



## Convention to Combat Desertification

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**Consideration of the follow-up to the outcome of the World Summit on Sustainable Development relevant to the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification and the outcome of the eighteenth and nineteenth sessions of the Commission on Sustainable Development**

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#### Note by the secretariat

##### *Summary*

Since the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) underscored the role of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) as an important tool in eradicating poverty and further to the consideration of desertification/land degradation and drought (DLDD) by the sixteenth and seventeenth sessions of the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD-16 and CSD-17), the Conference of the Parties (COP), has continued to attach utmost importance to the nexus between DLDD and poverty through its decisions. CSD-18 and CSD-19, held from 3 to 14 May 2010 and from 2 to 13 May 2011, respectively, focused on four thematic issues: transport, chemicals, waste management (hazardous and solid waste) and the 10-year framework of programmes on sustainable consumption and production. Given that the relevance of those issues vis-à-vis the UNCCD mandate is rather indirect, the present report will instead focus on previous CSD topics, namely desertification, land and drought, and their nexus with the WSSD outcomes related to sustainable development and poverty eradication.

The adoption of the 10-year strategic plan and framework to enhance the implementation of the Convention (2008–2018) (The Strategy) by the COP at its eighth session, which has the improvement of the living conditions of affected populations as its first strategic objective, further enhanced this approach. The COP called on the Executive Secretary to engage in policy dialogue on The Strategy to foster the awareness of and promote buy-ins among relevant policy decision-makers, making use of, inter alia, the

opportunities provided by the CSD-16 and CSD-17. In this respect, the Executive Secretary pursued initiatives to close the information gap with regard to the urgent need for the international community to prioritize DLDD issues and secure improved buy-in to The Strategy by focusing on the nexus between DLDD, sustainable development and poverty eradication. To this end, the Executive Secretary worked to prepare the ground for a high-level meeting of the United Nations General Assembly with an exclusive focus on this nexus. This meeting will be convened by the General Assembly on 20 September 2011 on the theme ‘Addressing desertification, land degradation and drought in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication’. The outcome document will be transmitted to the tenth session of the COP for further action.

The COP may therefore wish to take note of the outcome of the high-level meeting of the General Assembly and provide guidance on how to translate the policy options adopted into concrete activities.

## Contents

|   | <i>Paragraphs</i> | <i>Page</i> |
|---|-------------------|-------------|
| I. Mandate .....  | 1–7               | 3           |
| A. World Summit on Sustainable Development outcomes.....  | 2                 | 3           |
| B. The 10-year strategic plan and framework to enhance the implementation of the Convention (2008–2018) and decisions by the Conference of the Parties .....                                  | 3–4               | 3           |
| C. Outcomes of the sixteenth and seventeenth sessions of the Commission on Sustainable Development .....  | 5                 | 3           |
| D. The Bureau of the Conference of the Parties at its ninth session.....  | 6–7               | 4           |
| II. Follow-up to and implementation of the mandates relating to the nexus between desertification, land degradation and drought issues, sustainable development and poverty eradication ..... | 8–22              | 4           |
| A. United Nations Secretary-General’s report on the implementation of the Convention.....   | 8–9               | 4           |
| B. Millennium Development Goals Summit .....  | 10                | 4           |
| C. Joint report of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification and the United Nations Development Programme – “The Forgotten Billion: MDG accomplishment in the drylands” .....   | 11–13             | 5           |
| D. General Assembly resolution 65/160 on the implementation of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification .....  | 14                | 5           |
| E. Preparations for the high-level meeting.....   | 15–16             | 5           |
| F. Preparation of inputs for the Secretary-General’s background paper.....  | 17–22             | 6           |
| III. Conclusion and recommendations.....  | 23–26             | 7           |

## **I. Mandate**

1. The mandate for the Executive Secretary to pursue these initiatives is essentially derived from the WSSD outcomes, the outcomes of CSD-16 and CSD-17, The Strategy, COP decisions and guidance from the Bureau of the COP.

### **A. World Summit on Sustainable Development outcomes**

2. The Johannesburg Plan of Implementation (JPOI) placed the nexus between desertification and poverty in the spotlight, underscoring the role of the UNCCD as an important tool in eradicating poverty. The JPOI called for action at all levels to “combat desertification, mitigate the effects of drought and floods through measures such as improved use of climate and weather information and forecasts, early warning systems, land and natural resource management, agricultural practices and ecosystem conservation in order to reverse current trends and minimize degradation of land and water resources, including through the provision of adequate and predictable financial resources to implement the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification in Those Countries Experiencing Serious Drought and/or Desertification, particularly in Africa, as one of the tools for poverty eradication”.

### **B. The 10-year strategic plan and framework to enhance the implementation of the Convention (2008–2018) and decisions by the Conference of the Parties**

3. The mandate for secretariat initiatives to address the nexus between DLDD and poverty eradication is also derived from The Strategy, which underlines “the importance of the efficient implementation of the Convention as an instrument to prevent, control and reverse desertification/land degradation and also to contribute to the reduction of poverty while promoting sustainable development”. While its first strategic objective is to improve the living conditions of affected populations, the first UNCCD impact indicator decided upon by Parties is increasing the proportion of population in affected areas living above poverty line.

4. The COP, by decisions 3/COP.8, paragraph 22, and 7/COP.9, called on the Executive Secretary to consider engaging in policy dialogue to foster awareness of and buy-in to The Strategy among relevant policy decision makers, making use of, inter alia, the opportunities provided by the CSD-16 and CSD-17. It is evident that this guidance clearly encouraged the Executive Secretary to take advantage of the opportunities generated by CSD-16 and CSD-17, but also implied a need to explore the potential offered by other relevant forums.

### **C. Outcomes of the sixteenth and seventeenth sessions of the Commission on Sustainable Development**

5. The outcomes of CSD-16 and CSD-17 also underscored that “land plays a crucial role for achieving eradication of poverty”. In this respect, CSD-17 strongly encouraged action to develop policy measures to reduce land degradation, and which also contribute to poverty eradication.

## **D. The Bureau of the Conference of the Parties at its ninth session**

6. The Bureau of COP 9, which met in Bonn on 23 and 24 June 2010 and in Buenos Aires on 23 and 24 May 2011, also provided guidance by supporting the principle of convening a one-day, high-level event of the General Assembly in September 2011 to address DLDD in the context of global sustainability.

7. Based on the guidance referred to in paragraph 6 above, the Executive Secretary undertook a number of initiatives which contributed to the high-level meeting to take place during the 66th session of the General Assembly on 20 September 2011. These included, inter alia, the provision of inputs in various reports and outcomes of meeting, including the outcomes of the Millennium Development Goals Summit and most notably the production of the “Forgotten Billion” report prepared in cooperation with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

## **II. Follow-up to and implementation of the mandates relating to the nexus between desertification, land degradation and drought issues, sustainable development and poverty eradication**

### **A. United Nations Secretary-General’s report on the implementation of the Convention**

8. In pursuit of effectively following up on these provisions on the nexus between desertification and poverty eradication, the annual report of the United Nations Secretary General to the 65th session of the General Assembly on the implementation of the Convention underscored that DLDD were among the most pressing global environmental challenges of our time, and that they have the potential to reverse the gains of sustainable development. The report provides that DLDD causes food insecurity, destabilizes societies, entrenches poverty and exacerbates climate change. Stressing that more than 1 billion people who live on the world’s drylands are also among the poorest and most vulnerable, the report indicates that they bear the brunt of climate change shocks and are the least able to cope. The report pointed out that the poor who live in the world’s drylands are being left behind in attaining the Millennium Development Goals, adding that the situation needs to be addressed on a priority basis by the international community and calling on the world’s leaders to recommit with a renewed political focus on these issues.

9. Therefore the Secretary-General recommended that the General Assembly might wish to consider convening a one-day high-level event on DLDD in the context of global sustainability on the eve of the general debate of its 66th session.

### **B. Millennium Development Goals Summit**

10. To buttress the point on the nexus between poverty and desertification, the Executive Secretary was also active in ensuring a high profile for this issue at the MDG Summit, which took place from 20–22 September 2010 before the start of the 65th session of the General Assembly, particularly in the outcome documents. As a result of those efforts, the outcome document included a significant expression of support from the assembled Heads of State and Government for the implementation of the Convention. It also called for collective action by the international community in addressing the causes of desertification and land degradation and their impacts on poverty.

**C. Joint report of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification and the United Nations Development Programme – “The Forgotten Billion: MDG accomplishment in the drylands”**

11. The report stressed the close intrinsic links between desertification/land degradation and the achievement of MDGs in the drylands. It pointed out that the populations of drylands included the poorest, the hungriest, the least healthy and the most marginalized people in the world. The study provides that in many areas, natural resources on which the livelihoods of the poor depend are degraded in ways that contribute directly to their low levels of well-being. It also points out that successes in addressing poverty in the drylands have been due to enhanced political commitment and well-targeted investments. The report underlined that the achievement of the MDGs, particularly poverty eradication, cannot be achieved in isolation of one another. Rather, helping people to escape the poverty trap requires policies that tackle all aspects contributing to poverty – nutrition, lack of education, disease, gender inequalities, and above all desertification and land degradation, particularly in the drylands.

12. The study emphasized that for too long, drylands have been overlooked by political and business leaders the world over. It urged them to reverse this history of neglect since the drylands offer great untapped potential in terms of MDG achievement, but also because they represent some of the last great frontiers for economic development.

13. The UNCCD secretariat and UNDP organized a high-level side event to profile the findings of the joint report, which took place alongside the MDG Summit on 22 September 2010. The findings in “The Forgotten Billion: MDG achievement in the drylands” were widely circulated and served to create considerable awareness on the need to address the nexus between DLDD and poverty eradication if MDGs are to be achieved. The report constituted an important reference on the occasion of the General Assembly debate on the implementation of the Convention, in particular in its resolution 65/160.

**D. General Assembly resolution 65/160 on the implementation of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification**

14. Resolution 65/160 called for the convening of a one-day high-level meeting on the theme “Addressing desertification land degradation and drought in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication”, on 20 September 2011, prior to the general debate of the 66th session of the General Assembly. The General Assembly appointed the Executive Secretary as the focal point for the meeting. The resolution also provided that the high-level meeting would be structured around an opening plenary meeting, followed by an interactive panel in the morning and a second interactive panel in the afternoon, followed by a closing plenary meeting. The General Assembly also decided that the panels would be co-chaired by Heads of State or Government, one from the North and one from the South for each panel, to be appointed by the President of the General Assembly, with due regard to geographical balance and in consultation with regional groups.

**E. Preparations for the high-level meeting**

15. To ensure the success of the high-level meeting, the Executive Secretary initiated preparations early. On 2 February 2011, he met with the President of the 65th session of the General Assembly to brief him on the preparations being undertaken by the Executive

Secretary in fulfilment of his mandate as focal point for the high-level meeting and to discuss the cooperation necessary to ensure its success.

16. Subsequently, on 26 May 2011, the Executive Secretary addressed a diplomatic function convened by Japan in cooperation with the UNCCD secretariat and UNDP on the topic “Advancing the Fight against Desertification: Emerging Lessons” with a view to creating awareness regarding the high-level meeting and the need to address the nexus between desertification and poverty eradication as a priority. His presentation made the point that the fight against desertification has not been always understood as a challenge to be addressed globally. He clarified the point that the issue was the loss of arable land and the erosion of its capacity to bear crops and support ecosystem services, warning that if global food security requirements of an increase of at least 70 per cent in food production by 2050 were to be met, addressing DLDD would have to be seen as a prerequisite. He added that drylands held the key to future food security since many food crops, such as potato, corn, sorghum, wheat and barley, which are now global staples, originate from the drylands which currently sustain up to 44 per cent of the world’s cultivated systems and are home to 50 per cent of all global livestock. The Executive Secretary informed his audience that today, arable land loss was estimated to be progressing at 30–35 times the historical rate, and that land degradation outside the drylands accounted for 78 per cent of its total and therefore had to be prevented while focusing on reclaiming degraded lands in the drylands. He concluded that the achievement of MDGs, particularly the eradication of poverty and hunger, hinged on the drylands.

## **F. Preparation of inputs for the Secretary-General’s background paper**

17. As the designated focal point, the Executive Secretary also prepared inputs for the Secretary General’s background paper for the high-level meeting, which had been called for in General Assembly resolution 65/160.

18. The draft focuses on the strong links between DLDD, poverty eradication and the achievement of the MDGs. It states that land degradation affects 1.5 billion people globally whose livelihoods directly depend on exploiting degraded areas and is closely associated with poverty, as 42 per cent of the very poor live in those areas. The document reaffirms that many people living in rural areas directly depend on the natural resource base for their livelihoods, and that any deterioration in those resources, through desertification, land degradation and/or drought, had direct impacts on human welfare.

19. The draft document emphasizes that there is nothing inevitable about poverty and drylands, for people have successfully inhabited drylands for thousands of years, and drylands provide much of the world’s food in the form of grain and livestock. Major global areas of cereal production are located in semi-arid areas, including the North American Great Plains, the Pampas in Argentina and the wheat belts of the Russian Federation, Ukraine and Kazakhstan.

20. The draft therefore sought to dispel the myth that drylands are empty, barren places with little economic value and that they have impeded progress towards sustainable development. The paper also states that land has a value as natural capital and there are costs associated with unsustainable land use. It argues that preventing land degradation and achieving land improvement are feasible and draws attention to the fact that, at a time when 24 per cent of the global land area is becoming increasingly degraded, improvement has been noted in 16 per cent of the global land area, mainly in drylands and rangelands.

21. The document argues that the ubiquity of DLDD and its links with other global development challenges means that strategies to deal with its issues should be cross-cutting and synergistic if they are to make a substantial contribution to the eradication of poverty

and to the achievement of sustainable development. It suggests that the ultimate aim of any such integrated approach to addressing DLDD should be threefold: (1) enhancing the economic and social well-being of affected communities; (2) enabling them to sustain their ecosystem services; and (3) strengthening their adaptive capacity to manage environmental (including climate) change.

22. The contribution of the UNCCD secretariat to the Secretary-General's background paper was highly appreciated by Member States on the occasion of the consultations convened by the United Nations Secretariat on 12 May 2011. Comments made were taken into account in finalizing the paper.

### **III. Conclusion and recommendations**

23. Acting under the guidance of the COP and its Bureau, and mandates derived from The Strategy, WSSD and the outcomes of CSD-16 and CSD-17, the Executive Secretary has made active efforts not just to profile but also to ensure that the international community place high priority on land issues by contributing to the convening of a high-level meeting of the General Assembly exclusively dedicated to DLDD issues.

24. Since the Earth Summit in Rio in June 1992, much has changed in the comprehension of DDL, including the extent of affected areas. The depletion of fertile lands/soils in drylands and beyond is a major threat to mankind. The understanding of soils as a pivotal global common good in our life system is increasing, but it's not yet anchored in decisions-makers' minds. DLDD are not just local problems; they are linked to other issues such as biodiversity, climate change, food security, hunger, poverty, etc.

25. The UNCCD preamble highlights "the contribution that combating desertification can make to achieving the objectives of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, the Convention on Biological Diversity and other related environmental conventions" and "that strategies to combat desertification and mitigate the effects of drought will be most effective if they are based on sound systematic observation and rigorous scientific knowledge and if they are continuously re-evaluated". But policy response to date has been mainly at national level. Furthermore, many affected country Parties have both dry and non-dry areas, and socio-economic (including vulnerability) assessments will not be effective unless conducted nation-wide. This is also true at (sub) regional and global levels.

26. The COP may wish to take into account the views expressed by Member States and guidance provided at the high-level meeting, and factor this into COP outcomes. The COP may therefore wish to take note of the outcome of the high-level meeting of the General Assembly and provide guidance on how to follow up on translating policy options adopted into concrete activities.