THE PRESIDENT
OF THE
GENERAL ASSEMBLY

8 February 2021

Excellency,

I have the honour to enclose herewith a preliminary concept note for the one-day "High-Level Dialogue on Desertification, Land Degradation and Drought", to be held on 20 May 2021, pursuant to General Assembly Resolution 75/218 of 21 December 2020, entitled "Implementation of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification in Those Countries Experiencing Serious Drought and/or Desertification, Particularly in Africa".

The high-level dialogue will assess the progress made in the fight against desertification, land degradation and drought, and map the way forward in view of the end of the UN Decade for Deserts and the Fight against Desertification, and the beginning of the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration. This will include generating momentum and raising ambition for using land restoration as a key entry point within COVID-19 recovery strategies to build back better. Discussions at the dialogue will also highlight the importance of leveraging accelerated action on land-based solutions for climate and biodiversity action. Further updates and a draft programme will be circulated in due course.

For further information, your office may contact Advisers Mr. Mohammed Amin Shaker (mohammed.shaker@un.org) and Ms. Sara Ibrahim Mohammed Al-Ahmad (sara.alahmad@un.org).

Please accept, Excellency, the assurances of my highest consideration.

Volkan BOZKIR

All Permanent Representatives and
Permanent Observers to the United Nations
New York

Concept Note
High-level Dialogue on Desertification, Land Degradation and Drought
20 May 2021, United Nations Headquarters

Background

Land is the foundation of our societies. Productive land is a cornerstone to global food security and environmental health, zero hunger, poverty eradication, and energy for all. It underpins the success of the entire 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. And yet this finite resource is under existential threat.

Globally, one fifth of Earth's land area – more than 2 billion hectares – is degraded, including more than half of all agricultural land. Each year, more than 12 million hectares of land are lost to desertification, land degradation and drought (DLDD). Approximately 95% of our calories from food come from soil, yet topsoil erosion has accelerated by tenfold due to human activity. The world loses 24 billion tons of fertile soil annually due to dryland degradation, with significant negative impacts on food production and economic activity.

Land Use, Biodiversity Loss and Climate Change

Land degradation currently undermines the well-being of 3.2 billion people, more than 40% of the entire world population, driving species to extinction and intensifying climate change. The Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) estimates that over 70% of all natural, ice-free land has been transformed by human activity, devastating global biodiversity. IPBES further warns that this could rise to 90% by 2050 if global land use patterns continue unabated. Food, feed, and fibre also contribute significantly to climate change, with around a quarter of greenhouse gas emissions coming from agriculture, forestry and other land uses. According to the IPCC Special Report on Climate Change and Land, unsustainable land use and soil management practices to produce these three goods are behind this vast change.

Water Scarcity, Drought, Wildfires and Migration

Climate change further exacerbates, and is worsened by, unsustainable land-use and land-use changes, with many regions becoming drier, suffering more frequent and prolonged droughts. Droughts and climate change are intensifying the incidence of wildfires which now rage for longer and expand farther than ever before, having devastated roughly 30 million acres of land in the global north and south from 2018-2020 alone, causing significant losses in livelihoods, health and biodiversity, destroying ecosystems and billions of animals.

In addition, climate-induced land degradation and water-stress are anticipated to lead to the loss of more arable land in the coming years, plunging millions of farmers into poverty and contributing to forced migration and conflict. If not addressed, by 2025, two-thirds of the world will be living under "water-stressed" conditions – when demand outstrips supply during certain periods – with 1.8 billion people experiencing absolute water scarcity. Similarly, migration is likely

to increase as a result of desertification, with estimates that it will be responsible for the displacement of some 135 million people by 2045.[1]

Land Use, Zoonoses and Building Back Better

Furthermore, unsustainable land-use change, including deforestation, is the primary transmission pathway for emerging infectious diseases, and the rate of land conversion is accelerating. COVID-19, much like HIV/AIDS, Zika or Ebola, is amongst the 60% of infectious diseases considered zoonotic, originating from animal populations under severe environmental pressure. The link between land degradation, ecosystem destruction and zoonoses' emergence is well documented, and was highlighted during the first UN Summit on Biodiversity in September 2020.

As General Assembly resolution 75/218 affirmed, combating desertification, land degradation and drought, and achieving land degradation neutrality, are a pathway to accelerate achieving the Sustainable Development Goals that will contribute to safeguarding livelihoods, preventing and preparing for future pandemics, and building back better from COVID-19. Actions based on the clear understanding of rights, rewards and responsibilities of land management can help address COVID-19's fallout, by tackling one of the primary environmental drivers of emerging infectious disease outbreaks. At the same time, strengthening the resilience of our food and water systems through sustainable land use can help reduce the socio-economic effects of this pandemic, and any future systemic shocks, on global poverty and food insecurity. For every dollar spent on land restoration – including through low-skilled and labour-intensive shovel-ready projects – at least 9 dollars of economic benefits can be expected. Large-scale ecosystem restoration efforts have the potential to create up to 40 jobs for every 1 million dollars invested.[2]

Taking Stock of Progress Made

Over the UN Decade for Deserts and the Fight against Desertification (2011-2020), the world redoubled efforts to address land issues. One of the most impactful developments during the Decade was the remarkable expansion of the body of scientific knowledge about the drivers, processes and impacts of DLDD. Considerable technical progress was achieved in developing solutions to these challenges. This has included recognizing that nature-based solutions, including reforestation and land restoration to sequester carbon in soil, are essential to achieving the Paris Agreement's 1.5-degree target.[3]

Ensuring the food security of our planet's projected 9.7 billion global population by 2050, while simultaneously implementing the Paris Agreement, will be impossible without tackling land degradation and enacting food system reform. One of the most promising pathways to do so include upscaling Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN) initiatives within the framework of Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) and COVID-19 recoveries; formalizing and respecting land tenure rights for large and small-scale producers, including female farmers, who are responsible for between 60 to 80% of food production in developing countries; combating drought and forest fires, including through reforestation and forest management practices; and

[1] *UNCCD: Land and Human Security.* https://www.unccd.int/issues/land-and-human-security
[2] A/75/256, *Secretary-General Report: Implementation of United Nations environmental conventions.* 27 July 2020
[3] *IPCC Special Report on Climate Change and Land, Policymaker's Summary*. 2020

supporting the UN Decade of Ecosystem Restoration 2021-2030, which will build upon the impacts of the UN Decade for Deserts and the Fight against Desertification.

The inclusion of a specific target under SDG 15 ('Life on Land'), to achieve land degradation neutrality by 2030, reflects the commitment of the international community to make tangible progress on land restoration and reversing land degradation. Thus far, 123 countries have committed to setting voluntary targets to achieve land degradation neutrality, and many have secured high-level government commitments to achieve LDN. The urgent adoption and implementation of LDN targets by all countries is necessary in order to sustainably secure land's vital resources for generations to come and accelerate the entire 2030 agenda.

2021 will be a milestone year for the three Rio Conventions on Desertification, Biodiversity and Climate Change (UNCCD, CBD and UNFCCC). For the first time, the Conference of Parties of all three Rio Conventions are scheduled to take place in the same year. 2021 is also an important year for advancing the implementation of the UN Strategic Plan for Forests 2030 during the 16th session of the UN Forum on Forests in April 2021. This presents a clear opportunity to leverage accelerated action on land-based solutions for climate and biodiversity action. Addressing the numerous environmental and socio-economic challenges facing our world will be centered upon future land use decisions.

Mandate and Objectives

In accordance with General Assembly resolutions 74/220 and 75/218, the President of the General Assembly will convene a High-level Dialogue to assess the progress made in the fight against DLDD, and map the way forward in view of the end of the UN Decade for Deserts and the Fight against Desertification. The dialogue will take place on 20 May 2021, at United Nations Headquarters in New York. The dialogue's objectives are to:

- Bring attention to recovery opportunities during and after the COVID-19 pandemic that can be aligned with action to address DLDD through job-creating, shovel-ready projects like land restoration, regenerative agriculture, renewable energy and energy efficiency, and investments in sustainable land management that strengthen our planet's resilience.
- Elevate the discourse on DLDD issues' global significance for the entire SDG agenda and for climate, biodiversity and disaster risk reduction.
- Build upon the commitments and initiatives from Member States and stakeholders made during the Summits on Biodiversity and Climate Change, along the path to the CBD COP15, UNFCCC COP26, UNCCD COP15, and the 2021 Food Systems Summit.
- Encourage all UN Member States to adopt and implement Land Degradation Neutrality targets and National Drought plans, in line with implementing the Sendai Framework on Disaster Risk Reduction and as part of their Nationally Determined Contributions and future commitments under the post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework, to safeguard global food security, and guard against future systemic health or environmental risks and cascading hazards.

- Call for countries to support the Land Degradation Neutrality Fund, and other funding mechanisms, to accelerate efforts to scale-up land restoration by all sectors of society and support the global movement inspired by the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration.
- Share experiences and best practices, cutting-edge technologies, and innovative business models that build greater awareness of green, resilient and inclusive recovery strategies.