

25
YEARS



United Nations
Convention to Combat
Desertification

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**Speech by Mr. Ibrahim Thiaw
Executive Secretary**

**On the occasion of the Working lunch: “Inequalities and inclusive
ecological transition”**

G7 Meeting of Environment Ministers

**Metz, France
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A FISTFUL OF HOPE

The poet, T.S. Eliot, said he could “*show you fear in a handful of dust*”. He was not wrong, but I can also show you a fistful of hope and opportunity in the very same dust. Because just as extreme land degradation can fuel sandstorms in the Sahel or the Sahara, damaging human health and economic activity, that sand can fuel growth in Amazon rainforest, serving as a natural fertilizer when it arrives on the wind.

It illustrates the degree to which the threats and opportunities on this planet are as complex as they are connected. That’s why protecting our land, our biodiversity and our climate also offers so many opportunities to fight inequality in all its forms – and vice versa. And it’s why I would like to thank Minister de Rugy and the French Government for focusing these G7 meetings on these mutually beneficial relationships.

Actually, the timing of the meetings is as welcome as the theme. It will make valuable contribution to our preparations for the UNCCD’s 14th Conference of the Parties in September. As the only international treaty dealing with sustainable land management and with the well-being of nearly half the world’s population now affected by land degradation, we urgently need to channel as many opinions and experience as possible into those discussions and decisions.

Given that only around 11 per cent of the planet’s surface is suitable for arable farming, I can’t stress the word *urgent* enough. Because every year more than nine million people die from hunger, while we waste over a third of the food we produce, often because of a lack of energy, infrastructure, education or investment. Every day the population moves closer to nine billion, while we lose over 33 thousand hectares of land to exploitation, deforestation, urban expansion, pollution and global warming. And every degree of that temperature increase brings us nearer the point of no return, while mismanagement of our land resources fails to take advantage of the second largest carbon sink on Earth and mismanagement of our human resources fails to take advantage of the incredible talent and knowledge at our disposal to solve *all* of these problems.

Quite simply, we need to shift away from our current model, which is something we can only achieve by addressing the many inequalities that are both a cause and effect of choices that damage our environment. In particular, discrimination against women, young people and rural communities.

Rural communities are disproportionately affected by the impacts of climate change and are home to about 80% of the extreme poor. However, we know that investing in rural activities can be a tremendous lever for poverty alleviation. Adding 1 per cent GDP through agriculture also adds 6 per cent to the expenditure of the poorest 10 per cent of the population. No other sector has that impact, yet we still don’t make the most of such opportunities because of outdated inequalities.



In fact, about 90 per cent of countries still legally restrict the economic activity of women. So, while they make up more than 40 per cent of farm workers, just one in five own their land and even fewer control the decisions that affect it.

It's even worse in the developing countries most at risk from land degradation or drought. There, women produce up to 80 per cent of the food but are *twice* as likely to suffer from malnutrition as men and girls are *twice* as likely to die from it as boys.

Yet, lifting legal restrictions and tapping into the abilities of more women could create 240 million jobs by 2025 and grow the global economy by \$28 trillion. Think about it: we can carry on losing an area more three times the size of Paris every day because we are not making full use of our resources or add more than 10 times the French economy to global GDP by securing gender equality.

It's a similar story for our young people. More than one in five are not in employment, education or training. Many more are in informal, insecure jobs where they may still struggle to make ends meet, let alone build a future.

For a continent like Africa, with 11 million people entering the job market each year, that means both daunting challenges and incredible untapped potential, particularly in rural areas. Even with no immediate conflict, young people watching their aspirations evaporate with the quality of the land are vulnerable, underutilized and unlikely to stay where they are. That in turn creates migration issues, both between and within countries, as they seek opportunities in towns and cities elsewhere.

But again, tackling this kind of inequality can be as good for the planet as it is for the people involved. For example, the UNCCD is deeply involved with the 3S Initiative – which stands for Sustainability, Stability and Security in Africa.

With a dozen countries involved so far, we are working to create two million green jobs by 2025. This mainly focuses on vulnerable groups, particularly young people, migrants, displaced populations and those targeted by extremists by restoring and managing ten million hectares of degraded land, strengthening access to land and tenure rights to build a sense of belonging, and planning ahead for drought and other natural disasters to prevent further displacement.

In other words, building a future from the ground up allows young people to set down roots and nations to protect both their natural and human resources. So, while investing US\$4.6 trillion now to halt land degradation will already save us five times as much by 2050, addressing inequality offers an additional multiplier we can't afford to ignore.

What is clear from all of this, is that if we really want to fight inequality by protecting biodiversity and climate, we need a global movement for land restoration. A movement that puts every resource at our disposal by embracing people of all faiths, genders, ages and cultures and that matches the ambition of the Sustainable Development Goals.

But, as Antoine de Saint-Exupéry said: "*A goal without a plan is just a wish.*"



All of these issues are integral to our plans at UNCCD and our discussions at COP14 in September. Now, I look forward to learning more about the plans of the other guests today, to see how we can join forces in swapping fear, discrimination and degradation for hope, opportunity and progress.

Thank you.