

25
YEARS



United Nations
Convention to Combat
Desertification



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Opening Speech

Ibrahim Thiaw, UNCCD Executive Secretary

At the Ministerial Side Event on Strengthening South-South Cooperation to address desertification and land degradation for better livelihood

New Delhi, 8 September 2019

Thank you, Mr. Sun Guoji,

Honorable Mr. Zhang Jianlong, Minister of National Forestry
and Grassland Administration of China,

Honorable Mr. Prakash Javadekar, Minister of Environment,
Forest and Climate Change of India, UNCCD COP14
President,

Honorable Dr. Mahendra Reddy, Minister for Agriculture,
Rural and Maritime Development, Waterways and
Environment of Fiji,

Honorable Mr. Ohn Winn, Union Minister of the Ministry of
the Natural Resources and Environmental Conservation of
Myanmar,

Mr. LI Bijian, Minister in Chinese Embassy in India

Mr. SUN Jin, Special Representative for Climate Change
Negotiations of Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China

Distinguished colleagues,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

First, I would like to thank the Chinese Delegation for inviting me here to address the opening of this special event on Strengthening South-south Cooperation.

I wish to take this opportunity to welcome and thank ministers for your attendance at this event – I know many of you have just landed in India.

Allow me also to express my sincere gratitude to the host country for the great hospitality and for making special arrangements for this – the only event today in the Expo Mart Center.

And my appreciation to all the participants. I think your participation points to the fact that “South-South Cooperation” is both an attractive and significant idea.

The idea was born some 40 years ago. Indeed, the anniversary will be marked next week - on the 13th of September - United Nations Day of South-South Cooperation. It is an idea that has come a long way. And I hope this event will show the value of south-south cooperation to the theme of the COP “Investing in Land: Unlocking Opportunities”.

It could not be more opportune or important.

Today, our planet is under pressure. And mankind is in trouble.

On the planetary side, global assessment reports issued both by IPCC and IPBES underlined the undeniable link between land, climate change and ecosystem stability.

At the same time, we are heading for a population of 10 billion by 2050.

- Already, one tenth of us live in extreme poverty. That means more than 700 million people are unable to meet their basic needs.

Tragically, many of the hungriest and poorest in the world are those who eke out their living, subsistence farming, in the global south.

The world's 2.5 billion smallholder farmers, herders and fishers who depend on natural resources for food and income are

most affected. Facing famine and flood on an all too regular basis.

Bertrand Russell (British Philosopher) once said “*the only thing that will redeem mankind is cooperation*”.

- *So 40 years ago, the first United Nations Conference on Technical Cooperation among Developing Countries (TCDC) adopted the Buenos Aires plan of action for promoting and implementing technical cooperation among developing countries (BAPA). It set out the fundamental elements of south-south cooperation.*
- *Then 27 years ago, it was the global south that put land on the global agenda at the Rio Summit. Rio, as you are fully aware, set out the fundamental Rio Principles for*

sustainable development and international cooperation on environmental cooperation that we use to this day [including this convention].

So - what can south-south cooperation do to redeem mankind?

To my mind, when early this year, the Second High-level United Nations Conference on South-South Cooperation reemphasized the significant role of south-south cooperation can play in the attainment of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development – it was an obvious fit.

South-South cooperation is a statement of solidarity. Among countries but more importantly among the peoples of the South. Solidarity based on shared experience.

What is the shared experience? Yes – it is often a shared history of exploitation by outsiders and entrenched poverty and food insecurity.

Increasingly though is a shared experience with the natural resource base. Countries and people in the south are dependent on natural resources for the development of a still predominantly rural population on the front line of climate change and environmental degradation. South-south cooperation contributes to collective self-reliance – in the face of these challenges.

And no two sets of cooperation really look the same.

- Cooperation can be done in the political, economic, social, cultural, environmental and technical domains.

- On a bilateral, regional, intraregional or interregional basis.

But developing countries from the global south can share knowledge, skills, expertise and resources to meet their development goals.

I am confident China will play an ever more extraordinary role in south-south cooperation – it certainly has comparative advantage on issues of sustainable land management and land restoration.

Over the last few decades, China has achieved not only a remarkable growth of its economy but also lifted more than 70 million people out of poverty. People who mostly come from remote, impoverished and degraded regions.

A key element of its strategy was building up and restoring its natural resource base.

The country has increased forest coverage, for example, from around 8.5% in 1949 to nearly 22% today.

Measures to combat desertification and restore land have brought ecological security. And stability to regions that had been severely impacted by sand and dust storms. UNCCD and China have been cooperating on knowledge transfer on these issues for a long-time.

- In 2005, the Chinese Academy of Forestry opened its UNCCD Training Center on Combating Desertification.
- In 2019, an MoU is set to be signed with Ningxia Forestry Bureau to further enhance knowledge management and experience sharing among affected parties.

With the newly established South-South Cooperation Assistance Fund taking shape, I know that the potential for collaboration is even greater.

- The fund supports developing countries achieve the SDGs - land management and agriculture development are among the priorities to be supported.
- A bilateral project on technical assistance to the African Great Green Wall - to be implemented in Mauritania, Ethiopia and Nigeria - was launched in 2018.
- The UNCCD secretariat is in discussions about supporting the development of *ecovillages* to implement Land

Degradation Neutrality. It has successfully completed the conception stage.

But there are other countries in the south that could be important players too.

- I am delighted that here in India, the Indian government will announce a legacy programme for this COP which should have huge impact domestically and internationally. Certainly, I do not want to preempt our hosts announcement, but I believe south-south cooperation will receive a further boost.

My challenge to all of you is to keep being creative. As the climate and the land change, as we strive to achieve LDN and restore what we have degraded, there is much to learn from each other.

If we each look to what we can bring to the table – skills, knowledge and experience.

If we invest in each other and we invest in the land; I am confident the people of the south and their environments will not just be resilient. They will flourish.

I wish this event great success.
