

Message of Monique Barbut Executive Secretary, UN Convention to Combat Desertification

International Biodiversity Day 22 May 2014

Climate-proofing Land in Small Island Developing States

Small Island Developing states (SIDS) are highly vulnerable to climate change. Thanks to their proactiveness, there is no letup in the global fight to contain greenhouse gasses. But taking measures to pre-empt the negative impacts of climate change and building the capacity needed to ensure all forms of life recover from the effects of climate change is necessary to counter the most obvious threats. Sea-level rise is the most obvious threat to SIDS and other low-lying coastlines. For instance, The Maldives and Palau have lost part of their coastlines and salt water is seeping into wells in Barbados and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. SIDS face special challenges. They are more exposed to natural and climate-related disasters. A high population density means more land is built up, making water drainage a significant challenge after excessive storms.

These challenges have implications for the SIDS that suffer from land degradation. All 39 SIDS that are Party to the UN Convention to Combat Desertification claim they are affected by land degradation – that is 76% of all SIDS members. Deforestation, harmful irrigation practices, urban development, high population density and unsustainable land use practices in countries highly dependent on agriculture are some of the lead drivers. Due to their small sizes and dependence on agriculture, the loss of just one hectare of productive land to land degradation is a substantial loss, with social, economic and political ramifications.

The devastating effects on SIDS are visible. Floods are intensifying soil erosion, the loss of watersheds and a decline in water quality. Landslides, falling crop yields, stronger disaster impacts and the loss of endemic biodiversity, including the retreat of fish due to soil erosion are widespread. The water challenges the United Kingdom faced during the 2013 drought and 2014 floods pale in comparison to what small island developing countries could suffer. The UK estimates it will need up to USD340 billion by 2018 to reinforce its adaptation and resilience measures. Most SIDS cannot afford an equivalent financial outlay, and yet, adaptation and resilience measures are indispensable.

An ecosystem-based approach with land as the entry point for adaptation and resilience can reduce the investments needed considerably. The widespread adoption of sustainable land use techniques to recover degraded land can reduce surface run-off and improve water drainage. The adoption of agroforestry practices, as New Zealand has done, can increase tree cover and create windbreaks. The restoration of degraded forests as Haiti is doing can secure watersheds. And the restoration of mangrove swamps to create natural seawalls can reduce the effects of sea waves and storms. Due to their size and level of development, SIDS have a unique advantage. Planning land smartly to minimize disaster effects and increase the potential to recover from negative climate impacts. The UNCCD is committed to mobilizing the support needed to strengthen land-based climate change adaptation and restoration for SIDS affected by land degradation.

In celebrating International Biodiversity Day, we congratulate the Convention on Biological Diversity for drawing global attention to the plight of SIDS and for championing the role of ecosystems in building resilience to climate change.