



United Nations
Convention to Combat
Desertification

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

**High-Level Event
organized by the Group of Friends on Climate**

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Permanent Mission of France to the UN
245 East 47th Street – Second Avenue, 44th Floor**



Good morning.

Let me first thank Ambassador Delattre and Ambassador Hilale, co-chairs of the Group of Friends on Climate for the invitation extended to me to participate to this early morning diplomatic function. I specially salute Ambassador Peter Thomson, President of the General Assembly. I thank him for his recent address at the high-level event that we co-hosted on 1 May 2017 with the Group of Friends on desertification, land degradation and drought. I could not attend due to unforeseen circumstances but from all accounts I received including through the media, your intervention contributed to once again to raise awareness on the importance of tackling land degradation for global sustainability, and SDGs attainment.

I also salute you all Ambassadors members of this Group.

We, in UNCCD we have also such a grouping in the General Assembly process, the Group of Friends on Desertification, Land degradation and drought co-chaired by Iceland and Namibia.

Excellencies,

We tend to see climate change in classic Hollywood style “disaster movie” terms. The end of the world brought about by a sudden “climatic” event.



It often takes place right here in New York. It is dramatic but it is also simplistic. The challenges of climate change are complex. And a comprehensive response needs to take the nuances and complications into account.

Firstly, population is expanding rapidly. We will be at nearly 10 billion people on earth by 2050. Many of these extra people are going to be born in the most climate vulnerable areas. So, not only do we need to build the resilience of the current population to climate change, we need to be able to welcome an extra 2.5 billion people. And provide for their needs.

Secondly, we need to do this when the natural resource base is at breaking point. 80% of the world's population is already water insecure in some way. For each 1 °C of global warming, 7 % of the global population will lose at least 20 % of its renewable water resources. The gap, between water needs and water resources available, could easily reach 40% by 2030.

At the same time, 25% of the Earth's land is degraded. 1.5 billion people are already directly affected by land degradation. We are continuing to degrade land at a rate of up to 12 million hectares a year. Available cropland is expected to decrease by up to 20% by 2050. As a result, global food production is expected to decrease by 12 %.

Global warming trends are making land degradation and water scarcity worse. In the last 40 years, seasonal temperatures in the Sahel for example have already risen by 1.5-2.0 degrees Celsius. Incidences of drought and erratic rainfall have increased with dramatic consequences. The El Nino of 2015-2016 left nearly 30 million people in need of aid. Across Africa alone more than 650 million people depend on rain-fed agriculture.



The lives and livelihoods of millions of smallholder farmers may simply vanish.

To my mind, climate disaster won't be some Hollywood-style apocalypse. It will creep up on us.

Widespread land degradation, in combination with increasing climate shocks, for example, forces the poor to adopt emergency coping strategies.

Do we see the warning signs?

They initially cut down on food, withdraw their children from school or cut spending on healthcare.

But if all else fails – desperate people look for a “way-out”.

Migration is the most obvious choice. It is a common adaptation strategy. An estimated 42% of households migrate seasonally in the event of poor harvests. 22.5 million people were displaced, on average, each year by climate or weather-related disasters in the last seven years - equivalent to 62,000 people every day.

But we are moving away from a pattern of seasonal migration to permanent distressed migration trends. Estimates suggest that in ten years, 60 million people could have moved from degraded parts of sub-Saharan Africa towards Europe and North Africa.

In all likelihood, the current migration crises will become the new normal. And these migrations crises may be the least of our worries.

There were 28% more conflicts over water during the first decade of the 21st century compared to the 25 previous years.

In Northern Nigeria, shifting migration patterns have brought farmers and pastoralists into more contact with each other, sparking resource-related community clashes that



tend to converge along ethnic and religious differences. The region alone has suffered more than 100 violent conflicts since 2003. The Boko Haram group simply positioned itself to exploit this situation.

To my mind, climate disaster is the sea level rise and the warming. But is it also this creeping competition over increasingly scarce productive resources. It is the resulting forced migration. And the conflict that brings.

Degraded land is the villain of the story! Not only does it make the poorest in our society even more vulnerable to climate change. But, the IPCC estimates that the land use sector accounts for approximately 25% of global greenhouse emissions.

Land users are driving climate change. But, the poorest land users become helpless victims and expendable extras as climate change and land degradation trends come together.

It doesn't have to be that way.

Land is crucial for both adaptation and mitigation of climate change. It could, in fact, play a heroic role in turning the situation around. There will be a Special IPCC Report on climate change, desertification, land degradation, sustainable land management, food security and GHG fluxes in terrestrial ecosystems in 2019.

I hope – and am fairly confident – it will say that by achieving land degradation neutrality (SDG Goal 15) we can redraft the climate change “disaster” script.



Land degradation neutrality combines good land management and a massive scaling up of rehabilitation activities.

In terms of mitigation, the potential is huge. It is derived from both removals of greenhouse gases (GHG) as well as a reduction of emissions through management of land and livestock. The recoverable carbon reserve capacity of the world's agricultural and degraded soils is estimated to be between 21 to 51 Gigatonnes of carbon.

The annual rehabilitation and restoration of 12 million hectares of degraded land annually up to 2030, as a minimum, could help close the estimated emission gap by 25% [up to 3 GtCO₂e out of 11 GtCO₂e by 2030].

There are up to 2 billion hectares of degraded terrestrial ecosystems, an area larger than South America, with the potential for rehabilitation and restoration. 500 million hectares of that is abandoned agriculture land.

Starting at just 20-150 USD per hectare on average, land rehabilitation is a cost effective investment.

Restoring and getting back into production just 12% of degraded and abandoned agricultural land could:

- Boost smallholder's incomes by \$ 35-40 billion per year.
- Increase water productivity by up to 100%.
- And it could be feeding 200 million people per year within 15 years.

It is the definition of adaptation with sustainable development benefits - as called for by Paris.

107 countries are in the process of setting LDN targets under the UNCCD. We are helping countries to turn targets into action with the launch of an LDN Fund. Because an



investment in land is an investment in adaptation for the very poorest with multiple additional benefits.

An investment in land is a simple and cost-effective accelerator of change – supporting climate mitigation, adaption and the achievement of more than half of the SDGs.

To me, this is a blockbuster of an idea. A comprehensive response to climate disaster where land plays a leading role. Less disaster movie more real action.