

STATEMENT

BY

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United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD)

High-Level CSD Intersessional Meeting
African Agriculture in the 21st Century:
Meeting the Challenges, Making a Sustainable Green Revolution

Key message from the Executive Secretary

“The operationalization of a sustainable green revolution in Africa must address land degradation including by reclaiming degraded/dry lands and using to its fullest extent the only existing legally binding international treaty on land issues -- UNCCD – which can assist countries in assessing and monitoring progress made in this regard”

Windhoek, February 9, 2009

Madam Chairperson,
Excellencies Ministers,
Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The theme of this gathering, namely “African Agriculture in the 21st Century: Meeting the challenges, making a sustainable green revolution” is of great significance to me, as the Executive Secretary of the UNCCD. I attach a great importance to attend this meeting since, despite the fact that this Convention, being the most ratified among the Multilateral Environmental Agreements, the international community is not yet sufficiently cognizant of the integral nexus between the objective of agriculture improvement and the one of land and soil improvement. Land degradation is the process leading to desertification, which is increasingly recognized as a fundamental and persistent global development issue. In Africa, particularly in rural areas, the map of poverty and hunger coincides with that of land degradation which affects a significant and increasing portion of the arable lands, directly impacting the well-being of people and the economic development of countries causing agricultural economic losses, disorganizing local and regional food markets, and becoming a threat multiplier to social and political stability.

In this respect, the African continent appears to be the most affected. In a context of increasing competition to access the required natural resources, and the compelling need to coping with climate change challenge, Africa must skip the “input-intensive” green revolution model to a “knowledge-

intensive” model in order to ensure a high output but still sustainable agriculture.

Madame Chair,

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

According to FAO, the recent figures of the number of hungry people worldwide is 963 million, noting that despite progress made, one of three Africans south of Sahara are chronically hungry, the highest proportion of undernourished anywhere. Efforts made to operationalize a sustainable green revolution are therefore welcome, to contribute to achieving the Millennium Development Goals as they relate to poverty and hunger. As implied in the documents prepared by the secretariat, any green revolution in Africa would have to take into account the fact that a large part of Africa is arid and semi-arid.

In fact, talking of agriculture, the best arable land for the agricultural use constitutes only 11% of the earth surface, which only ensures the food for 6.3 billion people today and 8.2 billion predicted by 2030. But arable land is shrinking due to Desertification, Land Degradation and Drought. It also established that one third of the world’s cropland has been abandoned in the past 40 years because land degradation has made it unproductive. Every year 20 million ha of croplands are abandoned. Research shows that by 2050, half of the arable land in the world should no longer be producing due to desertification. A recent GLADA report noted that today, land degradation is occurring more faster in humid zones than in dry ecosystems.

This is particularly alarming when it comes to Africa, where most of land degradation is taking place. In this respect, the operationalization of a sustainable green revolution in Africa must address land degradation including by reclaiming

degraded/dry lands and using to its fullest extent the only existing legally binding international treaty on land issues - UNCCD – which can assist countries in assessing and monitoring progress made in this regard.

As you know, every year, the Committee for the Review of the implementation of the Convention examines mandatory national reports submitted by country Parties and comes up with recommendations as to how to improve the status of land degradation, desertification and drought. As recently underscored by the Secretary-General, the Convention could offer a long-term solution to producing more food to feed more people. These unused lands could also serve for agrofuel production under the condition of sustainability, and thus offer new benefits for their inhabitants. This is where the Convention offers a comprehensive strategic response to a sustainable green revolution in Africa which in turn could prepare the continent to adapt to climate change shocks, mitigate its effects and strengthen the resilience of affected communities and ecosystems. This African green revolution would also serve to prevent encroachment on humid and forest ecosystems, where traditional agriculture is deployed. Ultimately, the use of the UNCCD as a tool for sustainable African green revolution would not only improve affected populations and ecosystems, but would also generate global benefits for the whole world. This is therefore an area where substantial investments would yield high returns.

To sum up my statement, my intervention covered four issues which are of utmost importance:

1. Land degradation is worsening especially in Africa as a cause and a consequence of both poverty and climate change;

2. In Africa, more than in other regions of the world, how to make small scale farming viable and more productive is the main challenge;
3. Africa must build its own pathway to a green revolution
4. The UNCCD is offering a global framework and platform to assess and monitor land improvement.

Thank you for your attention.