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**Follow-up to the Joint Inspection Unit report and strategy development
to foster the implementation of the Convention**

**Follow-up to the Joint Inspection Unit report and strategy development
to foster the implementation of the Convention. Situational analysis**

Note by the secretariat

Summary

This document was prepared by the Intergovernmental Intersessional Working Group (IIWG) core consultancy team¹ to provide contextual information and analysis on the first decade of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), and perspectives on the forthcoming 10 years. It outlines the comparative advantages of the UNCCD in the current international environmental and developmental governance context, highlights some of its strengths and weaknesses, and identifies recent evolutions in the international governance context that can create opportunities or new challenges for the Convention.

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CONTENTS

	<u>Paragraphs</u>	<u>Page</u>
I. DESERTIFICATION AND THE UNITED NATIONS CONVENTION TO COMBAT DESERTIFICATION.....	1–9	3
II. LAND DEGRADATION, POVERTY AND ECOSYSTEM SERVICES	10–13	4
III. SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY AND KNOWLEDGE	14–15	5
IV. POLICY IMPLEMENTATION	16–19	6
V. CAPACITY-BUILDING	20–23	7
VI. FINANCING AND TECHNOLOGY	24–28	7
VII. ADVOCACY, AWARENESS RAISING AND EDUCATION.....	29–30	8
VIII. GOVERNANCE AND INSTITUTIONS	31–37	9
IX. A RENEWED COMMITMENT FOR THE CONVENTION	38	10

I. Desertification and the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification

1. Desertification and land degradation are the result of human-induced causes such as unsustainable land-use patterns and practices, including deforestation, as well as natural causes such as drought. The complex interrelations between the natural and the socio-economic causes and impacts of desertification are recognized in the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD). This makes the Convention an instrument of choice for the sustainable development of drylands and the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in these regions. Moreover, through its impact on land and water resources, biodiversity and climate change, the Convention addresses global issues and generates global benefits.

2. Dryland climates are naturally characterized by low rainfall and generally high temperatures, with high temporal and spatial rainfall variability. Over time, dryland ecosystems and peoples have developed coping strategies that have allowed them to adapt to climate variability. However, population growth, human development aspirations and changes in socio-economic conditions have led to the overutilization of drylands and to unsustainable land-use and management practices, increasing their vulnerability to drought and land degradation. In addition, climate change is expected to increase the frequency of extreme climatic events such as droughts, thereby contributing to the increased vulnerability of dryland ecosystems and communities. Widespread poverty and marginalization in dryland areas also means that affected populations have fewer resources at their disposal to mitigate the effects of prolonged drought, often leading to food crises, famine and mass population displacements.

3. Developed as a result of the 1992 Earth Summit (United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), Rio de Janeiro, Brazil), the UNCCD brings together all aspects of environment and sustainable land management in one broad policy framework. Based on bottom-up participation and promoting a blend of environmental and social/economic policies, the Convention provides an evolving canvas to address the challenges of desertification, land degradation and drought. Ten years after its coming into force, the UNCCD benefits from almost universal membership and there is now an overall recognition that it can make a lasting contribution to the achievement of sustainable development, the MDGs and, more generally, poverty reduction.

4. The UNCCD is unique in many ways. First, in its geographic focus on drylands it brought attention to some of the most vulnerable ecosystems and people in the world. Second, it is the only international instrument that focuses on sustainable land management, an issue traditionally addressed strictly within the scope of national policies. And third, it is the only global treaty that focuses on developing countries, specifically in Africa, and on improving living conditions for rural populations, who are an important proportion of the world's poor. Desertification/land degradation is now recognized as both an environmental and a developmental problem, and one of global proportions.

5. It is opportune to note that many countries have taken advantage of the Convention's tools and processes to implement sustainable land management practices beyond drylands. A new understanding of the scope of the Convention has emerged over the past 10 years which

combines the priority given to drylands and Africa with recognition that the tools and policies promoted by the Convention are relevant to sustainable land management globally.

6. However, much remains to be done to achieve lasting impact on the ground and there is growing evidence that land degradation and drought will worsen with increased climate change impacts, as emphasized by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Fourth Assessment Report. Therefore synergy between plans and programmes to combat desertification and adapt to climate change under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) are becoming increasingly relevant, particularly in the light of rapidly increasing financial resources made available for adaptation.

7. As with many other environmental agreements, the UNCCD focused during its early years on the development of an international governance system designed to assist countries, particularly developing ones, in crafting policies and programmes to achieve the Convention's dual objectives. Now that these systems are in place, it is important to determine their effectiveness in facilitating countries' efforts, and to place renewed emphasis on achieving progress on the ground. The financial, economic and institutional constraints faced by affected developing countries need to be considered in that regard as they create bottlenecks impeding successful implementation of policies and programmes.

8. It is also important to stress that the Convention can contribute to achieving the MDGs, which enjoy broad-based high-level commitment from all countries. The Convention's focus on Africa also provides an opportunity for renewed impetus in addressing some of the world's most pressing social and environmental problems.

9. The Convention also faces increasing challenges of its own, in particular a decreasing level of political support, due partly to the lack of demonstrable progress on the ground and partly to a perceived polarization of its debates. Beyond a short-term focus on its own institutions so as to keep them effective, the Convention must now carefully examine the role it can play within the international environmental governance system, and focus on its strengths. It is believed that with an agreed set of priorities at all relevant levels, measurable indicators of progress, and a renewed commitment by all Parties, the Convention can generate increased benefits for Parties and local stakeholders.

II. Land degradation, poverty and ecosystem services

10. Early work under the Convention was based on the links between desertification/land degradation – particularly, low agricultural productivity – and the socio-economic conditions of affected communities, but recent work has shown a direct correlation between poverty and land degradation. It is now recognized that poverty and land degradation are inextricably linked in a vicious downward spiral in which poverty leads to short-term and often unsustainable resource management strategies with the effect of maintaining or aggravating poverty conditions. It follows from this that curbing land degradation and desertification can make important contributions to reducing poverty and generating benefits at the community and country levels.

11. Moreover, most poor rural populations derive a large part of their incomes and livelihoods from ecosystem services. Protecting and, where possible, rehabilitating land and

water resources can set in motion a virtuous cycle that is key to alleviating poverty from the local to the national level, and therefore to achieving the MDGs in a sustainable way. This can only be achieved through conscious and systematic implementation of strategies designed to provide primary land users with more diverse income alternatives, while supporting their capacity to manage natural resources sustainably. Increased attention to the impacts of agricultural trade on resource management is warranted in that regard.

12. A focus on policy incentives and sustained national and international investment in sustainable land management is necessary to ensure that local populations can continue to derive benefits from the exploitation of natural resources without affecting the continued provision of ecosystem services. There has been little systematic analysis of the costs of land degradation; it has, however, become increasingly recognized that these costs include not only direct financial losses from declining agricultural productivity, but also potentially severe social costs through the weakening of local capacities and institutions. In addition, the economic benefits of preventing land degradation are also little known, although it is clear that beyond a certain threshold of degradation, the costs of measures to rehabilitate land are prohibitive. Tools such as the valuation of ecosystem services in addition to socio-economic monitoring can be used to achieve both the MDGs and UNCCD objectives. In addition, a more systematic economic analysis of the impacts of land degradation at country level may be called for in order to generate political will and financial resources for implementation.

13. Interventions that strengthen the preparedness of dryland populations to deal with drought are not only essential to curb or avoid land degradation, they are also key strategies to adapt to climate change, protect biodiversity, avoid food crises and reduce poverty in drylands. Mitigating the effects of drought, therefore, appears to be a strategic area in which to develop synergistic strategies and generate global benefits.

III. Science, technology and knowledge

14. When the Convention was negotiated, it was widely understood that the instrument could only be successful at curbing the effects of desertification, land degradation and drought if relevant scientific understanding informed policy-setting and the development of concrete management interventions. It was recognized that technical and scientific cooperation (articles 17 to 19) would be a key element of the international instrument, bringing together scientists from around the world to address the most pressing and relevant research questions and to generate relevant knowledge that would lay a reliable foundation for decision-making.

15. By assessing the work on science and knowledge under the Convention during the past 10 years, some strengths and weaknesses of the UNCCD science bodies can be identified. In comparison to the UNFCCC and the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), the Committee on Science and Technology (CST) has delivered relatively few concrete scientific outcomes, and its work programmes have remained at a general level. The work programme of the CST should reflect the multidisciplinary and evolutionary nature of the Convention and should focus on the scientific and technological needs of implementing Parties. Much scientific work on all aspects of land degradation currently takes place outside the realm of the UNCCD, through national and international research institutions or international organizations with scientific and technical mandates. This wealth of information, data, capacity and knowledge should be brought into the

work of the Convention in order to fulfil more effectively the its scientific needs and those of individual Parties. It is essential that such knowledge be action/management relevant and readily accessible to the end-user.

IV. Policy implementation

16. The UNCCD is an instrument of international cooperation which seeks to curb land degradation/desertification and drought and to mitigate the effects of drought through the implementation of a common policy framework. There are two interrelated elements to this framework: the adoption of effective strategies, programmes and measures to implement the Convention, and the creation of an enabling environment to facilitate action, which involves the integration of UNCCD objectives and approaches into the broader policy framework, sometimes referred to as “mainstreaming”.

17. The Convention’s record in fostering the development of effective strategies, programmes and measures, and of the enabling environment needed to reverse land degradation and mitigate the effects of drought, is mixed. One of its successes has been the development of 88 national action programmes (NAPs) in 140 affected countries as well as several regional action programmes (RAPs) and subregional action programmes (SRAPs). However, their implementation has been made difficult by their unequal strategic and operational value, and by a chronic lack of national and international dedicated resources.

18. The unequal success in the implementation of NAPs also arises from the lack of their integration into other, broader, policy areas, including agriculture and development planning in affected developing country Parties. Of particular importance are national development plans and budgets, poverty reduction strategy papers (PRSPs), and national sustainable development plans. Synergy with other environmental instruments, including those addressing climate change and biodiversity, is also of major importance. Without such integration, the impact of NAPs and other strategies to combat desertification will remain marginal. This situation is mirrored in developed country Parties where desertification has not been fully integrated at the programmatic level within development agencies’ country assistance programmes. This has resulted in a financing gap that has a demobilizing effect. One of the salient features of the UNCCD is its participatory approach to policy development and implementation. This strong focus on participation is based on the recognition that successful implementation can take place only through the empowerment of communities, including women, at the local level, working with local land managers and farmers and herders. This has led to the development of participatory processes for the formulation of NAPs and other strategies.

19. However, the insufficient empowerment of local communities and the presence of perverse economic and policy incentives continue to act as barriers to implementing these strategies. Successful implementation of UNCCD-related strategies, programmes and measures will result from reforming the incentive structure and empowering local communities through participatory resources management.

V. Capacity-building

20. Article 19 of the Convention and the various regional annexes include a special focus on capacity-building needs to ensure the successful implementation of the Convention. It is clear that mixed results have been achieved to date in curbing desertification, land degradation and the effects of drought, and that this can be attributed largely to a lack of capacity among stakeholders.

21. During the past few years, countries have taken part in exercises such as the capacity development initiative (CDI) and the national capacity self-assessments (NCSA) for global environmental management, promoted by the Global Environment Facility (GEF) as instruments for analysing national and local capacities to address and implement the Rio conventions. Now that such assessments exist in a large number of countries and capacity strengths and weaknesses have been identified, strategies and action plans for systematically improving and supporting capacities need to be implemented and acted upon.

22. Capacity-building needs for the successful implementation of all three Rio conventions seem to converge to a large extent and could potentially be fulfilled in a synergistic manner. The UNCCD is particularly well equipped to support capacities at national and local levels through its strong community outreach and participatory nature.

23. Capacity development for environmental management cannot be viewed in isolation from the overall development process. In the case of the UNCCD, attention should be paid to broader, systemic issues that may hinder the achievement of sustainable land management and jeopardize the sustainability of any capacity development efforts. Factors that foster the more widespread adoption of best practices in sustainable rural development also need to be identified so that they can be scaled up at the policy level.

VI. Financing and technology

24. Financial and human resources mobilization and technology transfers are central elements of the UNCCD. The Convention calls for the mobilization of adequate, timely and predictable financial resources to support the implementation of programmes to combat desertification and mitigate the effects of drought (article 20). After 10 years of implementation, this UNCCD objective has yet to be met. This situation is a limiting factor in the effective implementation of the Convention. There are several reasons for this financing gap. First, developed country Parties have not made a clear commitment to provide stable resources to UNCCD implementation. Second, developing country Parties have experienced mixed success in mainstreaming UNCCD objectives into national development plans and in mobilizing national resources. And third, development partners have failed to mainstream UNCCD programmes and activities into their programmes and projects.

25. The financing environment of the Convention evolved over the first decade of implementation. Following the third GEF Assembly and UNCCD decision 6/COP.6, the GEF became a financial mechanism for the Convention, alongside the Global Mechanism (GM). This allows the Convention to access new financial resources under the GEF land degradation focal area. It also raises the need to ensure a strategic and programmatic convergence between the

UNCCD and GEF approaches to land degradation. Finally, the complementary roles of the GEF and the GM need to be clearly articulated.

26. At the country level, synergistic action and improved programmatic convergence among donors remain challenges that affect the effectiveness and impact of actions to combat land desertification. In its report entitled *Delivering as One*, the United Nations High-Level Panel on System-wide Coherence stresses the need for improved coherence among donors and recipients at the national level. Such coherence is needed in the context of limited resources. Initiatives such as country programme partnerships have been effective in fostering such coherence.

27. Over the next decade, it is expected that innovative financial resources and mechanisms, including private sector investment, and trade in and markets for ecological services, will play an increasingly prominent role in the financing environment. Moreover, climate change mitigation and adaptation financing might be increasingly channelled to drylands. Efforts must be made to harness these new financial resources and to ensure their consistency with the Convention's approach.

28. Finally, technology transfer and adaptation remains a challenge, because financial, know-how and intellectual property issues, as well as the lack of economic and policy incentives, impede the dissemination of existing and new technologies. Effective means of removing existing barriers and creating new incentives to technology transfers and adaptation should be explored.

VII. Advocacy, awareness raising and education

29. Advocacy efforts are essential in order to generate the international attention needed to mobilize decision makers and public opinion across the globe. The International Year of Deserts and Desertification (IYDD) in 2006, through a series of special events and high-level communication strategies, generated increased awareness among Parties and in the general public. Parties should seize every opportunity to build on the awareness generated through the IYDD and to advocate UNCCD objectives in other international forums, and to make the case that this Convention is a key instrument for generating local and global benefits which support the MDGs and sustainable development. Developed and developing country Parties should also advocate for the UNCCD at the national level, especially within government agencies and other key constituencies. Such advocacy is a prerequisite for the successful integration of land degradation/desertification issues into national policies, strategies and programmes.

30. Unlike its sister Rio conventions, the UNCCD suffers from a limited engagement of key constituencies, including major southern and northern non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which have been instrumental in generating public awareness of, and political and financial support for, other conventions. The difficulty in maintaining active NGO participation and networks such as RIOD (Réseau international des organisations non gouvernementales sur la désertification) has been a limiting factor in the Convention's outreach and coalition-building capacity. The systematic engagement of NGO constituencies, awareness raising, and education are central to strengthening the Convention's profile and to generating greater recognition of its contribution to sustainable development and the achievement of the MDGs. This is true at both national and international levels.

VIII. Governance and institutions

31. One of the underlying principles that led to the adoption of the UNCCD is that the international community needed a collective instrument to effectively address the causes and impacts of land degradation and drought. Convention institutions and governance play a fundamental role in facilitating international cooperation and supporting Parties to implement common objectives at regional and national levels.

32. In its first decade, the UNCCD record in facilitating cooperation and effective implementation has been mixed. This situation can be attributed in part to the suboptimal performance of its governance structure and institutions. For example, the Conference of the Parties (COP) has focused much of its attention on process-related issues, thereby limiting its effectiveness in addressing substantive implementation issues. The creation of structures and processes at the international level (for example, review or science committees) is an essential component of an efficient governance system, but governing bodies should ensure that procedural issues are not too resource intensive.

33. Also, it has been noted that UNCCD focal points are often located in weak ministries and appointed at a junior level. Moreover, many developing country Parties' focal points lack the financial and human capacity to participate effectively in COPs and associated Convention processes. This has led to unequal participation among Parties and to the disconnection of COP decisions from implementation at the national level.

34. The Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention (CRIC) performs important functions in measuring progress in implementing the UNCCD and in serving as a platform to share best practices. However, it has not met all expectations due to the absence of an effective measurement framework with clear reporting guidelines, and due also to difficulties in organizing its work in a manner conducive to learning. Substantial and interactive discussions at CRIC sessions must be facilitated.

35. Reporting is a key strategy in encouraging compliance with the provisions of an international instrument. Effective reporting from Parties requires robust guidelines, performance indicators, and adequate capacity and financing. Reporting guidelines adopted under the Convention are not robust enough to promote implementation and improve compliance. Moreover, as noted elsewhere, UNCCD reporting is underfunded compared to its sister conventions.

36. Despite the dedication and professionalism of their staff and management, the performance of the main two Convention institutions, the secretariat and the GM, has been suboptimal in many instances. Performance has been impeded by difficulty in clearly delineating the two institutions' respective mandates, resulting in institutional tensions. Conflicting views on the roles and functions of the two organizations has also led to expanding demands by the COP without the provision of corresponding financial and human resources. The availability and predictability of adequate resources is essential to support effective management and programme planning.

37. Under the Convention, several regional, subregional and national-level institutions have been established over the past decade. These include the appointment of dedicated national focal points and, in certain cases, NAP committees and implementing agencies. Furthermore, regional entities such as thematic programme networks and centres of excellence have been designated, providing some level of devolution of anti-desertification action. These regional, subregional and national institutions could provide platforms for the synergistic implementation of all multilateral environmental agreements in the medium and long term.

IX. A renewed commitment for the Convention

38. The entry into force of the UNCCD in 1996 resulted from the global community's recognition of the need to coordinate action through a negotiated instrument that would address both the natural and the human causes of desertification, and the need to address both its environmental and socio-economic impacts. By 2007, 191 Parties had ratified the Convention, making it a truly global instrument. During its first decade of existence, commitments of developed and developing country Parties towards the UNCCD fluctuated, and sometimes failed to meet the level of engagement necessary in order to achieve lasting impacts in affected areas. These commitments need to be renewed in order to revitalize this key instrument. Such renewed commitments must originate from the recognition that the issues which made this instrument essential in 1994 are now even more pressing, and that the success of an international instrument can result only from the energy and political will that Parties exert in supporting its objectives.
