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Unlocking the GEF effect, with three for the price of one

Good afternoon,

During the Council, there's a lot of focus on the big issues and budgets.

Rightly so.

There's a lot at stake.

But I would like to take a step back for a moment and give those discussions some context:

- By introducing you to some people who you will never meet,
- But who are connected to every person in this room.

Thanh, who produces tea in Vietnamⁱ.

Onay, who farms fruit and meat in Cubaⁱⁱ.

And Edmond, who grows trees in Albaniaⁱⁱⁱ.

Thanks to GEF they are restoring areas of degraded land and delivering wider benefits for biodiversity and climate change.

Take Thanh,

- Where chemicals and climate change had reduced her land to bare stones and her tea bushes to red stumps,
- Now, she's restoring her soil, doubling her yield and teaching organic farming methods to other growers in the area.

Where Onay was among thousands of Cubans allocated unhealthy, abandoned monoculture land,

- Now, his family runs a thriving sylvo-pastoral operation,
- Which supplies food to their community and farming knowledge to their neighbors.

And where Edmond fought unsuccessfully to grow a much-needed species of tree,

- In an area hit by erosion, flooding and illegal logging,
- Now, he's introducing solutions learned from his Austrian counterparts.

Quite simply, because of the way GEF has touched the lives of these few individuals, they in turn are improving the prospects of many more people and places around the world.

These brief stories are typical of an integrated approach to land management that can only be applauded and encouraged.

There's no doubt that with the Conventions on desertification, biodiversity and climate, GEF already gets a three for one return on investment.

Between 2010 and 2017, 42 percent of the 618 projects supporting the UNCCD

- are classified solely as land degradation projects.
- The rest - 58 percent - are multifocal area projects delivering for all the conventions.
- An analysis of the results of the GEF-5 land degradation projects confirms that investing in Sustainable Land Management in production landscapes is a cost-effective way to deliver real global environmental benefits while creating local and national socio-economic benefits too.^{iv}

There's also no doubt the impact programs on Food Systems, Cities and Forest Management are:

- Focusing on the drivers of degradation and the partners who can make every dollar work harder.
- To ramp up results and transformation, instead of spreading resources too thinly to make a real difference.

Again, that's a three for one integrated approach, which could help turn a cycle of destruction into one of growth.

To my colleagues in charge of Chemicals Conventions on the podium with me today, I see as many links between their work and land.

Mining activities often degrade lands and most of the chemicals they are dealing with pollute ecosystems, lakes, river systems, food and affect people's health. Furthermore, as we see more frequent and more severe **droughts** affecting all countries,

. rich and poor,

. we should ask ourselves, what solutions should we devise to assist the most vulnerable.

- . For those rural communities who have no insurance cover;
- . whose sole source of revenue comes from the natural capital,
- . and whose countries are too poor to prepare meaningful response to emergencies,
- . every cycle of drought is “hell”. So is every cyclone, every forest fire etc.

Science has warned us: with climate change, we are likely to have more frequent and more severe extreme events. The question is whether we are building sufficiently strong and resilient systems to face them.

For example, today more and more people are moving to cities that:

- Use an area 200 times their size to meet demand for resources.
- Put more pressure on those already hit by land degradation and water scarcity.
- And, ultimately, force more rural communities to refuel that cycle.

But the combined effect of those impact programs can help restore two billion hectares of land around the world:

- To meet that growing demand from urban areas.
- While stabilizing vulnerable rural areas.
- And sinking huge amounts of carbon dioxide.

That would be a massive step towards achieving land degradation neutrality by 2030.

And, while the recent IPBES report rang some welcome alarm bells on the threat to our biodiversity, the upcoming IPCC land report will bring a balanced perspective that reinforces the mutually beneficial links between all three Rio-Conventions.

That creates a window for us to rapidly:

- Share the lessons being learned from the way GEF identifies and targets projects that maximize those natural synergies.
- And find more sweet-spots where we can accelerate and multiply such cost-effective benefits across *all* of the Sustainable Development Goals.

There are two perfect occasions to make that happen with:

- The UNCCD COP 14 in early September in New Delhi, focusing on jobs and opportunity.
- Then the Climate Action Summit looking for practical actions to speed up and scale up efforts across the public and private sectors.
- And, as we mark UNCCD's 25th anniversary this year, the 197 parties to the convention are determined to make the most of both of them.
- Ladies and gentlemen let me once again: Thank the GEF for betting on land as the ultimate natural solution to some of our biggest challenges.
- And promise that UNCCD will do everything possible to prove you were right to do so.

George Washington said that “*Perseverance and spirit have done wonders in all ages.*”

Well, I think people like Thanh, Onay and Edmond have already worked wonders, now it's our turn to do the same.

Thank you

ⁱ <https://www.unenvironment.org/news-and-stories/story/greening-vietnams-tea-industry>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.thegef.org/news/road-restoration-cuba-s-modern-farming-revolution>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.unenvironment.org/news-and-stories/story/sowing-best-practices-cleaner-air-and-better-resilience-climate-change>

^{iv} Analysis of GEF -5 Land degradation focal areas projects: 117 projects include direct interventions on more than 50 million ha of production landscapes benefiting 40 million of rural people, including 25 million defined as poor, half of them being women. Within the project cohort, 80 projects included positive results in terms of vegetation cover (89 million ha), a third of the projects included gains in carbon (143 million tons of CO₂e in avoided emissions and/or carbon sequestration), and half of the projects included benefits for natural habitats (25.6 million ha). These projects contribute significantly to GEF-5 corporate targets by providing 89% of the SLM target, 42% of the Biodiversity mainstreaming target, and 29% of the climate change mitigation target in terms of avoided GHG emissions. GEF (2017): Report of the Global Environment Facility to the Thirteenth Session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification, p. 15.

<https://www.thegef.org/sites/default/files/documents/UNCCD%20COP%2013%20GEF%20report%20final%2019%20July%202017%20rev.pdf>