

**Keynote speech by Monique Barbut, UNCCD Executive Secretary
World Day to Combat Desertification Global Observance
17 June 2016, Beijing**

His Excellency Mr. Wang Yang, Vice Premier of China;
His Excellency Mr. Zhang Jianlong, Minister of State Forestry Administration;
Her Excellency Ms. Tarja Halonen, Former President of Finland and the UNCCD
Drylands Ambassador;

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

How many of you remember a year of 'typical' weather?

Many of you would agree with me that the "typical weather" of our childhoods is a thing of the past. Today;

- Droughts are longer and more intense.
- Sudden, strong rains cause flash flooding.
- The heat in some big cities is increasingly unbearable.

Extreme climatic events seem to be the new typical. They inconvenience everyone. For some people, they change - even destroy - lives.

Two months ago, I was in Agadez, Niger. Tourism, the typical economic activity of the city, has dried up. Instead, Agadez is now a transit point for a hazardous journey. It is a major gathering and departure point for hundreds and thousands of desperate people from all over West Africa trying to make it to the Mediterranean coast.

Drought and flash floods have stripped too much of the land in West Africa of its productive top soil. People's lives – that were already tough - have got worse. The local people I met told me, migration was once a temporary measure to improve income and food security for the rural population; and for young people to raise some additional income when preparing for marriage. Today, migration is becoming a permanent solution to escape a seemingly dire fate.

Extreme weather events are, of course, a matter of climate change. But 15 out of 24 types of ecosystem services are in decline. Land degradation and land-use change is the major stress factor.

Almost everyone in this People's Congress Hall knows what land degradation means for the poorest in society - and has been striving to fight against it. Here in China, the Green Great Wall has vastly improved vegetation cover, significantly reduced the intensity of dust storms and boosted livelihoods. It has given people not just hope, but a bright future.

Africa is doing the same to change its fate. Built on China's experience, the Great Green Wall Initiative for the Sahara and the Sahel is a major African-led initiative that's promoting a mosaic of sustainable land management across Africa - from Dakar to Djibouti.

Since its launch in 2005, food and water security have improved and employment opportunities are growing. If successful, the initiative will be one of humanity's largest carbon sinks. I invite you to experience the wonder of the Great Green Wall in Africa via a virtual reality tour, which will be available in the UNCCD exhibition area during the afternoon session.

Taken together, the two great green wall initiatives are real symbols of hope, solidarity and shared experience. They demonstrate what is possible when nations cooperate; and when that cooperation is inclusive and forward looking. From the desperation of desertification and tyranny of extreme weather, positive changes are emerging with real benefits for people's lives. But the changes can only fully blossom if we build on our momentum and inspire further action at every level. Reaching Land Degradation Neutrality could accelerate the achievement of many of the sustainable development goals and the Paris agreement, for example.

An old Chinese saying goes something like this, "One bee cannot produce honey; one grain of rice cannot produce a meal [(Yī zhī fēng niáng bù chéng mì yī kē mǐ áo bù chéng zhōu) 只蜂酿不成蜜一颗米熬不成粥].

I am particularly pleased to observe the World Day to Combat Desertification this year in China – the country which, with solidarity and engagement, brought millions of people out of poverty through massive scale land restoration efforts. I encourage China to spearhead work in achieving land degradation neutrality and ensure it becomes humanity's defining

achievement in the 21st Century. It will mark China's legacy in green development.

I thank the Government and People of China and its State Forestry Administration - the tireless national focal point of the Convention, for hosting such a remarkable global observance event.

I wish you all a successful and enjoyable day. Thank you.