



# **The 15<sup>th</sup> OSCE Economic and Environmental Forum**

**Part 1 / Vienna, 22 - 23 January 2007**

**“Land degradation and desertification: a challenge  
to public security and sustainable development”.**

*Keynote addresses*

*Global efforts to combat land degradation and soil  
contamination and the OSCE role*

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## **The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification as a mechanism**

In the era of globalization it seems that only change remains a permanent feature. Yet, let us recognize some constant factors that continue to impact on our societies: geography, ecosystems and their services have historically played their role in the rise and fall of civilisations. Europe does well to lend its attention to the conditions of eco system and their services in neighbouring regions. Whether we consider central Asia, the Middle East or Northern Africa, these areas are all characterized by desertification.

Desertification affects all regions and puts at risk the livelihoods of more than a billion people in 110 countries. Most of them belong to the poorest people of the world. When the grass is green through the windows of the homes of more Nordic countries, there is a

common misperception that desertification is a 'natural' problem of advancing deserts in faraway developing countries. In reality, it's about the loss of the land's biological productivity and it affects Europe and its immediate neighbours. The drylands include approximately one third of the Earth's surface and more than one hundred countries. Over 250 million people are directly affected by desertification, while some one billion are at risk.

The causal chain that leads to desertification, has been analysed at length and with different findings. The suggested causes include drought and climate change as well as anthropogenic factors such as soil erosion and pollution, over-cultivation, over-grazing and deforestation. Clearly one cannot ignore the broader context of population dynamic, poverty and external constraints, often imposed by the global economy.

According to the World Bank, nearly 75% of the poorest populations live in rural areas, and a large majority of them depend on agriculture for daily subsistence and income creation. In drylands, the fragile ecosystems make it hard to accumulate a surplus in agricultural production, and poor households are forced to extract more from their lands than can be sustained in the long-term. Over-exploitation and burdening of land results in the impoverishment of soils, leading to the vicious downward spiral of increasing desertification and rising poverty. Thus the poor become both the cause and the victims of desertification. There is a strong correlation between population growth, land degradation, food insecurity and poverty.

The economic costs of desertification are enormous. UNEP told us that the global economy is losing US \$ 42 billion each year as a result of this process of land degradation. The cost of inaction is yet to be assessed. Statistics touted by the International Union of Soil Scientists at its recent World Congress in Philadelphia in July of last year suggest that over the last 300 years the average soil loss was 200 million tons per year; and in the past 50 years this average has reached 760 million tons. 6 million hectares in annual loss to soil degradation is irreversible and an estimated 1860- M ha, or little more than half of the desertified area worldwide, requires rehabilitation. The cost of rehabilitation over a 20-year period has been calculated to be about US\$213 billions. If not rehabilitated, the income foregone (over a 20-year period) could equal staggering US\$564 billions. The cost of replacing nutrients lost from arable land in countries of sub-Saharan Africa is estimated to range from <1% to as high as 25% of the national Agricultural Gross Domestic Product for selected countries.

The loss of livelihoods and natural resources sets in motion a train of events leading poor farmers to often adopt non-sustainable survival strategies that further deteriorate their resource base. In the countries concerned more and more people choose to abandon their land and migrate to cities or developed countries in search for a better life.

Uncontrolled, large-scale rural to urban migration can strain the social order in towns and cities, particularly by swelling the ranks of the urban unemployed or underemployed. Such a mass displacement of people, particularly in cases of severe food shortage, can place enormous strain on the existing social structures in recipient areas, leading to social unrest, including inter-ethnic and inter-tribal conflicts.

While it is not possible to give exact estimates of the total number of desertification induced migrants, tentative estimates indicate that at least 135 million people are forced to leave their

lands. This summer over 1000 boat people were braving death at sea each day to land in the Canary Islands. How many were coming originally from desertified areas?

Migration within Europe or from other continents to the industrial countries in the North is causing increasing international tension. Close to one-third of the developed countries have restricted immigration from developing countries, and strengthened border controls have been introduced as a measure to limit migration. But no nation can build a wall high enough around itself to deter the forces that further degrade the land and accelerate poverty. If an informed, and thus, updated, policy-making is not developed by all countries concerned millions will be forced to flee their homes and seek new lands.

In this framework it is clear that migration does not constitute a choice but often the only alternative. Most of the time, migrants fleeing drought and desertification do not want to leave their countries, but are forced to do so. In the Sub Saharan African countries, forced migration has risen as a response to threat of recurrent drought and desertification. Policy makers do not always underline this fact.

Ecosystem services are what ecosystems produce that is useful to man. On a meeting organized in the context of the International Year of Deserts and Desertification (IYDD) researchers pointed out a direct link between losses in natural resources and negative impact on other core elements of sustainable development, underlining therefore that investment in arid lands would be economically and environmentally profitable. Yet, beyond the huge economic and social costs of desertification, its ultimate implications for peace and security have not been given adequate recognition.

The Government of Spain and this Secretariat organized in 1994 already in Almeria a seminar on desertification, migrations and conflicts that illustrated converging views of scholars and experts on this matter. Land degradation, desertification and drought in a context of climate change project on all continents a high correlation with local conflicts, ethnic strife and wars. Today, should we not endorse a more advanced and preventive concept of national security that would include issues related to natural resources access and/or scarcity in the vulnerable drylands of the world?

In sum, resource scarcity and environmental degradation beyond a certain threshold create inequity in resource distribution that often affects social order and stability. Insecurity resulting from competition over scarce resources have the potential to escalate to interstate violence. From this viewpoint, desertification is seen as a threat to public security.

The Executive Secretary of the UNCCD, Mr Arba Diallo, observed before a NATO meeting in Valencia that *“In a world seemingly awash with ethnic and sectarian strife, many of these clashes are over natural resources, especially oil, timber, and minerals such as diamonds but also, increasingly, water and arable land. These conflicts often appear to be ethnic -- and indeed may have evolved into such -- but they risk misinterpretation if we ignore their origins in resource disputes and poverty. Thus the perception of national security must now be enlarged, so as to include awareness of mounting threats to the global environment.”*

Let me summarize the argument:

- Under current scenarios of climate change/climate variability and extreme weather events,
- Under current scenarios of correlations between demographic growth and poverty,
- Under current scenarios of consumption patterns and growth trends in large emerging economies,
- Under the consequent scenarios of mining non-renewable or slowly renewable natural resources,

Land degradation/desertification/drought and their associated impacts constitute a clear, growing and global threat to economic sustainability, social cohesion and public security.

In his comments on the desertification synthesis of the “Millennium Ecosystem Assessment” (2005) Walter Reid, director of the assessment observed that *“dryland systems in developing countries are the regions where people are experiencing the greatest problems from the breakdown in the supply of ecosystem services and that “the ecological, social, and economic impacts of desertification can affect not just the people living in drylands, but also countries far removed from those regions.”*

The potential of including desertification within the security debate does not lie in merely identifying how desertification acts as a cause for instability and conflicts. Rather, focus on stemming desertification and preventing further land degradation can bring forward a new type of conflict settlement and confidence-building measures.

Quite generally the United Nations in general and this Convention in particular have a role to play in reconciling environmental conservation, economic growth and social stability. Our Convention, is one instance of international law serving the cause of addressing a global challenge that is unfolding, in time, increasingly threatening consequences for international security and geo political stability.

With desertification having played a role in sparking off 10 of the last armed conflicts in arid lands, the UNCCD is an example of an international treaty, which addresses highly complex and intertwined issues.

One example of a region at risks is the Mediterranean region, where most countries are threatened by desertification and where, according to NATO, desertification poses a common challenge to security. While the problem is most severe in the southern Mediterranean countries, such as Algeria, Tunisia and Egypt, countries in the northern Mediterranean are also affected – for example, in Portugal, 60% of the total land area is at risk, and in Turkey, nearly 75% of arable land is prone to desertification.

I am sure the OSCE recognizes that it is necessary to respond to the expectations of the lower income groups in marginal regions that are otherwise vulnerable to attempts at political destabilization or ideological radicalization. OSCE, in the light of its mandate, can bring a useful contribution in enhancing capacity building to address these multiple challenges.

In 2006 the UNCCD Secretariat in collaboration with the government of Spain organized again the second International Symposium on Desertification and Migration in Almería,

Spain to analyze the links between land degradation, poverty and one of the most evident and important consequence of the desertification: migration. The symposium

- Promoted interdisciplinary research in order to have a better understanding of the linkages among poverty, desertification and migration,
- Supported the dialogue between agencies and governmental policy development in affected countries and
- Prioritized the need for foreign aid and multilateral negotiations to overcome the problem.

Since desertification and, migration have a growing impact in Europe, the symposium suggested that Spain be the advocate of this double challenge in the agenda of the European Union, OSCE, OECD and COP-8 of the Convention, to be held in Madrid, in 2007. The UNCCD Secretariat will support Spain in this endeavour, within the limits of its resources.

Let me recall here that the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification, and the action programmes prepared as part of the Convention process, provide a powerful tool for introducing and strengthening confidence-building measures, as well as for directly alleviating the fundamental causes of migration, such as poverty and social inequity.

The UNCCD has been acknowledged as a significant player in achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), particularly with regard to the eradication of poverty. The UNCCD national action programmes (NAPs) constitute a political and operational consensus on the measures for preventing, rehabilitating and reclaiming degraded land. In Eastern Europe an important focus is placed on the decontamination of soils. Often, NAPs are primarily geared to improve the livelihoods of the poorest, marginalized rural populations. In this regard, the successful implementation of the UNCCD makes a significant contribution to food security, human rights and income creation and thus reduces social tensions.

Drawing on past lessons, the Convention states that these programmes must adopt a democratic, bottom-up approach. They should emphasize popular participation and the creation of an "enabling environment" designed to allow local people to help themselves to reverse land degradation. Of course, governments remain responsible for creating this enabling environment. They must make politically sensitive changes, such as decentralizing authority, improving land-tenure systems, and empowering women, farmers, and pastoralists. They should also permit non-governmental organizations to play a strong role in preparing and implementing the action programmes.

In contrast to many past efforts, these action programmes are to be fully integrated into other national policies for sustainable development. They should be flexible and modified as circumstances change. Desertification can only be reversed through profound changes in local and international behavior.

Step by step, these changes will ultimately lead to sustainable land use and food security for a growing world population and we hope that strengthened efforts for SLM in the GEF context will gradually strengthen this trend. Combating desertification, then, is really just part of a much broader objective: the promoting sustainable development in fragile ecosystems, and encouraging positive implications for national stability and international security.

Beyond efforts at national level, regional cooperation in Europe plays an important role.

Drought is becoming more and more a crucial issue in Europe. Since 2003, UNCCD secretariat, at the request of Balkan countries has launched a process for the establishment of a Drought Management Center for South Eastern Europe (DMCSEE) in the context of UNCCD (Albania, Bosnia Herzegovina, Croatia, Hungary, R of Moldova, FYR of Macedonia, Greece, Turkey, Slovenia, Romania, Bulgaria), in cooperation with WMO. The countries selected Slovenia as host country of this Center for South Eastern Countries. This project proposal will be presented soon to potential partners for cooperation, including OSCE.

Regional activities are also planned under the Regional implementation annex IV for Northern Mediterranean and annex V for Central and Eastern Europe, such as:

- A Regional Training Center (RTC) for CEE countries on "soil conservation strategy" to be hosted by Bulgaria;
- A Regional Thematic Network (RTN) for CEE countries on "afforestation in temperate zones affected by drought" to be hosted by Romania
- A Regional Reference Center (RRC) for CEE countries on "soil conservation strategies and planning" to be hosted by Czech Republic
- A Regional Workshop on "Watershed rehabilitation techniques in the degraded areas" to be organized by Turkey in 2007;
- A Regional Training Programme (RTP) for NM countries on "afforestation and plantation techniques" to be organized by Turkey in 2007
- A regional workshop on resource mobilization for CEE countries to combat desertification and land degradation.

Countries that evolved these proposals would welcome partnership with the OSCE as well as its participation in the above mentioned meetings. Around Europe's borders, cooperation between Europe and Africa or Asia in the context of the UNCCD can build mutual trust, and hopefully lead to extended partnership in other policy areas. For instance the Thematic Programme Networks in Asia is one of particular interest.

This was all talk, now can we move to action?

Beyond the proposals for regional European cooperation listed above, we are ready to consider concrete further avenues for immediate cooperation. For instance one could consider a capacity building initiative in central Asia (Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan) for in depth UNCCD Country Reviews. This would be helpful in projecting scenarios, assessing the potential, challenges and correlations of enhancing SLM, implementing the Convention and strengthening regional cooperation. At the regional level, we could also cooperate in the creation of a Dryland Center in Central Asia.

The UNCCD secretariat is equally open to discuss the possibility to conduct similar in depth UNCCD country reviews in some countries requesting it and deemed of priority interest by both organizations in other regions. In this regard, the OSCE country offices could play an important role on the field.

We must continue to be mindful of the need for regional stability and security in key areas. The lack of access by the world's poor to modern energy services, agricultural opportunities, and other basics needed for economic advancement is a deep concern. Improving the resilience of eco systems in the drylands provides the basic services sustaining the socio economic options; leave alone the survival of the local population. Thus it can effectively reduce the risks to public security.

Let me conclude. Teddy Roosevelt said, "Poverty anywhere is a threat to prosperity everywhere". If we scratch poverty, too often we find a barren land. We do not need the riding spectres of Attila, Tamerlan or Genghis Khan to carry this logic home.

Thank you for your attention.