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Convention to Combat
Desertification

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SOIL ORGANIC CARBON

"All truths are easy to understand once they are discovered; the point is to discover them", at least according to Galileo.

The truth is that getting carbon back in the land is a natural remedy for climate change. It will help the world mitigate and adapt. Putting carbon where it belongs can drastically reduce land degradation, protect communities from drought and boost livelihoods.

It is a truth that has always been there but has consistently been overlooked. You know that and I know that. So why then is this truth overlooked? Why is this recent "discovery" among scientists not being leveraged?

First, I would suggest, there has been a politics of climate exclusion.



Up until recently, around one in 3 countries have had very little to gain from the political debate around climate change. Land-based mitigation as well as adaptation has to date been an underfunded activity – the “crumbs from the table” of the main climate negotiators.

The bulk of climate resources have been dedicated to mitigation in a few big emitting countries. As you know, the 20 countries with the highest carbon emissions account for 80 % of total emissions.

In terms of resources, CDM, REDD+, etc. were focused primarily on just two sectors – energy and forestry. Yet, 60 to 65 countries are considered low emissions, low forest countries. They emit less than 1 metric ton of Co₂ per person per year – so their emissions reduction was not really on the table.

Countries with less than 10 per cent forest cover are not generally included or eligible for forestry related (REDD plus) projects.



A total of just 39 countries participate in the REDD mechanism. Most dryland countries – UNCCD’s core constituency - fall outside of this group as much of their land, where they are practicing techniques like agro-forestry, would be classified as “other land with tree cover”.

That feeling of exclusion began to change at Paris. There was a far greater effort to bring everyone to the table. To dedicate funds to adaptation and mitigation more equitably. To make sure no country, no stakeholder was excluded and left behind.

Now we need to make sure the new feeling of inclusion is delivered upon. We need to be making sure that each and every sector and person can play a role.



In this we perhaps face a second challenge though, the complexity of climate science.

At Paris, all countries were able to set out their own ambitions. Agriculture and the land use sector featured in the mitigation and adaptation plans of more than 100 countries. A focus on land for mitigation would be one way of ensuring all Parties and stakeholders could make a contribution. And see tangible benefits.

The argument is strengthened by the fact that with the SDGs including - SDG 15 (Life on Land) – there is increasing recognition that healthy land and soil is a prerequisite for adaptation and for sustainable economic development.

So when Article 6 of the Paris Agreement asked Parties to look at a new mechanism with sustainable development benefits, land must be big part of the calculation. To my mind, if the Clean Development Mechanism did not



work as it was intended; it was because the development co-benefits were not sufficient.

So as the Americans would say -- Soil Organic Carbon can deliver a “double whammy” of mitigation and adaptation benefits.

The issue of agriculture and land use within UNFCCC negotiations has always been a contentious one.

It is fully recognized that land degradation and climate change form feedback loops whereby intensive use tends to increase emissions, while increasing average temperatures and rainfall variability exacerbate drought.

The IPCC has so far said the total economic mitigation potential of supply-side measures in the agriculture, forestry and other land uses sector -- the largest greenhouse gas emitting sector after energy -- is between 7.2 and



10.6 gigatons of carbon per year by 2030. This mitigation potential is derived from emission reductions as well as from enhanced removals of GHGs.

Despite all of this and the positive news from Paris - we are making slow progress!

Article 5.1 of the Paris Agreement states "*Parties should take action to conserve and enhance **sinks and reservoirs of greenhouse gases, including forests.***"

This talks primarily about "*biomass, forests and oceans as well as other terrestrial, coastal and marine ecosystems*".

So we should be covered. Yes or no?



But the Paris Agreement doesn't talk explicitly about land and soil despite the fact that it is the largest terrestrial pool of carbon.

Why not?

Well, I would suggest, the science or at least how the science is presented is part of the problem. From the Parties I spoke to, they enthusiastically embraced the role of land and soil organic carbon. But they were almost universally dismayed by the seeming complexity of the issue. And that's not your fault

With carbon – above ground – it is possible to estimate. But below ground, it is a bit more complex.

In the past, we have collectively stressed the complexity of the matter in fact. However, we haven't stressed the opportunities. We haven't thought outside of the box.



The guidelines for the measurement of Soil Organic Carbon have been developed by the IPCC.

The tools for making it doable and realistic at country level are not there yet. More often than not, I hear from your fellow scientists that “we don’t have the capacity at the national level”.

Well, I have great faith in the people gathered here. The methodologies, sampling and modeling techniques need to be harmonized. We need to find innovative ways to share data and build capacities in country.

If we get it right, we will have a unique chance to contribute to the upcoming Special Report on climate change, desertification, land degradation, sustainable land management, food security and GHG fluxes in terrestrial ecosystems.



Get it right and your work will be vital for reporting under all of the Rio Conventions. And it will be key for monitoring progress towards SDG as part of the indicator 15.3.1 on land degradation.

SDG 15, which focuses on the management of land resources, has a bold target: for every nation on Earth to become land degradation neutral by 2030. In simple terms, it means that in 15 years, we should put an end to the past pattern of degrading more land than we are restoring back to health every year.

The Irish Playwright, George Bernard Shaw said "*Science never solves a problem without creating ten more*".

But writers often get things wrong.



Sustainably manage our land resources must be based upon the best available scientific knowledge and upon proven success of land policies. Soil organic carbon plays a pivotal role in this.

I look forward to hearing how we can make soil organic carbon management a key part in solving many problems the world faces today.

Thank you and I wish you great success over the next few days.