

World Day to Combat Desertification: Economic Growth and Social Stability

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Desertification is far more than a simple environmental concern. The analysis that desertification ranks among the greatest development challenges of our times, as the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) puts it, constitutes a much broader view on the degradation of land, looking at production in agriculture and forests for sustainable livelihoods, food security, economic growth and social stability.

Food security, particularly in Least Developed Countries (LDCs) featured high at the G8 Summit in L'Aquila, Italy in 2009, with a USD 20 billion pledge to boost agricultural production. Numerous initiatives like the UN High-Level Task Force on the Global Food Security Crisis, created by the UN Secretary General as well as the revamping of the Committee on World Food Security hosted by FAO are complemented by funds and programmes like the Global Agricultural and Food Security Program and rapid-response initiatives like the EU's Food Security Thematic Programme.

We must be clear that our ultimate challenge is far greater than achieving food security based on large food imports into developing countries. We must strive to achieve full long-term food sovereignty, first and foremost in Africa. In spite of Africa's enormous potential for agricultural production, the UN Economic Commission for Africa (UN ECA) says that food imports into Africa currently total approx. USD 33 billion annually. Restoring and safeguarding the productivity of the continent's lands should be considered as a policy priority.

African countries, in particular, view land degradation as one of the major threats to development and many Heads of State have consequently made sustainable land management (SLM) a priority, as expressed politically and financially through the Comprehensive African Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP).

At the same time, investments in land and land acquisition by foreign investors remind us that agricultural produce is increasingly in short supply worldwide, with fertile land becoming an ever scarcer commodity. While the International Land Coalition (ILC) and other institutions are monitoring the developments in this regard, the World Bank is currently undertaking a major analysis on the development impact and potential of land investments and acquisition in developing countries.



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The President of IFAD has always underlined that agriculture – no matter how small the production units are – is a business for development. Taking into account the value of land for international investors, as well as the potential of small scale farming for development, the international community is increasingly addressing the issue of land degradation and desertification in its macro-economic dimension rather than treating the loss of the “wealth of nations” in response to any short-term crisis in food supply.

The Global Mechanism (GM) aims to generate further convincing arguments for economists and governments to invest in land, through its work on *Economic Valuations of Land* around the globe, in cooperation with the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), national governments and the UN University.

This year’s World Day to Combat Desertification (WDCD) slogan of the UNCCD, **“Enhancing soils anywhere, enhances life everywhere”**, makes clear reference to the enormous value of managing our lands sustainably. Given that we are currently celebrating the International Year of Biodiversity, this slogan serves as a timely reminder of the need to consider biodiversity conservation more broadly as an opportunity to promote productive systems of natural resources, with the potential to transform livelihoods.

Best regards,

The Global Mechanism Team