



**Opening Speech of Ibrahim Thiaw
Executive Secretary, UNCCD
UN Summer Academy 2019**

Colleagues and participants,

Thank you, Patrick and Simona, and you the participants for this opportunity to speak with you during the opening of the UN Summer Academy of 2019.

As we sit here on a beautiful morning a stone's throw from the slowly meandering Rhein river, I will open with words that may shake up the serenity. Words that may challenge the staff of the Knowledge Centre for Sustainable Development. Words that I hope will challenge you all.

I put it to you this morning that the 2030 Agenda and its very appropriate 17 Sustainable Development Goals are a train wreck waiting to happen....[LONG PAUSE]...that is if we do not recognize that all of these absolutely essential goals compete for land.



Just consider the beautiful park next to you – Schiller Park, named after the late economist and finance minister, Karl Schiller, who I will mention again in a moment.

At one time this entire estate – before it got purchased by Wilhelm Carstanjen in 1881 – was farmland. As such, it would have contributed to SDG 2 “Zero Hunger”. Today you might argue it contributes to SDG 15 “Life on Land”. But it certainly is not contributing to both goals simultaneously.

This would not be a problem if land were unlimited. But the reality is *we need land* to fight poverty (SDG 1), promote decent work and economic growth (SDG 8), and reduce inequalities (SDG 10). (*land management and land restoration generates millions of green jobs, provide growth and prosperity for rural communities, and therefore improve human security, thus reduce inequalities*).

We need land for sustainable consumption and production (SDG 12) and food security (SDG 2). (*Do we know that 99.7% of the*



food we eat is coming from land? Land produces not only food and fodder but also fiber).

We need land to ensure clean water (SDG 6) and clean energy (SDG 7). (Some of our children still believe that the water we drink is coming from the tap (or from a bottle!). Many still do not understand that the future of energy is in renewables, mostly solar).

We need land for sustainable cities (SDG 11) and infrastructure (SDG 9). (Most new cities, new roads, ports and airports, will be built in the developing world. How many forests, how many agricultural land will be transformed to accommodate the new demand?).

We need land to both mitigate and adapt to climate change (SDG 13). (Degraded land emits carbon; well conserved or restored land sequesters carbon. We have at least 25% in balance: either to reduce our carbon budget, or to store in new bank).



And it is on land where gender equality (SDG 5) can have the greatest impact globally -- 90 percent of the world's 570 million farms are owned and operated by families, where the yield gap between men and women averages 20 to 30 percent.

If I had more time, I would have talked to you at length about the links between land management and peace and security (SDG 16); or land degradation and migration. But I don't have much time. In fact, I could have spent a great deal of time speaking about land and oceans (SDG14), recognizing that 75% of the pollution going to the sea comes from land. But I am conscious of time limits. What about land and health (SDG4)? Healthy land / Healthy people is the equation. Both from the air pollution perspectives (Deserts and Sand Storms); or from the water quality point of view (soil erosion pollutes our clean water).



We need land for so many things. But the simple reality is we do not currently approach any of those things with full consideration of the all other demands that may very well be impacted by our land use decisions. Or by our management of that land once those land use decisions have been made.

In the UNCCD we have been concerned about land degradation and sustainable land management for literally decades. But as recent major assessments from IPBES and IPCC (the respective UN panels for Biodiversity and Climate) have made very clear, land transformation – that is, the conversion of land from its natural state – now accounts for more 70% of the total land surface of the globe.

And the rate of land transformation is accelerating.

In the process we have rendered almost one in every four hectares of land unusable. This impacts the climate: almost a quarter of all emissions come from land. This impacts biodiversity: **IPBES** tells



us that if we do not bring this into balance soon, 1,000,000 species will be lost.

And let's be clear – the combined impacts on the climate, biodiversity and productivity puts our own species at risk.

This doomsday scenario is very real, but it is not our only option.

If we recognize that land underpins the SDGs, then we can turn land into part of the solution. We can use land to integrate and even accelerate the achievement of the SDGs.

We can use land (restoration) to create millions of jobs, spur economic growth; reduce unwanted migration; fight poverty and stabilize poor and vulnerable communities and nations.

But that will only be possible *if our goal is to keep land in balance*, which requires a much more holistic approach.



Karl Schiller was the economist that came up with the *magic square*, depicting economic equilibrium. In the world of land equilibrium – which includes people and the environment – the magic square is about *doing no further harm in net terms*. Something called Land Degradation Neutrality.

Put another way, if on one side of the weighing scales we do all possible to avoid or reduce land degradation ([through protection and sustainable land management](#)) while at the other side of those scales we accelerate the reversing of past land degradation ([through restoration and rehabilitation](#)), *we can keep land in balance*.

And if we can keep land in balance, we can keep food, fodder, fiber, energy, biodiversity and even carbon in balance.

The 14th session of the Conference of the Parties to the UNCCD meets at the beginning of September ([which makes this last week very busy for us](#)). These issues will be central to the discussions, and ultimately, the policy decisions taken there. These will help



governments think about land more holistically in pursuit of that balance we need for all the SDGs. It may be called a magic square, but it is not magic.

It comes down to holistic thinking and rolling up our sleeves. It comes down to our vision and our effort, as UN staff, in our service to all.

If you can, please follow us as we work with countries to take on these challenges.

And if you will, please consider the pivotal role of land and how we use and manage it in your own work as you consider the SDGs and how we can achieve them. Each and every one of us can do something, no action is too little to start.

Wangari Mathai once said she was inspired by the story of the hummingbird, when the smallest of all decided to fight forest fires,



while all other big animals stayed put. The hummingbird said: “I will do the best I can”.

Thank you.