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Check against delivery

**Ibrahim Thiaw**  
**Under-Secretary-General & Executive Secretary UNCCD**  
**Bonn City Anniversary Reception**  
**30 September 2019**

Lord Mayor Ashok Sridharan,

Ambassador Jutta Schmitz,

Distinguished guests, friends and colleagues,

**[Introduction]**

On behalf of everyone at the UN Convention to Combat Desertification, I would like to say thank-you:

- For inviting us to share a moment that's so special to us, in a place that's so special to the City of Bonn.
- The only catch is that historic visitors like Theodor Heuss, Charles de Gaulle or Mikhail Gorbachev<sup>1</sup> set rather high expectations!

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.bonn-region.de/sightseeing-and-culture/old-town-hall.html>

But that can only be a good thing, given the scale of the threats and opportunities linked to our land and the bold action required to do something about them.

Because when the 1992 Rio Earth Summit created UNCCD as the *only* legally binding international agreement to restore and protect our land.

- It also created our sibling conventions on climate and biodiversity,
- Seeking to leverage the inextricable links between all three.

For better or for worse, when you affect one, you affect them all.

Magnifying the consequences for people from all walks of life.

**[consumer footprint – drought – investment/opportunities]**

Unfortunately, for too long, these issues were associated with stereotypical images of the poorest areas in Africa.

Images that are painfully true.

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But dangerously limited given that land degradation already affects every second person on the planet.

1. First, they don't show how often the visible suffering in developing countries represents the hidden consumer footprint of cities halfway round the world.
  - From the peatlands and forests being converted to farm fruit and veg for year-round export.
  - And the soil nutrients and biodiversity being wiped out by chemicals and monoculture to increase short-term gains.
  - To the pollution and health problems being drip fed by economic models that couple excessive resource extraction, with inefficient product lifecycles and ineffective waste management.
  
2. Second, they don't reflect the global scale of the threats and the ferocity with which problems like drought and heatwaves are growing. From Europe, you don't even need to look as far as growing Asian sandstorms or shrinking island states to see the impact. You just need to look at
  - slowing shipping lanes in Germany,

- thousands of summer deaths in France,
- critical water shortages in Italy,
- or unprecedented wildfires in Spain, Portugal and even Sweden.

3. And third, those cliché images don't even start to highlight the way that each investment in our land creates multiple opportunities.

Whether that's

- Wealthy countries, like the US developing a restoration economy that created 126,000 jobs and \$25 billion economic output in a single year.<sup>2</sup>
- Or developing nations advancing the initiative for Sustainability, Stability and Security in Africa to restore 10 million hectares and create 2 million jobs for young people, migrants and those most at risk from extremists.

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<sup>2</sup> 25 Billion = \$9.5 billion direct + \$15 billion indirect & induced

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## [Progress – SDGs – COP - People]

Fortunately, as the work of UNCCD has progressed, we've:

- Not only seen a significant change in perception across all three areas.
- But also seen that change ripples across regional and global efforts to scale up and speed up progress.
- From the integration of land across virtually all of the Sustainable Development Goals.
- To recognition of how easily and cheaply it can be converted from a major source of climate emissions to a cost-effective sink for a *third* of them.

In fact, when the 197 Parties to UNCCD met this month, it was amazing to see how far we've come since first setting out to care for our land.

- The targets and actions being coordinated to advance ambitious policies, best practice and funding mechanisms.
- The practical business cases being developed to show how restoration can deliver financial returns of up to 30 times the original investment.

- And the public-private partnerships using existing knowledge and technologies to tackle everything from infrastructure and energy, to poverty and health, or forced migration and security.

### [Public perception / people / COP]

However, there has also been a seismic shift in the *public perception* of the global crisis that encompasses our climate, biodiversity and land.

- A passionate movement of individual and collective advocacy for a more sustainable, value-based approach to economic progress.
- Where people, not only use their lifestyle, career and purchasing power to make things better, not worse.
- But also remind their governments and agencies like UNCCD, that we do more and we need to do it faster. Much faster.

It's a movement that hit home at our Conference of the Parties earlier this month, ensuring that people remained at the heart of all our decisions,

- As victims of land degradation
- As conduits for change

- And as the ultimate beneficiaries of the opportunities that creates.

And, without doubt, it's a movement that thrives here in Bonn.

- The place where JFK found allies in “*the war against poverty, hunger, disease and ignorance.*”<sup>3</sup>
- The place UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, praised as a “*competence centre for international policy and global sustainability strategies.*”<sup>4</sup>
- And, therefore, the perfect place for UNCCD to call home.

## [Bonn]

By practicing what you preach, you are instrumental to our work.

- From local efforts, like supporting the demonstrations by young people.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.jfklibrary.org/asset-viewer/archives/JFKPOF/045/JFKPOF-045-011>

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.deutschland.de/en/topic/politics/un-city-bonn-centre-of-sustainability?fbclid=IwAR3xC\\_Dglt9Urkg6ILKruIp8DvK-Mpd2Xh9aCOomNNwyp9c4XhNukDNgHtk](https://www.deutschland.de/en/topic/politics/un-city-bonn-centre-of-sustainability?fbclid=IwAR3xC_Dglt9Urkg6ILKruIp8DvK-Mpd2Xh9aCOomNNwyp9c4XhNukDNgHtk)

<sup>5</sup> <https://iclei.org/en/media/ahead-of-climate-strike-mayor-of-bonn-and-iclei-president-takes-a-bold-supporting-stance>

- Or the urban gardens like “*Stadt Fruechtchen Garten*” (*City Fruit Garden*) bringing better food choices, biodiversity and community interaction.<sup>6</sup>
- To global initiatives, like the Bonn Challenge.
- And cross-sector collaboration, like the new PROGREEN partnership from Germany and the World Bank to tackle restoration, poverty and emissions.<sup>7</sup>
- I know we can count on your leadership in preparing the Decade for Ecosystem Restoration and encouraging others to do the same.
  - In fact, we already saw that at COP14’s Local & Regional Government Day
  - Where the ICLEI focused on using the positive aspects of land management to help rural and urban communities flourish together.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.stadtfruechtchen.de/ueber-uns/>

<sup>7</sup> [https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2019/09/23/world-bank-and-germany-launch-fund-to-curb-forest-loss-build-resilient-landscapes?cid=ECR\\_LI\\_worldbank\\_EN\\_EXT#3](https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2019/09/23/world-bank-and-germany-launch-fund-to-curb-forest-loss-build-resilient-landscapes?cid=ECR_LI_worldbank_EN_EXT#3)

## [Conclusion]

This summer, at a reception on the UN Campus, Mayor Sridharan said:

*"There is no better way to mark the anniversary of the Convention dedicated to combating land degradation than planting a tree."*

I don't want to contradict, but maybe it could be *even better* if in 25 years' time, our successors can stand in the shade of that tree.

- Safe in the knowledge that people around the world found shelter from this global crisis
- Because we joined forces to take bold action when we had the chance.

Thank you.