to Confucius, the remaining and noblest route to learn wisdom is **reflection**. And I count on you, in the next few days, to reflect wisely.

It has taken us many years to arrive at a clear target for our Convention. With the revised strategic framework to be adopted at this session and with bold, national Land Degradation Neutrality targets in the process of being set by 110 countries, we are at an exciting point.

Your discussions, visionary leadership and guidance over the next few days will put us on the right path forward.

A route towards further wisdom and success.



But to finish with one of my favourite Chinese proverbs (and a little bit of Chinese street wisdom!).

Guāng shuō bù liàn zǔ bǎ shì

Talk does not cook rice.

On leaving Ordos, your reflections need to help us put the strategy and the targets into action.

Thank you.