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Mesoamerica on the March: Crunch Time for A Regional Strategy

"Environmental sustainability must be embraced as a regional priority to ensure Mesoamerica's security, growth and development." This was the unequivocal verdict of Guatemala's Vice President, Mr Rafael Espada, during a recent encounter with top UNCCD officials that drew a consensus on the need to take real and lasting action to reinvigorate Mesoamerica's dwindling natural resource base.

Coming in the wake of Guatemala's worst drought in over 30 years, this collective show of force offers genuine promise for the region's agricultural production and forests, two major determining factors for development, wealth creation and poverty reduction. There is no doubt that crunch time is drawing near for Guatemala, which is rated one of the top-ten countries most at risk from climate change, worldwide.

Mr Luis Ferrate, Guatemala's Minister for the Environment, stressed that sustainable land management (SLM) is a ticket to enhanced resilience, given future climate scenarios, and to achieving food sovereignty and sustained economic growth, and thus, must rocket up the political agenda.

Guatemala is leading Mesoamerica's march towards this very goal and seeking the investments needed to transform the region's productivity and future development. A feature of this Mesoamerican context is its truly regional approach to the push for investments. There is a sprit of solidarity and regional integration.

Mr Luc Gnacadja, the UNCCD Executive Secretary - attending a gathering of Mesoamerican Ministers and high-level Government officials together with Mr Christian Mersmann, the GM's Managing Director - spotlighted the region as an example. What is impressive, are the country efforts to integrate land with broader regional strategies to ensure the resource receives greater attention and increased financial resources. A case in point is the region's Agro-Environmental Health Strategy, one of the few instances in the world where these three sectors are combined to deliver mutually reinforcing development outcomes.

Impressive too is the role of the private sector in efforts to address land degradation. Citing a government reforestation initiative in Guatemala, Mr Gnacadja stressed that promoting such public-private partnerships in the regional approach is also bound to generate good results for communities and the local economy.

The private sector is playing an increasingly prominent role in financing sustainable actions. With climate change and drought featuring large in future scenarios for the region, private companies are understandably keen to safeguard their future corporate profits. For example, a study is underway to assess the cost of declining pineapple production, a major export for the region. In light of similar proactive developments in the private sector elsewhere, the secretariat is developing its SLM Champions Programme to maximize the potential in private sector initiatives.

It is becoming abundantly clear that international cooperation is not enough to meet the required investments in land, particularly situated against the new economic and environmental backdrop. Guatemalan Parliamentarians were emphatic that a compelling economic case must be put forward to justify investing in sustainable development. Governments must dedicate greater resources from their own domestic budgets to tackle the issue. "Investments in land, foremost, make economic, not just environmental, sense," Mr Mersmann observed, adding that "Land is a vital piece of the macroeconomic puzzle, leading to growth, new markets and enhanced productivity."

Mere mention of the pineapple fruit in the context of the UNCCD is a reminder that implementing the UNCCD is about enhancing productivity, food sovereignty and resilience in all developing nations. Mesoamerica's assertive action on land is bringing this point to wider attention.

This article was jointly developed between the UNCCD secretariat and the Global Mechanism.