

**Message of Monique Barbut  
Executive Secretary  
United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification**

**INTERNATIONAL DAY OF RURAL WOMEN  
15 OCTOBER 2013**

International Day of Rural Women recognizes the critical role and contribution of rural women, including indigenous women, in enhancing agricultural and rural development, improving food security and eradicating rural poverty. This is crucial. The status of women is the world's barometer of our collective wellbeing, and the change in rural women's empowerment a measure of the social and economic pressures on households.

Recent data suggests that globally we have made little progress in rural women's empowerment, nearly two decades after the Fourth World Conference on Women held in 1995 in Beijing, China. By 2012, women still made up 70% of the world's poor and two-thirds of the world's 600 million poor livestock keepers. They were producing half of the world's food and contributing 43% of the agricultural labor, but only owned 2% of all the land.

Now as then, rural women still have problems accessing assets like credit or land, appropriate knowledge and decision-making avenues. Clearly, change is needed towards a more targeted approach to rural women's empowerment because rural women are not a homogenous group.

A recent assessment of poverty based on the natural endowment of ecosystems, for instance, shows that aridity goes hand-in-hand with women's illiteracy. Thus, lack of access to knowledge may exert greater hindrance to their empowerment than other factors. Similarly, the 20-30% gap in agricultural output between men and women is mainly due to differences in resource use.

The EUDAFANO Women's Cooperative in Namibia's northern region has set up a production and marketing system that has enabled rural women producers of Marula oil to sell their products in European markets, including The Body Shop. EUDAFANO shows that in addition to political will, creativity that leads to a targeted approach is crucial for improving the fortunes of drylands rural women, and those who depend on fragile soils or degraded land.

The economic potential of rural drylands women is underdeveloped because fragile soils are often viewed as unproductive and are, thus, disregarded not just in national policy, but in many women's affirmative initiatives and policies. It is not surprising that poverty is lagging most among rural drylands populations, particularly women.

With populations living in dryland and drought-prone areas as its primary mandate and the participation of women as a principal of the Convention, the UNCCD is the premier tool for the empowerment of rural drylands women. The Advocacy Policy Framework on Gender adopted in 2011 by the Convention's Parties has strengthened our ability to target affected women.

I applaud the efforts of all rural women, starting with those living on fragile lands, for their steady steps in improving livelihoods. I also applaud the support organizations battling against all odds to create positive change, and welcome initiatives for collaboration to advance the empowerment of rural women whose progress is largely hampered by the fragility of their land.