United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification

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Keynote speech by Monique Barbut, UNCCD Executive Secretary
"Desertification, Cities and Me" at Future of Cities Salons
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As a Parisienne, I love my life in the city. And I like the changes that I have seen of Paris in recent years. There are more buildings with green rooftops. More car and bicycle sharing. More trees and less dog mess on the streets. The people of Paris are known to be strongly attached to their way of life but are recognizing that they have to change if they want to live in a cleaner environment.

But there is a lot more to be done.

Let us start with the ground beneath our feet.

Regardless of where we live, productive land and soil are the primary building blocks for our lives and economies. But city dwellers often wonder: **"Why does desertification and land degradation matter to me or my life in the city?"**

Well, I will give you five reasons why land should matter to you.

Certainly if cities do not take proactive steps, it will matter more and more and our discussions about greening cities will miss their mark.

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Firstly, **urbanization** often means sealing the soil. When the land is covered by roads and buildings, it no longer absorbs energy from the sun or greenhouse gas emissions. As a result, this creates a “heat island” effect. The “Heat island” affects everyone living in the city via increasing energy demands, utility costs and rising air pollution. The lack of green cover promotes soil erosion which could lead to flooding or landslides.

Additionally, urbanization takes away productive land for food production. Every year, 19.5 million hectares of agricultural land is converted to spreading urban centers and industrial developments globally.

This is not only a problem of fast growing, developing countries. In the European Union, at least 275 hectares of soil were lost per day between 1990 and 2000, amounting to 1,000 km² per year, with half of this soil being sealed

by layers of concrete and asphalt. This essentially means that every ten years an area the size of Hong Kong – or Cyprus - is paved over in the EU alone.

Secondly, even if land degradation normally happens outside of a city, it affects the city in various important ways.

Let us take the example of **sand and dust storms.** You are more familiar with these than me. Sand and dust storms were once a natural phenomenon, predictable at certain times of the year. But land degradation around deserts has increased the number of source areas. The amount of dust and sand and the frequency and distance of the spreading of the sand and dust particles has increased. In combination with other air pollutants such as PM 2.5 particulates – dust and sand storms could cause havoc. They are impacting health and hygiene, transport and communication services. They can lead to huge economic losses.

Thirdly, land degradation deprives rural people of their livelihoods. This causes the **unplanned migration.** People move from rural areas to urban centers, or even, across national borders. Migration used to mostly be a temporary measure to improve income and food security for rural populations. But

migration is now changing. As a result of loss of rural productivity, the moves are speeding up and becoming permanent. By 2030, almost 60 percent of the world's population will live in urban areas. Rapid urbanization is exerting pressure on fresh water supplies, sewage systems, food supply/land and soil resources, biodiversity, and public health.

Fourthly, with climate change accelerating the rate of land degradation, the rights and basic survival of millions of people are directly under threat. Land degradation is a cause and consequence of **climate change**. Cities are both the perpetrators and victims in this vicious circle. According to UN-Habitat, cities consume 78 percent of the world's energy and produce more than 60 percent of all carbon dioxide, as well as significant amounts of other greenhouse gas emissions. And yet, cities cover less than 2 percent of the Earth's surface.

Climate change will bring more frequent and severe weather, which causes devastating impacts; especially for coastal and land-locked cities. Many cities suffer from more flash floods these days, which not only cause disasters like landslides and inundation but also wash away the top soil, reducing the land's capacity to hold water and sequester carbon. We need healthy and productive

land to help cities adapt and stop the vicious circle – instead we continue to degrade the land.

Fifth and finally, land degradation affects the **economic development** of cities. The World Bank estimates that up to 80 percent of climate change adaptation costs are to be borne by urban areas. This costs approximately from 64 billion to 80 billion US dollars per year. As land degradation accelerates the impacts of climate change, this economic cost will likely increase as more land is degraded by further urbanization.

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A Chinese proverb goes, "**Without skin no hair can grow**" [(Pí zhī bù cún maó jiāng yān fù) 皮之不存毛将焉附].

Land is the skin of the Earth. Our entire existence depends on a thin layer of soil that covers that land. It is slow to form and can be destroyed in the blink of an eye. Without it…nothing will grow. If we manage our land badly, we – and future generations - will suffer the consequences.

Action is needed now.

Many cities are taking action to prevent and reverse land degradation such as increasing tree and vegetative cover, and switching to a green economic approach to development.

Then your next question should be, “What can I do?” At the individual level, there are many things you can do to fight land degradation in your city. For example, you can start by reducing your land footprint. You can buy local products. You can plant trees or create green spaces to absorb carbon dioxide. Simple lifestyle changes can make a big difference. **Building resilient cities starts with affirmative actions by residents.**

At the UNCCD, we have been advocating for a land-based approach to sustainable development. In September 2015, 17 Global Goals for Sustainable Development were adopted by world leaders meeting at the United Nations in New York. Among these, Sustainable Development Goal 15 “Life on Land” and target 15.3 on Land Degradation Neutrality are particularly significant for UNCCD stakeholders. The UNCCD is now set to become a driving force in achieving this key target.

To be clear, by Land Degradation Neutrality, or LDN, we mean stopping the degradation of land and restoring what has already been degraded, so that the amount of healthy and productive land stabilizes, and even increases. When LDN is achieved, we will have more productive land everywhere for everyone.

So, how can achieving LDN help you and your city?

Well, harnessing the positive aspects of urbanization and strengthening the rural-urban linkage would be a good entry point for creating sustainable cities and communities. Future cities require planning which focuses on the needs and capacities of the region, and not just the urban area in isolation.

The sustainable management of land and water should be part and parcel of resilient urban-rural planning.

New patterns of building green infrastructure with multi-functional land use are emerging. The creation of “green mosaics”, with integrated green infrastructure, can close the urban-rural divide.

Green Mosaics are open spaces for recreation and habitats for biodiversity - including elements like urban forests and horticulture - that provide for healthy and livable cities. This landscape mosaic/spatial plan can make cities work better.

Landscape planning that recognizes the vital services that an ecosystem provides can enhance water supply and quality while simultaneously reducing the risks of droughts and floods.

- At the watershed level, better land management uses the natural ability of ecosystems to retain water by slowing down and absorbing some of the storm water runoff.
- Forests can help to stabilize slopes, reducing the impacts of flooding, land erosion and landslides.
- In urban areas, green roofs, permeable pavements and green spaces help to absorb water and minimize storm water runoff.
- Along rivers, floodplains that are protected can increase river channels' abilities to convey water and reduce pressures on levees.

It positively enhances the life and health of city dwellers. People with access to parks and green space are less stressed and less likely to suffer from anxiety, obesity and asthma, high blood pressure and cholesterol.

Restoring land enhances the capacity of cities to cope with urbanization, climate change, pollution and many other problems that are directly relevant to cities and their people.

Land makes us resilient. It nurtures the future of our urban centres.

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Tomorrow marks the World Day to Combat Desertification. I hope this forum offers you some food for thought about the relationship between desertification, land degradation and you- the people of Beijing. Half of humanity – 3.5 billion people – lives in cities today. Land degradation is my problem. Land degradation is your problem, too. But remember, all of us have the power to reverse land degradation through our actions.

I would like to thank the organizers of the event, namely, the World Future Council, Society of Entrepreneurs & Ecology Foundation, State Forestry Administration and Beijing Forestry University for giving me this wonderful opportunity to speak to all of you today.

Thank you.

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