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**Item 16 of the provisional agenda**

**Special segment: interactive dialogue sessions**

**Background document for the panel discussions during  
the high-level segment**

**Note by the secretariat**

*Summary*

On the occasion of the high-level segment of the ninth session of the Conference of the Parties of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), ministers and heads of delegation will hold general plenary discussions in the form of three ministerial round tables. Political authorities will discuss responses to emerging challenges as they relate to desertification, land degradation and drought. There will be three round-table discussions:

- (a) Round table 1: The global trends of desertification, land degradation and drought - liaison with other problems and challenges for decision makers and stakeholders
- (b) Round table 2: Desertification/land degradation and climate change - what role for the land in the ongoing negotiations for a new climate change regime at Copenhagen?
- (c) Round table 3: Partnerships and institutions for combating desertification, land degradation and drought - the path to improvement.

In order to assist ministers and other heads of delegation in preparing for the high-level segment, the UNCCD secretariat has prepared a background paper in consultation with the Bureau of the Conference of the Parties.

It is anticipated that the high-level segment will bring political momentum to the deliberations of country Parties on the best options to foster the implementation of the Convention.

## **I. Background**

1. The high-level segment of the ninth session of the Conference of the Parties (COP) to the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) will be held from 28 to 29 September 2009 in Buenos Aires, under the auspices of the Minister of Environment of Argentina.
2. Ministers and heads of delegation from the 193 Parties to the UNCCD will bring a political momentum to the deliberations of country Parties on the best options to foster the implementation of the 10-year strategic plan and framework to enhance the implementation of the Convention (The Strategy).
3. In order to assist delegations in preparing for the high-level segment, the secretariat has prepared an information note on the round-table discussions, which includes some of the questions that ministers and heads of delegation will be invited to consider during their deliberations.

## **II. Format of the high-level segment**

4. During the high-level segment, plenary discussions in the form of round-table sessions will offer an opportunity for political authorities to examine responses to emerging challenges as they relate to desertification, land degradation and drought (DLDD). These will provide guidance on the actions needed to achieve the objectives of The Strategy.
5. For each round table discussion, the secretariat suggests that the COP 9 President invites a maximum of four panel members to engage in an interactive dialogue. Panellists would be identified taking into account their geographical distribution. A moderator would be invited to facilitate the discussions and the interactions between panellists and the participants. A rapporteur would also be identified.
6. Three general topics have been identified for consideration:
  - (a) Round table 1: The global trends of desertification, land degradation and drought - liaison with other problems and challenges for decision makers and stakeholders;
  - (b) Round table 2: Desertification/land degradation and climate change - what role for the land in the ongoing negotiations for a new climate change regime at Copenhagen?
  - (c) Round table 3: Partnerships and institutions for combating desertification, land degradation and drought - the path to improvement.

### **III. Round table 1: The global trends of desertification, land degradation and drought - liaison with other problems and challenges for decision makers and stakeholders**

#### **A. Background**

7. The two main objectives of the UNCCD can be summarized as: (a) to combat desertification, land degradation and mitigate the effects of drought; and (b) to achieve sustainable development in areas affected by and at risk from DLDD.

8. These objectives can only be achieved by taking an integrated approach that addresses the physical, biological, socio-economic and cultural aspects of DLDD. The UNCCD is a unique instrument in that it incorporates both environmental and societal elements. It is therefore paramount that a robust scientific underpinning based on expertise from multiple relevant scientific, social-scientific and economic disciplines supports and informs the efforts to implement the Convention.

9. The scientific community has long recognized that soil, and more broadly land, is a valuable, finite resource, which serves multiple functions for the global good that contribute to sustaining human life. Yet, around the world, severe land degradation and desertification have continued to impair the sustainability and productivity of ecosystems. In view of the wide range of urgent global challenges linked to the sustainability of land and soil, such as climate change, lack of food security, lack of energy security, biodiversity loss, lack of water security and related issues such as conflict and migration, it is vital that the findings from key global scientific assessments such as the Desertification Synthesis of the Millennium Assessment and the work of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, as well as the research of the broader scientific community, are accessible to and used by decision makers. Such scientific information can help to focus efforts to address the key gaps in data and knowledge, leading to real benefits for the world's dryland ecosystems, their inhabitants and the wider global socio-ecological system, as well as to make progress towards broader environmental and development goals.

#### **B. The global land and soil sustainability challenge: what role for the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification?**

10. Land and soil are global commons resources on which humanity depends for the provision of ecosystem goods and services.

11. The UNCCD enjoys the support of 193 Parties, the nearest approximation to universal support. This clearly indicates that there is unambiguous recognition by the international community that land and soil need to be used in a sustainable manner, and that the Convention, in conjunction with The Strategy adopted by Parties in 2007, offers an appropriate global framework through which such sustainable use and management can take place.

12. Furthermore, the UNCCD conceptualizes DLDD as both an environmental and a developmental challenge, thus locating itself squarely at the environment-development interface. This is a distinct advantage as it permits adoption of people-centred and rights-based approaches to mitigation and rehabilitation efforts pertaining to soils and land. Essential links to the UNCCD

sister conventions (the Convention on Biological Diversity, CBD, and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, UNFCCC) have also been established. This potential to harness synergy is increasingly important in the face of climate change and other global challenges, and soil and land can act as key links in promoting multiple benefits: the soil acting as a long-term carbon store, sequestering carbon, and land more broadly providing new economic opportunities.

### **C. Can the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification guide the sustainable use of the world's soils?**

13. The UNCCD has considerable potential not only to guide the sustainable use of the world's land and soils, but also, in so doing, to harness multiple benefits for other urgent global challenges, including food security, energy security, water security, poverty alleviation, climate change and biodiversity. To achieve this potential, it is vital that the UNCCD process, along with all stakeholders in the fight against desertification, capitalize on cutting-edge scientific knowledge and information.

14. Key actions through which progress could be made include the following:

- (a) Ensuring the availability of information;
- (b) Maintaining visibility of the problem, its status, risks, costs and solutions;
- (c) Facilitating the accessibility of information to all stakeholders;
- (d) Ensuring the compatibility of UNCCD efforts to guide the sustainable use of land and soils while simultaneously harnessing synergy with other relevant processes (i.e. climate change and biodiversity).

15. There is a need to ensure the continuous availability of cutting-edge scientific information on the causes and impacts of, as well as the solutions to, DLDD at scales ranging from the local (household) to the international level. Continued support for scientific research into DLDD and the potential options for sustainable land and soil use is of paramount importance. Parties and decision makers may therefore wish to encourage the creation of innovative approaches to medium- and long-term financial arrangements. For example, public-private and community partnerships could be facilitated, with a view to creating new funding opportunities and financial instruments to help fund research that brings together scientific, local and traditional expertise on sustainable land management (SLM).

16. The UNCCD needs to be visible to all stakeholders. Its visibility is dependent on the effectiveness of mechanisms to communicate risk, raise awareness and educate stakeholders on the benefits of action as well as the costs of inaction. This need relates directly to operational objective 1 of The Strategy on advocacy, awareness-raising and education. The proposed UNCCD Communication Strategy, which will be considered by Parties at COP 9, will enhance the visibility of soils and land across multiple sectors. From a scientific point of view, serious consideration could be given to assessing the costs of action and inaction. Such an endeavour

could play a key role in increasing the global visibility of the need for the sustainable use of land and soil.

17. Scientific information urgently needs to be made more easily accessible to all stakeholders. There is a substantial need for an appropriate knowledge-management system. The Strategy states that the UNCCD secretariat should “support the knowledge-management systems established by the [Committee on Science and Technology] CST and perform information and knowledge brokering functions” and support the “convening and mobilization by the CST of relevant science, knowledge and technical capacities”. Good practice and success stories need to be showcased, and the long-term benefits that an accessible knowledge-management system can bring should be acknowledged.

18. The UNCCD is well placed to harness potential synergies and benefits from a focus on land and soils, due largely to its unique location at the interface of the environment and development. Mainstreaming and synergy activities with other multilateral environmental agreements and global initiatives, such as the Millennium Development Goals, are vital if the UNCCD is to become a global authority on scientific and technical knowledge pertaining to DLDD, as stated in operational objective 3 of The Strategy.

19. Issues for discussion by ministers and heads of delegation could include:

(a) The recommendations of the CST, building on the UNCCD 1st Scientific Conference – what are the implications for policymakers and for the UNCCD process?

(b) Prevention of land degradation: can the UNCCD guide the sustainable use of the world’s soils?

(c) Critical problematic: food security, migration, and access to and the use and management of water.

#### **IV. Round table 2: Desertification/land degradation and climate change - what role for the land in the ongoing negotiations for a new climate regime at Copenhagen?**

##### **A. Background**

20. Our planet is in peril due to the continuous degradation of ecosystems. A number of interrelated factors contribute to this problem, which place the livelihood of millions of people in danger. Two such complex interrelated factors are climate change and desertification/land degradation.

21. Climate change affects land potentials through in particular drought and flooding. Yet when the land is degraded, it emits higher levels of the greenhouse gases (GHG) and in turn exacerbates climate change. Although scientific researchers have long highlighted this vicious circle between climate change and land degradation, it has not been much debated as yet at the level of the international community or in policymaking processes.

22. Desertification refers to land degradation in arid, semi-arid and dry sub-humid areas resulting from various factors, including climatic variations and human activities. In this definition climate variation is cited as a direct causal factor and is implicitly linked to the process of desertification. The linkages between climate change and desertification/land degradation must be capitalized on when undertaking the most appropriate synergistic responses that simultaneously address both phenomena.

23. Addressing desertification issues is one of the most important ways of addressing climate change issues. In this way, the resilience of the inhabitants of the drylands can be brought about, and their potential to adapt to climate change can be enhanced. Activities to combat desertification/land degradation are mostly undertaken on the land in order to boost the productivity of the soil and guarantee the availability of other natural resources with a view to enhancing sustainable development.

24. Consequently, where the inhabitants of drylands have to grapple with vulnerabilities associated with the effects of land degradation and climate change, combating desertification becomes the most appropriate vehicle, which should be given priority when evaluating options to be undertaken.

25. Given the interactions between climate change and land degradation, the process of combating desertification has benefits beyond reversing the land degradation processes. Through research on soil conservation measures, technology transfer to farmers, and the education and training of farmers and local communities, the affected land can be returned to productivity. By increasing the vegetative cover of the land through afforestation and reforestation activities, rejuvenating the fertility and enhancing the productivity of the soil, promoting integrated management of natural resources, and creating and providing alternative livelihoods for the inhabitants of drylands, beneficial synergies are created which help to resolve intricately related problems and to enhance the potential of the inhabitants of drylands to adapt to climate change.

### **B. The importance of linking desertification and climate change**

26. The linkages between climate change and desertification must be capitalized on when undertaking the most appropriate synergistic responses to simultaneously address both phenomena. In this way the potential and resilience of the inhabitants of drylands can be enhanced.

27. The UNCCD and the UNFCCC are intended to safeguard the welfare of populations and their resource base. Therefore, their implementation at the country level should be coordinated, synchronized and synergized with a focus on the role of the land in addressing both issues.

### **C. Measures addressing desertification to combat climate change**

28. In the drylands, more attention is being paid to building the potential for adapting climate change measures at the local level to address both climate change and desertification. In this way, measures to address climate change and desertification could increasingly complement each other. Combating desertification by slowing or reversing the desertification process plays a major role in reducing the associated GHG emissions that contribute to global warming.

#### **D. Management of drylands**

29. The successful management of drylands and the processes of combating desertification demand synergistic activities that enhance adaptation to natural changes in climatic conditions. Previously, several techniques were employed to protect valuable land and water resources, vegetation cover, soil fertility and the natural environment. However, the processes of combating desertification/land degradation have benefits that help to resolve intricately related and changing climatic problems and to enhance the potential for adaptation to climate change.

30. The processes involved in combating desertification/land degradation also lead to a rebuilding of the biophysical foundations for a sustainable natural environment – biodiversity, forests, livestock, soils, water and natural ecosystems – and boost the productivity of the land. This translates into vegetation increases and improvements in soil quality as well as factors that can improve the amount of soil moisture.

31. Land should be viewed from a new value; that of its capacity to sequester the excess blanket of carbon dioxide, convert it into stored carbon and cool the globe. In fact, carbon dioxide when mixed with water and sun enriches the soil, promoting vegetative growth that powers ecological sustainability as well as generating more carbon sinks. If soil is being lost, so too is the potential for carbon sequestration and the ecological foundation on which production and conservation are based. Soil carbon sequestration is reduced everywhere where there is depleted soil.

32. Enhancing soil carbon sequestration is the next major step. This could be achieved by recognizing soil carbon storage as an eligible carbon sink in all land use systems in the post-2012 Kyoto regime. Carbon sequestration in soils helps to mitigate climate change, and thus contributes to the realization of the ultimate objective of the UNFCCC – to reduce emissions of GHGs in the atmosphere. When carbon sequestration in soils is achieved through SLM it contributes at the same time to better adaptation to climate change.

#### **E. Rehabilitation of drylands to absorb carbon dioxide emissions and assist mitigation processes**

33. Rehabilitation of drylands is of the utmost importance to preventing increased GHG emissions and to making use of the potentials of drylands for carbon sequestration in ways that are not just carbon neutral but achieve a carbon negative balance in the drylands. Nevertheless, existing climate change financing mechanisms to support mitigation have so far been highly inadequate in enabling agriculture in general and SLM in drylands in particular to contribute, in line with the potential outlined above, to GHG reductions and carbon sequestration.

34. The world's soils hold more organic carbon than that held in the atmosphere and the world's vegetation put together, yet the role of the soil in capturing and storing carbon dioxide is often missing from consideration of the importance of the land in mitigating climate change. Extraordinary demands are being placed on agricultural systems to produce food, fibre and energy, and the inevitable changes in the flow of carbon into or out of soils have significant effects on a global scale.

35. Over the years, most efforts to manage GHG emissions have involved planting trees, since the amount of carbon that can be sequestered in this way is substantial. However, the drawback of conventional carbon enrichment is that this carbon-sink option is of limited duration. Many good practices and technologies already exist to increase the carbon stock in soils by preventing carbon losses in rangelands, pasturelands and agricultural soils, as well as from livestock and other uses of land. Examples include enhancing soil quality through erosion control, afforestation and woodland regeneration, promotion of agro-forestry production systems, sylvo-pastoralism, integrated water conservation and management, and so on.

36. Concerning enriching soils with additional carbon, technological development will be a key driver in ensuring the efficacy of additional mitigation and adaptation measures. Innovative examples include those found in biochar and no-tillage technologies. For instance, conservation tillage and zero-tillage are increasingly being adopted because they reduce the use of energy and often raise carbon storage in soils.

37. Issues for discussion by ministers and heads of delegation could include:

(a) What mechanisms should be considered to effectively contribute to DLDD, within the framework of the adaptation and mitigation strategies?

(b) Bio-energy: The threats or opportunities for the drylands?

(c) Making energy efficiency and carbon sequestration work for land and soils improvement: What are the potential impacts for affected populations and ecosystems?

(d) From Buenos Aires to Copenhagen: Ideas, strategies and proposals for effective synergies between the Conventions.

## **V. Round table 3: Partnerships and institutions for combating desertification, land degradation and drought - the path to improvement**

### **A. Background**

38. Most human activities that affect the environment take place on land. SLM lays the foundation for sustainable development. Land is the main source of livelihoods, food and natural resources for peoples throughout the world. Land represents the most important tangible capital for most rural communities, particularly in low-income countries. The pressure on land and the footprint of human activities on land are already highly unsustainable, and, given current development patterns, are not likely to improve unless serious measures are taken.

39. Land degradation and the widespread loss of fertile topsoil, in terms of quality and quantity, are gradual processes – a creeping and silent disaster. The impact of land degradation is often not conspicuous, but nevertheless potentially very damaging – particularly considering, on one hand, the slow formation rate of soil of 100 to 400 years/cm of topsoil and, on the other hand, the irreplaceable value of soil in respect of maintaining ecosystem services and securing sustainable livelihoods.

40. The challenge is not limited to the drylands but affects all types of ecosystem: salinization in the large irrigation systems of Asia, deforestation and landslides in Latin America and Central America, loss of organic nutrients and pollution in the soils of developed countries, compaction of soil due to infrastructures and erosion in mountainous areas are some aspects of an ongoing attack on land productivity and soil health. The scientific community has widely and long recognized that soil, and more broadly land, is a valuable, finite resource, and that its sustainable future needs to be assured. Good soil health is a prerequisite for the provision of most of the ecosystem services and the longer-term survival of many communities.

41. Food security remains an increasingly urgent and critical problem on the international agenda. The recent rise in food prices reminds us of the importance of the maintenance of arable land, which depends to a significant extent on international efforts to fight DLDD.

42. Most drylands, in spite of the risk of desertification, which derives from their natural characteristics, offer tangible economic opportunities that can alleviate poverty, provide for self-sustained livelihoods and guarantee the sustainability of further dryland development.

### **B. Towards a cooperative framework**

43. The UNCCD, with its 193 Parties, is a unique normative framework for tackling DLDD. It addresses sustainable livelihood issues for millions of people in the world. Its strategic importance is now even more significant in view of its ability to address concerns in the emerging global context of climate change, resilience to natural disasters and food security.

44. As the international community increasingly focuses on the need to adapt to climate change, there is a growing consensus on the need for strategic partnerships and a strengthened institutional framework for policy implementation on DLDD.

45. The General Assembly at its sixty-third session adopted resolution 63/218, in which Member States reaffirmed their commitment to combating and reversing desertification/land degradation in arid, semi-arid and dry sub-humid areas, consistent with relevant provisions of the UNCCD and taking into account The Strategy.

46. The General Assembly also emphasized that “desertification/land degradation and drought seriously threaten the ability of developing countries to achieve the internationally agreed development goals, including the Millennium Development Goals”. It recognized that the timely and effective implementation of the Convention would help to achieve these goals.

47. In the same resolution, the General Assembly further recognized “the cross-sectoral nature of desertification, land degradation and drought mitigation, and in this regard invites all relevant United Nations organizations to cooperate with the Convention secretariat in supporting an effective response to desertification and drought”.

48. The UNCCD should play an important role not only in vigorously addressing DLDD but also in closely linking areas that are either root causes or serve as drivers of DLDD. Issues such as the relationship between soil fertility and food productivity, on the one hand, and between

SLM and the sequestration of carbon in soils, on the other, represent examples of linkages where the Convention should pay due attention.

49. Given the overarching nature of the objectives contained in The Strategy, the establishment of a network of United Nations agencies around this issue would serve to better coordinate and reinforce the system-wide contribution and response. By building a bridge between land degradation, ecosystems/biodiversity loss and livelihoods, The Strategy creates a multidisciplinary “common ground” for other relevant United Nations agencies to play their role.

50. To achieve its main objective, the network for the implementation of The Strategy would also pursue a number of related inter-agency goals and activities, and facilitate coordination on DLDD. Therefore, the task of mobilizing and improving the targeting and coordination of national, bilateral and multilateral financial and technological resources in order to increase their impact and effectiveness lies with all stakeholders and must be intensified, particularly as the multilateral discussion surrounding the DLDD subject area expands.

51. The need for SLM is increasingly clear and urgent. All stakeholders have a responsibility to act now. This is already non-negotiable for today’s populations who confront the effects of DLDD in their everyday lives. Business as usual is not an option if future generations are to benefit from the global land and soil resource in the same way as their predecessors.

52. The UNCCD and The Strategy offer a unique opportunity for the consolidation and convergence of United Nations entities towards a cooperative partnership to address DLDD.

53. Issues for discussion by ministers and heads of delegation could include:

(a) The role of the land (DLDD) in the Green New Deal and the economic stimulus packages

(b) Which mechanisms can foster coordination at all levels?

(c) What are the implications for the UNCCD institutions at the global and regional levels?

(d) Economic opportunities: Why invest in drylands?

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