

**Message from Mr. Luc Gnacadja, Executive Secretary of the
United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD)
On the Occasion of the World Day to Combat Desertification and Drought - 17 June 2008**

This year's theme for the World Day to Combat Desertification and Drought, "Combating land degradation for sustainable agriculture," underscores the significance of land and its management for one of the most important activities in fostering our civilization – agriculture.

Reports on global food price increases and subsequent food riots highlight the challenge that the world is facing, adding to the already enormous problems in achieving the Millennium Development Goals. Although the current high food prices may be mitigated temporarily by new agriculture production prospects, the limiting causes for the achievement of sustainable food production to feed the ever-increasing world population would remain. As population and demand for diverse types of agricultural production increase, unsustainable approaches of land management are evidently failing.

A study on climate change reports that by the 2080s the capacity of global agricultural production could be reduced by about 16 per cent if carbon fertilization is omitted and by about 3 per cent if it is included. The conversion of land in unsustainable uses can exacerbate the vicious circle of land degradation, loss of biodiversity and climate change. Land degradation weakens the soil's fertility, disrupts the balance of the water cycle and contributes to food insecurity, famine and poverty, as well as forced migration. Confronting this complex issue requires a global response to increase the productivity of land ecosystems and make sustainable agricultural production a priority through pro-poor policies in view of adaptation to climate change and biodiversity protection.

At the same time, we must not forget the important role science and technology play in combating land degradation for sustainable agriculture. One such way is to develop guidelines and standards for alternative uses of agricultural goods and services, such as for bio-fuel production, with targets the sustainable livelihoods of the most vulnerable people living in degraded lands. A piecemeal approach to agricultural production in the past has threatened biodiversity and conservation of arable land. Scientific research must be integrated with proven policies and strategies aimed at sustainable development, market-oriented mechanisms and appropriate capacity-building. Local knowledge needs to be identified, preserved and shared while respecting the rights of the owners of such knowledge, as the men and women living on the land often have long developed and implemented sustainable practices of reducing land degradation and risk.

The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification provides a global framework to support policies and measures to prevent, control and reverse land degradation through scientific excellence, awareness raising and advocacy, thereby contributing to poverty reduction. In its strategy for the next 10 years, the Parties to the Convention have highlighted the importance of forging a coalition to combat land degradation including desertification as well as drought in the present context of climate change, delivering benefits at all levels and contributing to access to food and water, and the protection of biodiversity. In this regard, the Convention has a considerable role on sustainable agriculture by means of improving the livelihoods of affected populations and ecosystems.

Desertification is a global issue that requires a global action. Let us not forget the following warning, a five thousand years old wisdom:

"Upon this handful of soil our survival depends. Husband it and it will grow our food, our fuel, and our shelter and surround us with beauty. Abuse it and the soil will collapse and die, taking humanity with it".¹

¹ From Vedas Sanskrit Scripture – 1500 BC