



*Message from Mr. Luc Gnacadja, Executive Secretary, United Nations Convention to
Combat Desertification (UNCCD)
On the Occasion of the World Environment Day
5 June 2009*

This year we commemorate the World Environment Day with a theme, “Your Planet Needs You - UNite to Combat Climate Change.” It is a call to give a human face to environmental issues, to empower people to become active agents of sustainable and equitable development, to promote an understanding that communities are pivotal to changing attitudes towards environmental issues, and to advocate partnership, which will ensure all nations and peoples enjoy a safer and more prosperous future.

We welcome this call from the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), for drawing attention to the significance and role each individual can play in the global community to address climate change. The concerns UNEP raises are at the heart of our work among communities living in the world’s drylands, where drought and land degradation are prevalent.

The human face of the environment in the world’s dryland areas is manifest through the increasing number of domestic and international environmental migrants. Over the last few years, Mexico, this year’s World Environment Day host country, has suffered an exodus of between 400,000-700,000 migrants mainly from its drylands to the United States. Similarly, Spain and Italy are experiencing growing influxes of migrants from Africa, a region that suffers land degradation from Cairo to the Cap. Domestic environmental migrants are on the rise too leading to unsustainable natural resource management and extreme difficulty for effective development planning.

The human face of environmental problems is also evident in the impact of climate change on the availability of water in the drylands. In its most recent climate change Assessment, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change reported a drying effect in the Sahel, the Mediterranean, Southern Africa and the southern Asia regions. The increased heating of the earth has increased the ability of the atmosphere to hold water moisture, which has reduced the amount of rain falling in drylands. Consequently, over time the area under drought is expected to increase, while drought cycle will be more intense and last longer particularly in the tropics and sub-tropics. These effects are likely to accelerate environmental migration, and to exacerbate hunger and food insecurity.

The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) recognizes the centrality of land in addressing food security, environmental migration and other global challenges associated with climate change. Therefore, the UNCCD advocates sustainable land management as the primary response to these challenges and the means for empowering dryland communities.

Sustainable land management requires a re-orientation in land use and land use management practices. Agricultural practices such as agroforestry, crop rotation, inter-cropping and the use of organic farm and green manures restore soil fertility, rehabilitate degraded lands, and

improve food production. But these measures are also powerful tools for sequestering carbon in the soil and mitigate the effects of climate change.

The design of the Convention to Combat Desertification, with its emphasis on a bottom-up implementation approach that involves women, farmers, local communities and indigenous populations, is well placed to deliver the benefits of sustainable land management to local populations and to engage them in efforts to address climate change. In order to realize this potential, however, the global community needs to design climate change policies with market-oriented incentives that induce the proactive involvement of communities as well.

To this end, the UNCCD has been drawing attention to the untapped potentials for soil carbon sequestration, particularly in the drylands. Soil can store three times as much carbon as the atmosphere, and twice as much carbon as vegetation. More importantly, soils in arid, semi arid and sub humid areas can store carbon for much longer than wet forest soils due to slow mineralization. Drylands communities that practice agroforestry provide short-range carbon sequestration through vegetation, and longer-term carbon sequestration through soils; climate mitigation measures with a timeline of more than centuries.

This is why the UNCCD emphasizes the need for climate change policies that engage local communities, and that offer commensurate compensation. We are committed to work with partners in efforts to combat climate change, and to offer our expertise and experience on working with communities and designing sustainable land use programmes.

I commend UNEP for its efforts to raise awareness on the human face of environmental problems, to empower people to become agents of positive environmental change, to promote partnership and to involve communities in transforming attitudes towards environmental issues.

I wish you all success on this auspicious occasion celebrating the World Environment Day.