



UN strengthens resolve to improve well-being of drylands communities

Changwon, Republic of Korea, 20 October 2011 – With 10 percent of the world's dryland ecosystems already degraded, putting at risk the social and economic well-being of millions of people, United Nations agencies have agreed to step up their efforts to protect and revitalise drylands.

Unsustainable land and water use are among the factors driving the degradation of deserts, grasslands, savannahs and other drylands which cover an estimated 40 percent of the world's land area and support around two billion people, 90 percent of whom live in developing countries.

According to a new UN report, increased investment in drylands, strengthened links between science and policy, and diversified livelihoods for communities to relieve pressure on natural resources are among the solutions to realize the potential of drylands.

Global Drylands: A UN system-wide response sets out a common vision and agenda for UN-wide action on drylands management and the UN's role in addressing climate change and food security through a positive development and investment approach.

Prepared by 18 UN agencies through the UN's Environment Management Group (EMG), the report was launched today at the 10th session of the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) Conference of the Parties being held in Changwon, Republic of Korea.

The report signifies a milestone by the UN system in supporting the implementation of the UNCCD's 10-year Strategic Plan by 'delivering as one' in the areas of environment, development and humanitarian assistance by bringing together the UN's expertise, operational and coordination capabilities, and its advocacy role at the country, regional and global levels.

Developed following calls by governments for a UN system-wide response to land challenges, a central element of the common agenda is the need to address the underlying causes of land degradation and create enabling conditions for the sustainable development of drylands.

"Drylands have all too often been the poor relations in respect to more high profile ecosystems such as forests and coral reefs. Yet as this report underlines, they play a critical role in the Earth's planetary systems and support the lives and livelihoods of around two billion people," said Achim Steiner, Chair of the EMG and Executive Director of the UN Environment Programme (UNEP).

"The potential for enhancing carbon storage in dryland forests as both a climate mitigation and adaptation measure and in particular in Africa will be at the centre of Forest Day at the upcoming UN climate convention meeting in Durban," he said.

"And Rio+20 in June next year—20 years after the Earth Summit that established the UN Convention to Combat Desertification alongside the biodiversity and climate change treaties—represents a further opportunity to advance smarter and more intelligent management of drylands under the theme of the Green Economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication," added Mr. Steiner.

Over the past few decades, many inspiring projects and initiatives have flourished in drylands as a result of the efforts of national and international organizations and institutions, including the United Nations.

For example, in China's Loess Plateau, which has been degraded by decades of deforestation and unsustainable farming, around US\$520 million was invested by the International Development Association and others to regenerate the ecosystem and the many services it provided. These investments helped to reduce sediment loads into the Yellow River by around 100 million tones per year, reducing both flood risks and the cost of maintaining dams. The investment also brought positive impacts on livelihoods, through increased crop yields and employment.

UNEP and the Global Environment Facility (GEF) are also running a project to help improve the management of land between Nigeria and Niger, to avoid desertification and the degradation of local ecosystems.

"New and transformational pathways are also emerging from payments for ecosystem services to paying communities under the carbon markets for farming methods, including agroforestry that not only restore degraded land, improve yields but also soak up carbon from the atmosphere. Rio+20 represents an opportunity to accelerate and to scale up these transitions in drylands and beyond," said Mr. Steiner.

According to the newly launched report, it is clear and recognized at the political level that the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) cannot be achieved without addressing the needs of drylands communities.

The report promotes a solutions-focused approach and combats the view that drylands are wastelands – rather that they often present significant opportunities for achieving the MDGs.

Key findings and recommendations include:

- Human well-being in relation to health, food security, nutrition and security is at risk from dryland degradation which costs developing countries an estimated 4-8% of their gross domestic product each year.
- The drylands of Africa and Asia pose special challenges. Climatic fluctuations may be most pronounced in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, resulting in the poorest regions with the highest levels of chronic undernourishment being exposed to the greatest degree of instability.
- Dryland biodiversity provides important ecosystem services that benefit local communities. For example, dryland forests and woodlands provide shade and moisture, are home to pollinators, protect nutrients and help reduce erosion and flooding.
- In addition to providing a large proportion of the world's food, drylands have contributed much to ecosystem services including pharmaceuticals and raw materials.
- Because of their huge extent, drylands can have major global climate benefits. For example, dryland carbon storage (mainly in the form of soil carbon) accounts for more than one third of the global stock.
- The potential benefits that drylands may offer have not been fully utilised due to myths about drylands along with market failures, weak incentives, high investment costs, gender inequalities, and social marginalization of dryland populations.

- Many drylands in developing countries have become investment deserts, yet sustained higher levels of investment by the public and private sectors (in such areas as renewable energy, education, health, urban development, and farmland, rangeland and livestock) can support enhanced productivity and better incomes.
- The overriding imperative for investing in drylands must be poverty reduction. The UN system is uniquely positioned to promote increased investments and there is great potential for mobilising partnerships. New studies could help in making the case to potential investors.
- Different UN entities can play complementary roles in areas such as supporting governments to improve the enabling environment for drylands development, including improving governance, infrastructure and education, and harmonising natural resource policies.
- UN agencies can also assist by encouraging the intensification of water-efficient agriculture through approaches such as sustainable land management and by supporting social protection, for example, through the use of scenario modeling.
- In addition, UN agencies can act by working with the private sector to promote tools which encourage sustainable production and consumption in drylands, such as eco-labelling.

The report, which focuses on the drylands of developing countries, synthesises the results of stakeholder consultation involving multiple UN agencies and drylands and development researchers and practitioners over the past two years.

Global Drylands: A UN system-wide response is available at www.unemg.org. The agreed objectives, approaches and options for follow-up action will now be considered in more detail through the Environment Management Group.

Note to Editors:

The Environment Management Group is a UN system-wide coordination body which further inter-agency cooperation in support of the international environmental and human settlements agenda. It is chaired by the UNEP Executive Director and its Secretariat is provided by UNEP.

Drylands occur on every continent and span a diversity of cultures and landscapes. Around one billion people rely directly on dryland ecosystem services for their daily survival. The UN system has come together to highlight the importance of drylands to climate change, food security, human settlements and other key emerging issues on the global agenda.

The report, *Global Drylands: A UN system-wide response*, was today launched at a side event at the 10th UNCCD COP at Changwon Exhibition Convention Centre, Republic of Korea.

Media contacts:

Julie Marks EMG Secretariat, +41 22 917 8478 or julie.marks@unep.org
 Jessica Smith UNEP-WCMC, +44 1223 277 136 or jessica.smith@unep-wcmc.org