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## 25 years of protecting our land, biodiversity and climate

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Under Secretary-General & Executive Secretary of the UN Convention to Combat Desertification  
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### Introduction

Good morning,

His Excellency Mr. Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the President of Turkey,  
His Excellency Mr. Bekir Pakdemirli, Minister of Agriculture and Forestry,  
Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

On behalf of everyone at UNCCD:

- Thank you for joining us for the World Day to Combat Desertification.
- And, in particular, my thanks to the Government and people of Turkey for hosting this special 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary edition.

It's said that a cup of Turkish coffee will be remembered for 40 years.<sup>i</sup>

- Both for the taste,
- And for the lifelong friends you make while savoring the moment.

I've made many friends over a cup of coffee, but my colleagues will tell you it always comes with a reminder that:

- Like so many things we take for granted,
- Such a simple gesture reflects how our choices have an impact that ripples across incredibly complex and connected lifecycles.

Right now, that impact is damaging the health of our planet and ourselves.

Making it the responsibility of anyone who wants to ensure we all have equal rights:

1. To eat, drink or breathe;
2. To make our home in a town, in the country or even just in security;
3. To access jobs, education, technology, medicine or investment.

Simply, to live.

## 1. Eating & drinking (agriculture)

First, think about what it takes to feed 7.5 billion people.

Only 20% of the planet is habitable, yet within our own lifetimes:

- 1 out of every 4 hectares of productive land has become unusable.
- 3 out of every 4 hectares have been altered from their natural state
- And while agriculture *drives* that change, we *waste* a third of the food.

So, how are we going to

- *Increase* food production by 50%,
- Even as crop yields *decrease* by 50% in some regions because of land degradation, climate change and biodiversity loss?

Well, just as the damage comes from many pockets of local activity, so can the solutions.

We've seen how well land responds in Turkey's Central Anatolia region.

- As Karapinar's vegetation vanished, so did the soil and then the people.
- But reforestation, irrigated farming, pastures and bee keeping are restoring both the soil's organic structure and the local communities.

Combining more traditional knowledge, faith communities and technology in that way that could restore 150 million hectares of farmland by 2030.

- Generating up to \$40 billion in extra income for smallholders,
- Feeding another 200 million people,
- And sinking several gigatons of carbon dioxide.

Even better, if we can scale it up across *all* our degraded land, we can create new opportunities for the next generation.

## 2. Making a home (urban growth)

That's important for my second point – helping people enjoy secure, stable homes.

Today, half the population lives in urban areas, which consume resources:

- Requiring an area 200 times the size of the city to produce.
- And damaging people and places too often out of sight and out of mind.

That adds to the pressure on:

- The half the population living with difficulties of land degradation.
- And the half already living with water scarcity.

In turn, making it almost *inevitable* that even more rural communities will migrate towards towns and cities, and refuel that cycle.

Which is where land restoration reveals its *true* strength.

Because restoring the two billion hectares of land already damaged:

- will help meet that growing demand from urban areas.
- and create sustainable jobs and stabilize vulnerable rural areas.

Look at Africa's Sustainability, Stability and Security Initiative.

Or Triple S to its friends.

The UNCCD, a dozen countries and some amazing partners, are tackling the root causes of these issues. Our aim is:

- To increase the productivity of 10 million hectares;
- To create two million green jobs for vulnerable groups;
- And to prevent further displacement by improving land rights and planning for natural disasters.

But again, what we need to do now is scale this up.

### 3. Equality (poverty & gender)

Which brings me to my third and final point.

Because to achieve that scale, we must:

- Not only use all of our incredibly diverse resources,
- But also ensure the benefits are evenly distributed.

Over a billion people have lifted themselves out of extreme poverty since this Convention was formed, but exploitation of natural resources continues to widen the poverty gap instead of reducing it.

And, while women are key to closing that gap, 90% of countries legally restrict their economic activity.

- For example, they make up 40% of farm workers,
- But only one in five own their land and even fewer control it.

Yet, lifting such restrictions would add 240 million jobs and \$28 trillion to the economy by 2025.

That's like another US economy – and then some – within just *six* years.

Which is why, the UNCCD Gender Action Plan promotes:

- More participation in decision making;
- More economic and legal empowerment;
- And more access to resources, education and technology.

There is a social tipping point when women's participation reaches 30%.

And we need to reach it quickly, to *avoid* reaching one for land, biodiversity or climate.

## Conclusion

Which means, dear colleagues,

That instead of causing damage costing:

- The global economy nearly \$20 trillion a year
- And global warming *even more*.

We must take action to repay our debt to nature and restore our land.

- Generating a tenfold return on our investment.
- Multiplying the benefits of the Sustainable Development Goals.
- *Growing together* in a virtuous cycle where everyone contributes and everyone benefits.

Hama Arba Diallo, the first Executive Secretary of UNCCD said that  
“*Success is never granted and there is always a reason to it.*”

This Convention still takes *nothing* for granted and is determined to highlight the many reasons why land management *can and must improve*.

I’m happy to say that some old friends will join us for the roundtable to share their experience on how to do that.

But I warn you, there’s another break before then:

- And UNCCD is the *only* international Treaty protecting our land,
- We welcome all the friends we can get.

So, I will see you all for coffee to learn more about your actions to restore healthy land and an even healthier future.

Thank you.

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<sup>i</sup> Bir kahvenin kırk yıl hatırı vardır