

**Speech of Monique Barbut
Executive Secretary, UNCCD**

**Side event
on work of Abertis Foundation**

**Friday, 11 November 2016
18h30
Institut Cervantes**

THE ROAD LESS TRAVELLED

Thank you to the Abertis Foundation for inviting me.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Your invitation prompted to me think about the words of Robert Frost, the American poet. He once wrote *“Two roads diverged in a wood and I - I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference”*.

On the one hand, the road you have taken - in protecting areas of the vulnerable Mediterranean region - is an inspiration. The Castellet UNESCO Centre Centre for Mediterranean Biosphere Reserves, housed at the Abertis Foundation headquarters, is at the cutting edge of what is possible in public private partnerships. You are clearly an organization building for a sustainable future.

On the other hand, the Frost quote also allows me to challenge you. Will you follow or, when the road diverges again, will you take the less travelled path?

Together, we have reached a point in a journey that started thousands of years before urban planning or motor vehicles. Humans walking the same routes over and over to get water and find food carved paths into their

surroundings. As humans became a global network of villages, towns and cities, walking paths morphed into formal roads.

Since the Romans - building roads to move their legions throughout the empire - the same basic techniques were used. It was John McAdam, in the early 19th century, who refined modern construction techniques.

These modern construction techniques have pushed us forward at an ever faster pace. They move us at speed and in relative safety from point A to point B. But combined with urban expansion and the motor vehicle, they are increasingly requiring societies to make major trade-offs.

I know this is a point Albertis is acutely aware of. This understanding has already been driving your environmental strategy.

Roads are opening up the interiors of countries. They are allowing us to massively exploit the natural resources there. In the Amazon, estimates for the total length of roads vary widely from about 100,000 to 190,000 kilometres of [paved and dirt] roads. Once road construction begins, crews are quickly followed by land speculators, loggers, farmers, ranchers, gold miners and others who carve away the forest along the route.

But there are other indirect effects of roads that are not so easy to see. Some species of animals simply refuse to cross barriers as wide as a road. A

road effectively cuts the population in half. Habitat fragmentation may be especially ominous in the face of rapid climate change. If organisms cannot adapt quickly enough extinction is inevitable.

On top of this - and it is something we don't often think about - roads seal the land - and the soil beneath - destroying its productivity.

On a global scale - roads cover 64,285,009 km. More than 20 million km is paved. That is approximately 30-35 million hectares under tarmac.

We have got to a point where this sealing of the land – putting it beyond use – places society under incredible pressure. Action by stakeholders – to quote Mr. Almeny at a meeting in Peru earlier this year *“borne of a conviction that protecting the environment is a duty that we all share”* – is now urgent.

To put it in context.

By 2050, there will be 10 billion people on earth. They will be demanding more. More food, water and energy in particular. Demand for food is going to increase by 70%. It will double in developing countries. Demand for water will increase by 30% and energy by 45%.

More has got to come from somewhere. To meet demand we would have to bring 4 million hectares of extra land into production each year. That is being taken from the wetlands and the forests.

Rather than helping this is making the problem worse.

On top of sealed soil, worldwide, 52% of the land used for agriculture is already moderately or severely degraded – so it is not producing at an optimal level. And each year about 12 million hectares of cropland are lost entirely due to degradation processes. In total there are 2 billion hectares of degraded lands and terrestrial ecosystems - with the potential for rehabilitation.

The area's most seriously affected by degradation are currently home to between 1 and 1.5 billion people - up to 20 per cent of the global population. This number will rise. Many of these people are very poor. Land is their only tangible asset. Their poverty and vulnerability is being made worse by climate change.

If you are living on poor, drought affected land and the productivity of that land collapses; your options disappear too.

The UK Ministry of Defence estimates as many as 135 million people could be at risk of forced migration, by 2045, as a result of land degradation

and desertification trends alone. And seasonal moves – that used to help improve incomes and food security - are becoming permanent.

In Africa, the loss of productive land often pushes young men off the land and into big cities or towards the coasts. I recently visited Agadez, a town in central Niger – and met some of the 150,000 migrants who pass through just this one town - heading north – towards the Mediterranean – each year.

If trapped, in their home communities, in places like Agadez or in the coastal cities, there are few good choices.

Many young men, in particular, are at risk of radicalization. This is increasingly evident in the Sahel and around Lake Chad. And it is certainly no coincidence that the Lake Chad region is home to Boko Haram. In recent research, one in two young men joined an insurgent group because of lack of employment and opportunity.

So your focus on the Mediterranean region – which could become an even greater arc of instability - and on protected areas is important.

Our landscapes need conservation areas. But protecting pockets of land is not going to be enough.

Our working landscapes are the clear foundation for real sustainability.

All life on earth depends on access to healthy and productive land. To feed 10

billion people, we need to urgently start a massive programme of land rehabilitation in degraded ecosystems. Bringing the land back to life is the most powerful, cost effective and quickest way to create jobs and worthwhile opportunity. To protect communities from a changing climate. And to bring security and stability to vulnerable regions.

And there is a way forward.

In September 2015, the **global goals for sustainable development** (the SDGs) were adopted. One of the targets – associated with goal 15 - is achieving land degradation neutrality. Striving to achieve land degradation neutrality translates into climate action by protecting terrestrial ecosystems. Adopting and scaling up land management practices that reduce emissions and increase productivity. And restoring degraded ecosystems.

The annual rehabilitation and restoration of 12 million hectares of degraded land up to 2030, as an absolute minimum, would get us to a point of Land Degradation Neutrality at a global scale.

Note this is the amount of land we lose each year from production. It is starting point for a meaningful shift in our relationship with land based natural resources. But only a start.

The successful implementation of target 15.3 - on land degradation neutrality - can connect the dots between many of the 17 SDG goals and targets - especially if we consider the co-benefits. Land is crucial for biodiversity conservation and combating climate change to ensuring economic growth and human wellbeing. It is closely linked to how many decent jobs we can create (in sustainable agriculture, tourism, energy etc.); to food and water security; migration and urbanization trends; responsible consumption and to real climate action.

12 million hectares would for example help close the estimated emission gap of 8-11 Gt CO₂e by 3.3 Gt CO₂e in 2030. That is 25% of the remaining gap for a 2 degree pathway. More if we are bolder!

Investing in healthy and productive landscapes would be a highly cost-effective intervention to accelerate implementation of the climate and SDG plans too.

At between 20 USD and 300 USD a hectare it is - what the Americans would call - a no-brainer.

I firmly believe that we can deliver the sustainable development goals and climate targets at the same time. We can stop the worst impacts of climate change and regenerate communities everywhere.

But only if more of we all take responsibility and compensates for our own land foot-print. Not always in the place where the damage is done. But at least in the most vulnerable places.

Abertis, for example, manages 8500 km of road. These roads seal about 15,000 hectares directly. I would urge you – us all – to think not just about the emissions from your above ground operations but think about the land beneath the road.

I would urge you to join efforts to achieve land degradation neutrality.

There are close to 500 million hectares of degraded abandoned agricultural land where this vital work can start.

I commend Abertis for your work on protected areas. I commend you for your efforts to mitigate climate change in your operations. Actually, I commend the private sector generally for having the foresight to see climate change for what it is. A threat to the future of business. A threat to the stability of whole regions of the world.

But I challenge you. I challenge the private sector to join efforts to achieve land degradation neutrality. To bring sustainability, stability and security to all.

In choosing this path, you travel the road less traveled. But it will make
all the difference.

Thank you.