



Issues Paper ECOSOC Preparatory Meeting

"Land and Vulnerable People in a World of Change"

1. In preparation for the thematic debate of the High-level Segment of the 2008, a meeting of ECOSOC is being held on 17 April to discuss current global trends and their impact on the livelihoods of poor rural people, in particular those without secure land access or tenure and those struggling to survive on degraded lands and drylands.
2. The ECOSOC Preparatory meeting will explore the type and magnitude of threats and opportunities posed by increasing commodity prices, expanding biofuel cultivation, climate change and climate change mitigation activities, and other commercial interests on land productivity, sustainable land management, biodiversity and on poor rural producers with insecure access to land and land tenure. The meeting will also identify policy options to assist policy makers to seize the opportunities and avert the threats stemming from climate changes and related global challenges.
3. The ECOSOC Preparatory meeting is organized and co-sponsored by DESA, FAO, IFAD, UNCCD, UNCBD, UNDP and UNEP.

Overview of the issues

4. Equitable and secure access to land and land use is fundamental for the approximately 2.5 billion rural people in developing countries who depend on agriculture, forests, and forest products for their livelihoods. Land provides a source of income, livelihood, food security, cultural identity, and shelter. It is a basic asset for the economic empowerment of poor people and a safety net in times of hardship. It defines power relations between and among individuals and social groups and thus has enormous political implications. It is a critical factor in the formation of individual and collective identity and in the organization of social, cultural and religious life. Sustainable management and conservation of land resources and agricultural biodiversity, along with secure rights to land and greater equity in land access, are central for poverty reduction, and of great relevance to the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG), notably MDG1 on the eradicating poverty and hunger.
5. Population growth, urbanization, and the weakening of customary land tenure institutions and systems are increasingly threatening poor people's access to land and tenure security, leading to escalating conflicts within and between countries. Local and national dynamics shaping the access of poor people to land are linked to broader processes and global factors. Trade regimes, global consumer- and corporate-driven food systems, increasing demand for bio-fuels, and crises such as climate change are creating greater competition for land and subsequently greater pressure on land use and on tenure systems.
6. These trends are occurring in the context of a degraded and dwindling natural resource base, which climate change is projected to exacerbate further. Land degradation and desertification¹ affect over two

¹ Desertification is the degradation of land in arid, semi-arid and dry sub-humid areas. It is caused primarily by human activities and climatic variations.

billion people. It is estimated that 5 – 7 million hectares of land are lost each year due to advanced degradation or other environmental damage, such as salinization. During the last fifty years, one-fourth of the world's top soil, one-fifth of the agricultural land, and one-third of its forests have been degraded or lost. This has contributed to the loss of biodiversity and the weakening of ecosystems that are the foundation of agriculture and food production. As a result of global warming, the world's agricultural gross domestic product is estimated to decrease 16 percent by 2020, with output falling by 20 percent in developing countries and by 6 percent in industrialized nations.²

7. These trends and challenges point to unprecedented changes in the rural spaces. These changes, unless managed carefully, further threaten the sustainable livelihoods and food security of poor rural people. Rural poor populations, who are among those that will be most affected by these trends, have limited capacity to cope with their effects. Their ability to mobilize and manage assets -- in this case, land -- is fundamental to their resilience in the face of these challenges. Thus there is a growing urgency to understand and address the threats posed by changes in land use and to reinforce the capacity of individuals and communities to withstand or recover from negative effects and to exploit the opportunities that may be available to them.

Land, Poverty Eradication, and Development

Land Rights

8. Improved land access for the poor can result directly in poverty reduction, not least by contributing to increased household food security. Generally, economic growth tends to be higher and more broadly shared when people have equitable and secure access to land.³ Secure land access and property rights provide important buffers that protect vulnerable groups against deepening poverty – particularly in a world where competition for access to resources and efficiency-enhancing land use change are the main drivers of the development process. Secure tenure is also a key prerequisite for promoting medium and long-term investments in land to improve its overall productivity.

9. Yet, in many regions and countries, land rights are insecure, particularly amongst vulnerable groups such as orphans, women (especially widows), indigenous peoples, rural youth, disabled people, and poor rural men and women in general. Land tenure insecurity has been a major contributing factor to social instability and conflict in many developing countries. Disputes and conflicts over land have had a significant impact on the level of investment in land and on agricultural yields.⁴

10. The issue of improved tenure security and land access has been reflected in a number of global and regional efforts. These include the establishment of the Commission for the Legal Empowerment of the Poor (CLEP) in 2005, the 2006 International Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development and the Pan-African Land Policy Framework. The latter initiative is meant to generate political commitment and to create clear guidelines for good practice in land policy, land reform, and land institutions.

11. To ensure that the benefits of these and other initiatives accrue to poor people, it is essential that the perspectives and requirements of all citizens -- and especially the poor and vulnerable -- are taken into account in policies, investments and programmes. Some attempts in this regard are taking place on the national level.

Sustainable Land Management and Use of Agricultural Biodiversity

12. Soil and land quality and robust ecosystems that depend on healthy land are critical to poverty reduction and development. Food and agricultural production depends on resilient and robust biodiversity

² Cline, W.R., 2007. Global warming and agriculture: Impact estimates by country)

³ Deininger, K (2003) Land Policies for Growth and Poverty Reduction. World Bank Policy Research Support, World Bank.

⁴ (Deininger and Yamano (December 2005), and Deininger and Castagnini (July 2005).

and ecosystems. These, in turn, depend on the maintenance of the “natural capital” of renewable natural resources, primarily land. Once eroded, the productivity of such natural capital declines and, with it, income and livelihoods. Many of the coping strategies that are used when livelihoods are strained – such as expanding cultivation and deforestation – further accelerate land degradation. Investment in sustainable use of land and water, maintenance of functioning ecosystems and biological diversity, the conservation and sustainable use of genetic resources for food and agriculture, protection of traditional knowledge, and equitable sharing of benefits arising from these resources is therefore essential for poverty reduction.

13. In all regions, land degradation aggravates the frequency and impact of natural disasters. Healthy ecosystems, achieved in part through sustainable land and soil management, are a key factor in mitigating the effects of climate change.

New challenges and increased competition for land

14. Climate change, rising food and commodity prices, and new uses of land for biofuels will have increasing impacts on sustainable land management, agricultural biodiversity, food security, land access, and tenure security.

15. Shifts in climatic regions, rising sea levels and increases in extreme climatic events are resulting in population movements and the need to adjust livelihood patterns to new circumstances, both of which will trigger changes in access to land and land tenure arrangements.

16. Recent rapid and growing expansion of biofuel production is driven by high oil prices and efforts to mitigate climate change, among other factors. The outlook for these factors suggests that biofuel production will continue to grow. FAO estimates that bio-fuels could supply 25 percent of the world’s energy needs in the next 15 to 20 years.⁵ In addition, FAO calculates that roughly one percent of the world’s arable land is currently used for bio-fuel development. This could rise to three percent by 2030, and as much as 20 percent by 2050.⁶

17. In many cases, growing pressure on land resources has accentuated tenure insecurity, meaning -- at worst -- that poor and vulnerable groups lose their access to land. As bio-fuel production expands, for example, some communities are facing forceful eviction from their land. This severing of access to the land leads to the loss of their livelihoods and weakening of culture.⁷ The impact on culture, knowledge, and spirituality is also felt by forest-dependent indigenous peoples in cases where changing land use may also involve a shift from forest cover to agricultural production, including tree plantations.

18. In a number of cases, governments may respond to market forces and economic opportunities related to rising food and commodity prices and demand for bio-fuels by looking for idle land to be transferred to investors. However, lands perceived to be idle by government usually provide a vital basis for the livelihoods of poor and vulnerable. Indigenous peoples are particularly affected by the current trends towards expanding land use and there is growing evidence that indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities in some countries have been forced off their lands, sometimes through violence, to create bio-fuel plantations.⁸

19. Increasing demand and competition may promote changes in the land tenure arrangements themselves. The spread of cash crops and the associated increases in land values has led to greater individualization of land rights previously held in common. The greater individualization and commercialization of land rights are likely to have implications for land access, and to result in winners and

⁵ Global: tool for deciding on food vs. fuel”

⁶ GLOBAL: Tool for deciding on food vs fuel. IRIN News: UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. 19 March 2008

⁷ Mihlar, Farah, “Minority and indigenous groups –silent victims of climate change say new global report.” 11 March 2008

⁸ Ibid.

losers. Those with better access to financial resources are likely to be better able to gain and/or secure access to land, while poorer and more marginalized groups may see their land access eroded.

20. The impact of these global changes and trends may contribute to deepening unsustainable agricultural practices, forced migration, and increased desertification. A careful assessment of their impact on sustainable land management is needed.

21. To date, benefits to poor farmers from these trends vary, depending on the context in which they are occurring. Some farmers, for example, may be able to use the opportunity to get better terms of trade from the new crops, and to increase income generation opportunities. The expansion of biofuels may allow farmers to shift production to feedstocks by entering into joint ventures, contract-farming or other arrangements with biofuel processors.

Forming an Action Agenda

22. Providing more equitable and secure access to land and ensuring sustainable land management, conservation, and biodiversity requires changes in policies, legislation, and institutions, and requires action at the international, regional, national level, as well as in local communities.

23. Balanced land access policies and programmes are needed that ensure a viable future for family farming and reconcile existing land rights and the need for investment. This can be achieved through equitable frameworks for land access by both rich and poor men and women, and through strengthening market access and technical support in selected areas.

24. Proactive land and water management policies are essential to reverse land degradation and its consequences. Much greater attention to desertification and land degradation by the global community is needed. This includes greater investment by donors and development banks and greater cooperation among UN agencies and the Rio Conventions in promoting sustainable land management.

25. Conservation and sustainable use of agricultural biodiversity requires, at a minimum, that the international community renew its commitment to the target of reducing the current rate of biodiversity loss by 2010 at the global, regional and national level as a contribution to poverty alleviation and global recognition of the need for a “low carbon and high-biodiversity economy.” This will require the integration and mainstreaming of the biodiversity agenda into land use planning and relevant economic sectors such as energy, transport, agriculture, forestry, and fisheries.

Questions to guide discussion:

- What policies and institutions are needed to effectively manage land rights and land access to protect and strengthen the rights of the poor to land and other natural resources, and to enhance agricultural productivity, reduce poverty, and promote sustainable rural development?
- What steps are needed to reduce biodiversity loss and reach the 2010 targets so as to ensure sustainable use of agricultural biodiversity? What can be done to facilitate early adoption of post-2010 reduction targets and an international regime on access and benefit sharing? What more can be done to encourage greater integration by Governments and relevant international organizations, development agencies, etc, of the three objectives of the Convention on Biodiversity into their development strategies including those for poverty reduction and relevant sectors of the economy?
- What steps are needed to further mainstream strategies to combat desertification and land degradation and promote sustainable land management into national development and poverty eradication

plans and planning and funding strategies of donors and international agencies, including international financial institutions?

- In the face of current global trends, what mechanisms are available or need to be developed to protect the resource rights of poor people who lack secure access to land?
- What is the role of national and international actors in enhancing opportunities for poor people to benefit from the trends outlined above?