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منظمة الأمم المتحدة
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联合国教育、
科学及文化组织

Message from

Ms Irina Bokova,

Director-General of UNESCO,

on the occasion of the World Day to Combat Desertification and Drought

[Land belongs to the future, let's climate proof it!]

Theme: Sustainable land management for ecosystem-based adaptation]

17 June 2014

Drylands and arid zones were long considered “barren”, with few water resources, extreme climates and poor soil. Often distant from governing bodies, these zones have been neglected by policy- and decision-makers.

They are nonetheless important ecosystems that are home to 100 to 200 million people. They are also home to unique species that have adapted to difficult environments and act as barometers of global climate change. As a result of climate change and unsustainable agricultural practices, the desertification and degradation of these regions, which are some of the most vulnerable on the planet, are endangering vast territories and the livelihoods of millions of people.

On this World Day to Combat Desertification and Drought, we reaffirm the urgency of implementing solutions for the sustainable management of arid zones. These solutions are useful to people outside these areas, too, as sustainable land management is an issue everywhere. UNESCO's arid zones programme is an exemplary initiative that has accelerated scientific research on these ecosystems and has shown that sustainable arid-zone management is the best way to adapt to the effects of climate change.

Climate change is no general or abstract phenomenon; it has a real impact on the daily lives of millions of people who depend directly on these fragile resources for survival and can see their environment deteriorating gradually. By sharing the experiences of those on the front line and by understanding the genuine impact of climate change on their daily lives, we can help them to adapt and raise global awareness. Such is the objective set for the Project on Sustainable Management of

Marginal Drylands (SUMAMAD) led by UNESCO since 2002 in partnership with the United Nations University Institute for Water, Environment and Health (UNU-INWEH). With the support of the Flemish Government of Belgium, the project is designed to combat desertification in project sites in nine countries, namely Bolivia, Burkina Faso, China, Egypt, India, Iran, Jordan, Pakistan and Tunisia, by rehabilitating degraded drylands, improving agricultural yields through better water management, formulating policy guidelines for decision-makers and sharing information and experiential data among scientists. Owing to the project, local communities have adopted more sustainable life practices (ecotourism, handicraft production, beekeeping and dietary diversification) to reduce their dependence on traditional dryland agriculture in a deteriorating environment.

This proves that, by thinking up context-specific solutions, we can combat poverty and improve population health. To achieve that goal, the provision of global scientific cooperation must be expedited and experiential data and better integrated approaches that take into account the physical, social and cultural factors necessary for the sustainable preservation of dryland ecosystems must be shared among countries. This is the goal to which UNESCO is committed on the 2014 World Day to Combat Desertification and Drought.

Irina Bokova