

FAO Main Message on Desertification: Policy Options to Expedite Implementation

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Introduction:

1. Policies to combat desertification should be based on Sustainable Land Management (SLM) principles. They should focus on informing and training farmers on technical and socio-economical options to efficiently combat desertification, and their potential impacts on productivity, their costs and level of risks. They may directly concern improved land management options for drylands and other agro-ecological zones, such as new types of agroforestry trees, new ways of harvesting and managing water, or combining organic and inorganic sources of soil fertility. They may also promote collective management practices of land resources, at a watershed or ecosystem level, which may result in new ways of exchanging goods and services between stakeholders, (e.g. Payment for Environmental Services), which would have in turn consequences on other policy domains. These policies should also promote “win-win” technologies that are beneficial for many development agenda such as food security, climate change adaptation and mitigation, land rehabilitation, biodiversity preservation, and rural poverty alleviation. For example, introduction of higher yielding improved seeds may increase the potential productivity impact of improved soil fertility, water management, or soil and water conservation measures, thus providing more incentives for farmers to invest in such measures.

2. SLM technology development and dissemination policies and programmes should be multi-objective, context-dependent, and always be promoted in full cooperation with concerned stakeholders (e.g. through farmer field schools, Land users associations, SLM Platforms), to make sure that they are well tailored to farmlands, rangelands and ecosystem conditions (e.g. using a landscape approach), and at the same time, ensure food production, livelihood improvement, and environment protection. The implementation of such policies deserve quite a high level of financial and human resources devoted to field and farm activities, which often are badly lacking in most countries, particularly in drylands.

3. Social policies supporting SLM adoption, such as the availability and opportunity cost of labour in rural areas, of infrastructure and education, and the promotion of non-farm income-generating activities, can have a strong impact on land management decisions, given that many land management measures to combat desertification are labour intensive. FAO’s work with countries and partners in combating desertification has facilitated the empowerment of the local people and communities, reinforcing their control over resources and their products, which are vital to ensuring their long-term commitment to combating desertification.

4. SLM must be designed through promoting farmer innovations and proven indigenous technologies, combined with technical advice that draws from the latest research and scientific development. This requires a careful study of various options, with full participation of the land users and in particular women and vulnerable groups, and other stakeholders (research, private sector, NGOs). The objective is to replace damaging practices that may have been applied by local societies as means of food and livelihood security and

survival during stress periods, and to promote the wider adoption of alternative land use/management practices that are shown to both protect and improve local land resources and livelihoods. Therefore, policies to combat desertification need to be formulated, implemented and monitored with the full involvement and control of the concerned land users (and their representatives), at the local, national, subregional levels and should be gender sensitive.

5. Shared understanding of land degradation processes and root causes within the main eco and farming systems is vital. These need to be assessed regularly (both scientifically and through participative assessments, as done by FAO in the LADA project) and serve as a diagnostic to prioritize country strategies and public expenditure frameworks. These priorities should be based primarily on elimination of institutional, legislative or infrastructure bottlenecks that prevent SLM adoption and up-scaling, and should facilitate co-management of development projects by stakeholders and collective community decision-making processes.

6. In general, policies have been successful when based on an integrated approach which includes: agro-ecological principles; a community land planning-landscape-ecosystem approach; a provision of incentives for access to fertilizers and support to small-scale farmers to better manage various risks including weather, climate and natural disaster risks; and a cross-sectoral institutional strategy. SLM embodies an approach which significantly increases land productivity, while alleviating rural poverty, preserving the natural base and maintaining ecosystem services. A programmatic and partnership process is essential in the formulation and implementation of the SLM investment programme, as sectoral policies influence desertification control. It cannot be conducted independently from rural priority development programmes. Therefore, SLM programmes should be increasingly mainstreamed into national development plans and strategies, in particular poverty reduction strategies, as well as into budgetary and investment agriculture sectoral reviews.

7. The TerrAfrica partnership is one very good example of a programme promoting the above approach, combining synergistically the efforts of many partners at international (20 agencies), regional (NEPAD Secretariat) and national level (SSA countries). Already a dozen countries have embarked on preparing SLM Country Strategic Investment Frameworks (CSIF). TerrAfrica is benefiting from several sources of funding, including World Bank grants and loans.

8. The recent High Level Ministerial Declaration on African Agriculture in the 21st Century, held in Windhoek, Namibia (9-10 February 2009) recognized that sustainable land management, including reclaiming dry and degraded land, is the key to agricultural revitalization and to the Green Revolution in Africa.