



Seizing *the Chance*

HAMA ARBA DIALLO calls for urgent action to tackle one of the greatest causes of poverty and conflict

Twenty-first century adults, like us, can only marvel at the magnitude of technological change that has swept us along in its wake. At the same time – as city populations grow apace – more and more of us live in environments where nature plays little role and seems of equally little regard. It is out of sight, and therefore out of mind. Yet we depend more than we sometimes care to realize on the web of life of which we are a part.

Television, that potent symbol of modern technology, delivers the stark evidence. Images of droughts, floods and forest fires are beamed into our homes with ever-increasing frequency, alongside debilitating images of poverty that are seemingly at odds with our modern world of plenty. They remind us of the price to be paid for ignoring the environment that sustains us.

Social implications

Desertification, or land degradation, is one of the most alarming processes of environmental degradation. Though partly due to climate change, it is primarily the result of such human-induced factors as over-cultivation, over-grazing and deforestation. Contrary to widespread belief, it is a truly global phenomenon with serious economic and social implications.

The international community recognised the urgent need to combat desertification at the 1992 Rio Earth Summit. The UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) was adopted two years later as an international ►

legally binding instrument to address the issue. Ratified in 1996, the Convention now counts 191 Parties, the largest membership of any of the Rio Conventions.

The intervening years have seen progress in placing desertification on the international agenda, but the issue still fails to receive the recognition it deserves.

Unique opportunity

In a timely reminder to the international community of the urgency of the problem, the United Nations General Assembly designated 2006 the International Year of Deserts & Desertification (IYDD). The title reflects the important distinction between deserts as a unique ecosystem on the one hand, and desertification, the loss of the land's biological productivity, on the other. It thus serves two distinct purposes: both highlighting the need to fight against desertification as a global sustainable development challenge and celebrating deserts as a natural habitat with captivating richness and cultural diversity.

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The Year is a unique opportunity to raise awareness among the broadest possible audience and to galvanize policymakers and the public at large into action. It is a chance that must be seized, given the staggeringly sobering statistics that belie the complacency with which the issue of desertification is often treated. Drylands cover approximately one third of the earth's surface. The livelihoods of over a billion people, in more than one hundred countries, are directly threatened by their degradation. The consequences are equally broad and great.

Food insecurity caused by the loss of productive land creates a spiral of poverty, forced migration

and social and political conflict. By 2020, it is estimated, 60 million people will have to move from desertified areas of sub-Saharan Africa towards North Africa and Europe.

Security implications

The implications for peace and security do not need to be spelled out. Desertification has already been identified by NATO as posing a very serious threat to security in the Mediterranean region. It has also recently been the catalyst for a number of conflicts in arid lands. Such conflicts, resulting from competition over scarce resources, have the serious potential to escalate to interstate violence. Nobel Peace Prize Laureate and IYDD Honorary Spokesperson, Wangari Maathai, has pointedly spoken of the "nexus between peace, security and environmental degradation." She recently described desertification as the 'new enemy' that harms peace.

The inextricable link between desertification and poverty ought also to shake people out of inertia. A recent major report of the Millennium Assessment entitled 'Ecosystems and Human Well-Being', described desertification as 'potentially the most threatening ecosystem change impacting the livelihoods of the poor. The correlation between both issues was explicitly spelled out at the 2002 Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development, which recognised the Convention as a key instrument for poverty eradication, the first of the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

Poverty eradication

Nearly three quarters of the poorest people on earth live in rural areas, according to the World Bank. A large majority of them depend on agriculture for their daily subsistence. Forced to extract as much as they can from the land for food, energy, housing and income, the poor become both the cause and the victims of desertification. And, in turn, desertification becomes both the cause and the consequence of poverty. Clearly this is no one-

dimensional environmental issue. The fight against desertification therefore requires a multi-layered approach, integrating the environmental aspect into a broader socio-economic framework.

The UNCCD stands at the helm of this process. Its main tool are National Action Programmes (NAPs) to combat desertification, which evaluate the nature and intensity of the problem in each country and identify the necessary action to be taken. A key UNCCD strategy - known as the 'bottom-up' approach - is deployed in the process, and gives special emphasis both to involving rural communities, and to empowering women.

Collective action

Governments are encouraged to integrate the NAPs into their poverty reduction and investment strategies. Successfully implementing these programmes, however, depends upon the cooperation of a broad international coalition of partners willing to provide the necessary technical and financial assistance. In other words, it requires collective action as an appropriate response to collective responsibility - the only way forward in seeking to put the world firmly on a path of development that really is sustainable.

Future generations

"The world is not ours, the earth is not ours. It's a treasure we hold in trust for future generations," runs an African proverb. How will those generations judge us? Former US President Lyndon B. Johnson sounded these words of warning: "If future generations are to remember us with gratitude rather than contempt, we must leave them more than the miracles of technology. We must leave them a glimpse of the world as it was in the beginning, not just after we got through with it." Timely implementation of the Convention will go a long way towards leaving such a proud legacy ■

Hama Arba Diallo is Executive Secretary of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification.