



Statement of Ibrahim Thiaw

UNCCD Executive Secretary at EU Ministerial Breakfast

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Natural Resource Use: towards a Safe Operating Space

The American poet, Edgar Allan Poe once wrote:

The boundaries which divide Life from Death are at best shadowy and vague. Who shall say where the one ends, and where the other begins?

When it comes to land – where the health and productivity of the land is destroyed, the boundary between Life and Death becomes very stark.

The idea of staying within a safe operating safe then is more than a vague idea. It is a matter of life and death. For everyone.

Land is an essential part of our life support system. It is the key building block of our societies and economies. In every part of the world.

The farm equipment association of Minnesota and South Dakota put it succinctly when they said *"Despite all our achievements we owe our existence to a six-inch layer of topsoil and the fact that it rains"*

Viewed from space, 70 % of the Earth's surface is covered with water. The remaining 30 % is the terrestrial land surface and home to a human population of currently 7.6 billionⁱ Only 71 % of the terrestrial land surface is defined as habitable; the remaining 29 % is comprised of glaciers and barren land.ⁱⁱ

Humans use half of this area for agricultural production. They obtain more than 99.7% of their food (calories) from land.ⁱⁱⁱ



And around 2 billion hectares - an area of land twice the size of China— is now degraded^{iv}.

Land degradation has already had a pronounced impact on ecosystem functions worldwide amounting to a 5 % reduction in total global net primary productivity^v

On top of this, degradation is negatively impacting the well-being of at least 3.2 billion people^{vi}

This means:

- Economic losses

In Tanzania and Malawi the annual costs of degradation account for, USD 2.5 and 0.3 billion. That represents roughly 15 and 10 % of their GDP^{vii} respectively.

In Central Asia, the annual costs of degradation across Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan are estimated at USD 6 billion^{viii}

- But it also means more food insecurity.
- Forced migration – from rural to urban areas. And then further afield.
- Significant greenhouse gas emissions from the land sector – that is driving climate change still further.
- And greater vulnerability to climate shocks – particularly drought.

With the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals especially target 15.3 Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN)^{ix} - *echoed by various other initiatives such as the Bonn Challenge^x, the New York Declaration on Forests^{xi}, the Initiative 20x20^{xii}, the African Forest Landscape Restoration Initiative,^{xiii}* we have the chance to change the narrative.

LDN is an accelerator and an integrator of the SDGs.

Good land management would underpin sustainable development in rural areas often dependent on productive land for survival and opportunity.



And as the second largest carbon sink after the ocean, good land management could also help fight climate change – adaptation and mitigation.

LDN is about preservation and conservation of land resources, certainly.
But, it is very practical.

It means the normalization of sustainable management practices. And a massive scaling up of our restoration efforts.

A record 120 countries are in the process of setting voluntary land degradation neutrality (LDN) targets under UNCCD to do just that.

Though I know they are making progress (and I hate to chide them), I would point out that the Europeans are so far a long way behind the rest of the world in their target setting exercise.

80 countries have already set targets and are moving towards implementation.

We need to encourage developed countries to set their ambitions too. And then together help countries make their ambitions a reality.

As custodian agency of LDN (SDG target 15.3), UNCCD is working to get real time decision making support in the hand of policy makers.

On that we are making good progress. In addition to the good work being done on the conceptual framework by the Science Policy Interface; an initiative launched by the Group on Earth Observations aims to make earth observation data available to strengthen land degradation neutrality (LDN) monitoring and reporting.

Three Working Groups have been established to kick-start implementation of the initiative, focusing on building national capacities; developing data quality standards and protocols for SDG indicator 15.3.1 (“proportion of land that is degraded over total land area”) and its sub-indicators (land cover, land productivity and organic carbon in soil); and establishing platforms with high computing capacities so partners can collaborate on big data analytics, such as open data cubes. Germany has pledged an initial contribution of €100,000 for the initiative.



LDN implementation also means getting our investments right. Across biomes, the benefits of restoration are estimated to exceed the costs by an average margin of 10 to 1.^{xiv} So it makes economic sense.

But LDN targets mean nothing if the poorest countries and communities aren't able to get projects and businesses off the ground. That is what provides the hope for potential migrants. And dials down conflict over scarce resources.

The LDN Fund, a public private partnership run by Mirova Natixis, is starting to invest.

We are also exploring a joint project preparation facility for all three Rio Conventions to ensure a level playing field for countries to access climate and environmental resources.

But for the longest term impact, we need to work on revitalizing degraded rural areas. Strengthening domestic and global value chains for dryland products. And for products that are sourced on rehabilitated land.

For that we need a new system of incentives – or at least a shift away from the perverse incentives driving us to the edge.

We can, we must, put a premium on keeping us all safe for the future.



End Notes

ⁱ <https://wad.jrc.ec.europa.eu/urbanplanet>

ⁱⁱ Roser, Max/ Ritchie, Hannah (2018) - "Yields and Land Use in Agriculture". *Published online at OurWorldInData.org*. Retrieved from: '<https://ourworldindata.org/yields-and-land-use-in-agriculture>'

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://wad.jrc.ec.europa.eu/expandingcultivation>

ⁱⁱⁱ Pimentel, David: Soil Erosion: A food and environmental threat, p.1.

<http://sos.natureandmore.com/userfiles/downloads/1368007451-Soil%20Erosion-David%20Pimentel.pdf>

^{iv} <http://www.bonnchallenge.org/what-our-global-restoration-opportunity>

^v IPBES (2018): Summary for policymakers of the assessment report on land degradation and restoration of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services. R. Scholes et al, (eds.), p. 19.

^{vi} IPBES (2018): Summary for policymakers of the assessment report on land degradation and restoration of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services. R. Scholes et al, (eds.), p. 10.

^{vii} UNCCD (2017): The Global Land Outlook, p.137, with further references.

^{viii} UNCCD (2017): The Global Land Outlook, p. 137, with further references.

^{ix} So far 118 countries have committed to set LDN targets to achieve land degradation neutrality by 2030.

<https://www.unccd.int/actions/achieving-land-degradation-neutrality>.

^x The Bonn Challenge is a global effort to bring 150 million hectares of the world's deforested and degraded land into restoration by 2020, and 350 million hectares by 2030. <http://www.bonnchallenge.org/content/challenge>.

^{xi} Launched at the Climate Summit held at UN Headquarters in New York in September 2014, the New York Declaration on Forests pledges to halve the rate of deforestation by 2020 and end the loss of natural forests by 2030, and restore at least 350 million hectares of degraded forest lands by 2030, an area greater than the size of India.

<http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/ourwork/sustainable-development/natural-capital-and-the-environment/biodiversity-and-ecosystems-management/new-york-declaration-on-forests.html> and

http://www.undp.org/content/dam/undp/library/Environment%20and%20Energy/Forests/New%20York%20Declaration%20on%20Forests_DAA.pdf.

^{xii} Initiative 20x20 is a country-led effort to bring 20 million hectares of land in Latin America and the Caribbean into restoration by 2020. See: <https://initiative20x20.org/> and <http://www.wri.org/our-work/project/initiative-20x20>

^{xiii} AFR100 (the African Forest Landscape Restoration Initiative) is a country-led effort to bring 100 million hectares of deforested and degraded landscapes across Africa into restoration by 2030. <http://www.wri.org/our-work/project/african-restoration-100#project-tabs>

^{xiv} IPBES (2018): Summary for policymakers of the assessment report on land degradation and restoration of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services. R. Scholes et al, (eds.), p. 25.