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Special Session of the General Assembly to Review and Appraise
the Implementation of Agenda 21

The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification: A New Response to an Age-Old Problem

The Environmental Problem - Desertification and Its Causes

One quarter of the earth's land is threatened by desertification, according to estimates by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). The livelihoods of over 1 billion people in more than 100 countries are also jeopardized by desertification, as farming and grazing land becomes less productive.

Desertification does not mean that deserts are steadily advancing or taking over neighbouring land. As defined by the UN Convention, desertification is a process of "land degradation in arid, semi-arid and dry sub-humid areas resulting from various factors, including climatic variations and human activities". Patches of degraded land may develop hundreds of kilometres from the nearest desert. But these patches can expand and join together, creating desert-like conditions. Desertification contributes to other environmental crises, such as the loss of biodiversity and global warming.

Most of the endangered dryland regions lie near the world's five main desert areas:

- The Sonoran Desert of northwest Mexico and its continuation into the southwest United States;
- The Atacama Desert, a thin coastal strip in South America between the Andes and the Pacific Ocean;
- A large desert area running eastward from the Atlantic Ocean to China, including the Sahara desert, the Arabian Desert, the deserts of Iran and the former Soviet Union, the Great Indian Desert (Thar) in Rajasthan, and the Takla-makan and Gobi Deserts in China and Mongolia;
- The Kalahari Desert in southern Africa; and



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- Most of Australia.

There are some other areas of major concern:

- In Africa, 66 per cent of the total land area is arid or semi-arid; in North America, the figure is 34 per cent.
- About 40 per cent of the continental United States is considered vulnerable to desertification by the US Bureau of Land Management. At least 40 per cent of Texas pasture land is already too parched for grazing.
- Drylands cover more than a third of the earth's total land surface, while deserts account for about 7 per cent. Activities to counter desertification focus on preventing the creation of "desert-like conditions" in dryland areas.
- The Roman Empire's breadbasket in North Africa, which once contained 600 cities, is now a desert.

Drought often triggers desertification, but human activities are usually the most significant causes. Over-cultivation exhausts the soil. Overgrazing removes vegetation that prevents soil erosion. Trees that bind the soil together are cut for lumber or firewood for heating and cooking. Poorly drained irrigation turns cropland salty, desertifying 500,000 hectares annually, about the same amount of soil that is newly irrigated each year.

Significant underlying causes include social and economic factors in developing countries, such as poverty, high population growth rates, unequal land distribution, refugee flows, modernization that disrupts traditional farming practices, and government policies that encourage the growing of cash crops on marginal land to pay off foreign debts.

Life on earth depends on the layer of soil that is the source of nutrients for plants, crops, forests, animals and people. Without it, ultimately none can survive. Although topsoil takes a long time to build up, if mistreated it can vanish in just a few seasons due to erosion by wind and water.

The Economic Problem



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If properly cared for, drylands can contribute significantly to economic growth by serving as a base for agriculture, grazing and human habitation and activity. Yet these areas are vulnerable to drought and the results of unsustainable human activity. A few facts:

- Of the world's 5.2 billion hectares of agriculturally used drylands, 69 per cent is degraded or subject to desertification, according to UNEP.
- In Africa, 73 per cent of the drylands used for agriculture is already degraded; in North America, the figure is 74 per cent.
- World food production must increase by more than 75 per cent over the next 30 years to keep up with population growth, according to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). Yet an area about the size of China and India combined -- 1.2 billion hectares -- has experienced moderate to extreme soil deterioration in the past 50 years, mostly in arid or semi-arid regions in developing countries.
- UNEP estimates that desertification costs the world US\$ 42 billion a year. Of the total, Africa loses some US\$ 9 billion a year, Asia US\$ 21 billion, North America US\$ 5 billion, Australia and South America US\$ 3 billion each, and Europe US\$ 1 billion.

Political and Social Problems

In addition to its negative economic and environmental impacts, desertification is partially responsible for population migration. Although no one knows for sure how many people have had to abandon their land when it turned to dust, it appears to be in the millions. One sixth of the population of Mali and Burkina Faso has already been uprooted because of desertification. It is also a factor in the immigration of Mexicans into the United States.



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Poverty forces poor people to wring as much as possible from the land in order to feed, house and warm their families. Unfortunately, over-cultivation, deforestation and other unsustainable practices degrade the land, forcing people to look elsewhere to support themselves. Poor people are highly vulnerable to the effects of weather, as drought can cause famine, while good rains can cause precipitous drops in crop prices. Politically, the poor are also vulnerable, often relegated to the most marginal land.

Desertification has played a part in armed conflict in arid lands, having contributed to political instability, starvation and social breakdown in places such as Somalia.

Convention Provisions and Priorities

The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification in Those Countries Experiencing Serious Drought and/or Desertification, Particularly in Africa, the Convention's full name, was adopted on 17 June 1994 and opened for signature in Paris in October that year. As at 14 January 1997, the Convention (CCD) had been ratified by 60 countries. It entered into force on 26 December 1996.

The stated objective of the Convention is "to combat desertification and mitigate the effects of drought in countries experiencing serious drought and/or desertification, particularly in Africa" To achieve this goal, the Convention calls for action involving international cooperation and a partnership approach. It focuses on improving land productivity, rehabilitation of land, conservation and sustainable management of land and water resources. Such action should also prevent the long-term consequences of desertification, including mass migration, species loss, climate change and the need for emergency assistance to populations in crisis. "The Convention's entry into force offers an opportunity for the



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international community to turn its attention to the most impoverished peoples of the planet", says Hama Arba Diallo, the Convention's Executive Secretary. "It will bring renewed hope to millions of people living in fragile dryland ecosystems and help them start on the road to sustainable development."

The Convention establishes a framework for national, sub regional and regional programmes to counter the degradation of drylands, including semi-arid grasslands and deserts. It calls on developed countries to:

- Actively support the efforts of affected developing country parties to the Convention;
- Provide "substantial financial resources" to assist affected developing country parties;
- Promote the mobilization of adequate, timely and predictable financial resources from all official and private sources; and
- Promote and facilitate access to appropriate technology, knowledge and know-how.

Desertification-affected countries are obliged to:

- Give priority to combating desertification and drought by allocating adequate resources in accordance with capabilities;
- Establish strategies to combat desertification and drought;
- Address the underlying causes of the problem and pay special attention to relevant socio-economic factors;
- Promote awareness and the participation of local population in action to combat desertification and drought; and
- Provide an enabling environment through appropriate laws, policies and action programmes.

The Convention also aims to improve the efficiency of desertification aid to developing countries by coordinating



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donors' efforts and encouraging affected countries to set up national action plans to combat desertification with grass-roots participation, particularly with people who live off the land. Convention framers believed that local people, who are often poor, know more than anyone else about the fragile ecosystems in which they live and work and are thus in the best position to contribute to the fight against desertification.

A "bottom-up" approach to action is stressed by the Convention. A significant component of this approach is the protection, promotion and use of relevant traditional and local technology, knowledge, know-how and practices. It has become evident that desertification cannot be effectively addressed unless the people most affected are fully involved and committed. Although the idea of participation has been accepted for many years, it has often been attached to old "top-down" ways of doing things. People could participate, but key decisions were made elsewhere, often alienating those they intended to serve. By incorporating a "bottom-up" orientation in international law, the Convention breaks new ground and enhances the chances for success through partnership. It specifically underlines the important role played by women. It also stresses the special role of non-governmental organizations, particularly in ensuring implementation.

Under the Convention, national action programmes are required to identify the causes of desertification and practical measures necessary to combat it and mitigate the effects of drought. These programmes must also:

- Specify the roles of government, local communities and land users and identify available resources;
- Incorporate long-term strategies;
- Suggest preventive measures;
- Allow for modifications in the face of changing circumstances;



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- Enhance national climatological, meteorological and hydrological capacities;
- Promote policies and strengthen institutional frameworks for cooperation and coordination and facilitate access by local people to appropriate information and technology;
- Provide for effective participation at local, national and regional levels; and
- Require regular review and progress reports on implementation.

To mitigate the effects of drought, national action programmes may also include the following:

- Establishment or strengthening of early warning systems and mechanisms for assisting environmentally displaced persons;
- Strengthening of drought preparedness and management, including contingency plans;
- Establishment and strengthening of food security systems; and
- Development of sustainable irrigation programmes for both crops and livestock.

The Convention also provides guidelines for: implementation and coordination of action programmes; information collection, analysis and exchange; research and development; technology transfer and development; capacity-building, education and public awareness; mobilizing financial resources and establishing financial mechanisms.

Four annexes outline how the agreement will be implemented by region: in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, and the northern Mediterranean, respectively. For example, the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean parties to the Convention have agreed to establish a regional coordination mechanism. The principal purpose of this mechanism will be to develop joint initiatives to be undertaken by the countries of the



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region for the implementation of the Convention, aimed at combating desertification and/or mitigating the effects of drought through a variety of activities.

Action Taken

A number of projects have been reported in the different regions:

Africa:

Algeria has carried out research on desertification trends using satellite imagery, has held a national awareness workshop and plans to develop government/NGO partnerships. **Botswana's** National Action Programme will culminate in a national forum process to discuss arrangements for its implementation.

Denmark and **Burkina Faso** have undertaken a joint Burkinabe Sahel project to promote grass-roots development in support of food security and environmental restoration at the local level. **Burundi** has coordinated the implementation of the conventions on biodiversity, climate change and desertification into a national strategy. **Cameroon's** national activities include the organization of national awareness days and the drafting of a national environment plan.

In **Egypt**, projects related to the Convention, including better water harvesting and irrigation techniques, are planned to increase its inhabited area from 5 to 25 per cent.

Ethiopia's activities include a national workshop on awareness creation, a review of policies and strategies by the Environmental Protection Authority and a student campaign to plant millions of trees.

Mali is establishing a National Desertification Fund. **Mauritania** brought together 15 African focal points in a workshop to



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exchange lessons learned. **Niger's** activities include holding workshops, establishing regional structures and an environmental fund, and the adoption of a national plan on the environment. **Togo** has launched a national information programme.

Morocco is setting up a National Action Programme and partnerships between the State and groups of villages. The **Gambia** has conducted public awareness campaigns, and revised national forest policy to enable community forest management. **Ghana** has established a national committee on desertification and held sensitization workshops and awareness seminars.

Senegal has created a National Environmental Fund, a desertification information system on the Internet, and an advisory think tank to monitor progress. **Kenya** is preparing a National Action Programme and establishing a National Desertification Fund. **South Africa** is creating a capacity to plan and monitor its National Action Programme. **Uganda** is carrying out activities to raise awareness and developing its National Desertification Fund. **Zambia** has reported a public awareness programme and a Forests Action Programme.

Latin America and Caribbean:

Argentina organized the first conference for combating desertification in Latin America, and its national activities include bringing together non-governmental organizations involved with desertification and developing an advisory group in the area of science and technology.

Bolivia has established a National Action Programme and organized awareness campaigns.

Brazil is elaborating a National Plan to Combat Desertification and establishing a National Network on Desertification, and is



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active in fostering technical cooperation with other affected countries.

Haiti has taken a comprehensive approach to sustainable development, after ratifying the biodiversity, climate change and desertification conventions, and is cooperating with **Mexico, Cuba, Argentina** and the **Dominican Republic**.

Mexico's national efforts include the adoption of a new environmental law, the drafting of a forest law and a technical assistance agreement.

Asia:

China is reviewing its projects to combat desertification.

Israel is involved in the development of orchards that will be irrigated by treated waste water, the organization of an expert meeting on synergies in implementing the conventions on biodiversity, climate change and desertification and the Rio Forest Principles; and an international school for desert studies.

Kazakhstan is carrying out national preparatory activities to combat desertification.

Syria's national activities include a greenbelt and an afforestation project.

Northern Mediterranean:

A meeting will be held in 1997 on benchmarks and indicators. It will be attended by France, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain and Turkey. Spain is preparing a National Action Programme.

Conference of Parties

The Convention established a Conference of the Parties (COP) to review regularly the implementation of the Convention and the



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functioning of its institutions. All parties are to provide reports to the COP on what they have done to implement the Convention. The COP also establishes and guides subsidiary bodies as needed, considers and adopts Convention amendments, and promotes and facilitates information exchange on measures adopted by the Parties.

The Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee for the Elaboration of an International Convention to Combat Desertification (INCD) has been meeting to address outstanding issues. Now that the Convention has entered into force, the COP will hold its first meeting in Rome from 29 September to 10 October 1997.

Committee on Science and Technology

Article 24 of the Convention establishes a Committee on Science and Technology as a subsidiary body of the COP to provide it with information and advice on scientific and technological matters related to desertification and drought. It is intended that the Committee be open to participation by all Convention parties and that it meet in conjunction with normal COP sessions.

Under COP supervision, the Committee is expected to arrange for surveying and evaluating existing scientific networks and institutions willing to become part of a new network to support the Convention's implementation. Scientists worldwide will be encouraged to contribute their know-how and research results to this international effort.

Financial Mechanism

In article 21, the Convention provides for a Global Mechanism to promote action leading to the mobilization and channelling of substantial financial resources, including the transfer of technology, on grant or concessional terms, to developing



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countries for action to implement the CCD. The mechanism is to operate under the guidance and authority of the COP.

Secretariat Headquarters Location

The Convention's Interim Secretariat is currently based in Geneva. Canada, Germany and Spain have offered to host the Permanent Secretariat of the Convention at Montreal, Bonn and Murcia, respectively. The selection of the physical location of the Permanent Secretariat is expected to take place during the first Conference of the Parties to the Convention, in Rome in September. The Interim Secretariat now based in Geneva would relocate to the new location in 1998.

Background

To respond to the great Sahelian drought and famine of 1968-1974, in which over 200,000 people and millions of their animals died, the United Nations Sudano-Sahelian Office was established. It was originally set up to assist nine drought-prone countries in West Africa and was subsequently expanded to cover 22 countries south of the Sahara and north of the equator.

The United Nations first addressed the issue on a global scale at the United Nations Conference on Desertification, held in Nairobi in 1977. The Conference produced the Plan of Action to Combat Desertification, a series of guidelines and recommendations to assist countries in developing action plans and to stimulate and coordinate assistance from the international community.

Subsequently, after another crippling drought, the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) in 1985 set up its Special Programme for Sub-Saharan Countries Affected by Drought and Desertification. This Programme has mobilized about \$400 million, which, combined with another \$350 million



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contributed through co-financing, has helped to pay for 45 projects in 25 countries.

Although the 1977 Plan of Action principles were valid, practical action fell short of expectations due to a lack of resources and coordination. As a result, the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, and popularly known as the "Earth Summit", called on the UN General Assembly to set up an Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee to prepare a legally binding instrument by June 1994.

A special session of the United Nations General Assembly, called "Earth Summit + 5", will meet in New York from 23 to 27 June 1997 to review action taken to implement Agenda 21, adopted at the 1992 Rio Conference.

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