

UNCCD HIGH-LEVEL POLICY DIALOGUE: TUESDAY, 27 MAY 2008

The high-level policy dialogue (the "Dialogue") on the theme "Coping with today's global challenges in the context of the Strategy of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification" (UNCCD), took place on Tuesday, 27 May 2008, in Bonn, Germany. The Dialogue was intended to facilitate a targeted exchange from a number of stakeholders on the ten-year strategic plan ("the Strategy") and to foster awareness of and buy-in among relevant policy and decision makers. There were over 120 participants, including ambassadors, ministers, country representatives, intergovernmental organizations, UN agencies, NGOs and the private sector. The Dialogue consisted of three segments, each of which comprised presentations and discussion among participants. This Briefing Note provides an overview of the presentations and a thematic summary of the discussions.

OPENING SESSION

Karin Kortmann, State Secretary, Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development of Germany, the Dialogue's Chair, welcomed participants and paid tribute to the UNCCD Secretariat's work on desertification, land degradation and drought (DLDD) as one of today's major environmental challenges. She explained that climate change is adversely affecting agriculture, exacerbating the current food crisis and impacting the poor. Investing in sustainable land use is of critical importance, she said, and entails measures of agrarian reform such as securing land tenure and engaging women farmers. She stressed that the Strategy's expeditious implementation requires financial contributions and innovation.

Joseph Puxeu, Secretary of State, Ministry of Environment and Rural and Marine Affairs, Spain, reminded participants that Spain is significantly affected by DLDD. While applauding parties for adopting the Strategy at the eighth Conference of the Parties and for completing the consideration of the budget at the first extraordinary session of the Conference of the Parties (ESCOP) in November, he observed that the Strategy's implementation requires further financing and concerted efforts to address interrelated environmental challenges such as climate change and biodiversity loss.

Luc Gnacadja, UNCCD Executive Secretary, explained that while the Strategy aims to prevent and reverse DLDD and reduce poverty, the Dialogue is intended to provide the course for the Strategy's future implementation. Citing a recent scientific study, he defined climate change as a major driver of DLDD leading to an "environmental crisis of global

proportions" with concomitant human impacts such as food shortages and large-scale displacement. He raised the potential of the Strategy to deliver multiple benefits by reversing DLDD and contributing to the mitigation of climate change.

SEGMENT I: POLICY DEVELOPMENT

Gnacadjia presented the Strategy and the global challenges it is designed to address. Linking DLDD, poverty and forced migration, he stated that the geography of poverty and hunger coincides with that of degraded lands. At the global level, he suggested that the dynamic between climate change and food security is large-scale and complex. Agrofuels, for example, proposed as a mitigation strategy to address climate change, are having unforeseen impacts on food prices. He reminded participants that DLDD is predictable and reversible, and outlined the Strategy's operational objectives, the Secretariat's new structure and its newly refined aims. He concluded by stating that the present challenge is to bring the global community "down to earth, down to the land."

Veerle Vandeweerd, Director, Environment and Energy, Bureau of Development Policy, UNDP, discussed the global importance of land and soil protection in the context of adaptation to and mitigation of climate change. While acknowledging that a gulf exists between identifying and tackling DLDD, she stressed possibilities for land rehabilitation. She underscored the indispensable role of farmers and highlighted the link between land tenure and improved land use. She also outlined prospective projects to be undertaken jointly by UNCCD and UNDP, including governance support and assistance with knowledge management.

SEGMENT II: DIALOGUE ON MOBILIZING FOR A FORWARD-LOOKING STRATEGY

Amb. Laurent Stefanini, on behalf of Jean-Michel Severino, French Development Agency, described successes and challenges for cooperating partners and beneficiaries. He explained France's "double win-win" perspective on desertification, namely that by linking climate change, biodiversity and desertification, strategies can be developed that both ameliorate the environment and promote economic growth. He provided three case studies to exemplify this synergistic potential: conservation agriculture in Tunisia; improving water supply for pastoralists in Chad; and forest management in the Congo Basin.

Monique Barbut, CEO of the Global Environment Facility (GEF), discussed innovative financial mechanisms to foster the effective implementation of the UNCCD and improve the livelihoods of people living on degraded land. She noted that

sustainable soil management requires a clear framework to coordinate an array of long-term measures. She underscored the GEF's financial support in the land degradation focal area, and specifically to TerrAfrica, a regional programme addressing DLDD. Praising the work of the Secretariat, she called for measures to mobilize activity at the local level.

Ahmed Djoghlaif, Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) Executive Secretary, explained that because of the disparity in funding commitments between the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the CBD and UNCCD, he feels the latter two conventions are "abandoned children." While questioning the reasoning behind this financial asymmetry, he thanked the GEF for its support. He praised the Strategy and pledged his commitment to Rio convention solidarity.

SEGMENT III: PARTIES' VIEWS ON RESPONSES TO EMERGING CHALLENGES

Meena Gupta, Secretary of State, Ministry of Environment and Forests, India, praised the Strategy's focus on operative objectives and urged countries to revise their national strategic action plans. She then detailed implementation efforts in India. Jesca Eriyo, Minister of State for Environment of Uganda, welcomed the Strategy, and called for increased funding and scientific knowledge to support national implementation. She called on the GEF to make funds more easily available.

Bruno Oberlé, State Secretary, Federal Office for the Environment of Switzerland, discussed public relations and funding strategies, and suggested that quantitative objectives are needed to aid implementation. Miguel Leonardo Rodriguez, Deputy Minister of Environment, Venezuela, noted the potentially deleterious relationship between the Rio conventions, exemplified by the biofuels controversy, and outlined Venezuelan implementation efforts.

COMMENTS AND DISCUSSION

Participants had the opportunity to comment on each of the three segments. This section summarizes in a thematic manner these comments and discussion points.

Severity of DLDD: Numerous countries exemplified that DLDD is a significant issue commanding international focus and national action. Many illustrated that DLDD is caused by both natural and man-induced factors, which intensify negative natural cycles such as climate change and further impoverish those it affects. Extrapolations of its effects led a number of participants to define it as among humanity's most pressing concerns.

The Strategy: The Strategy was praised as a framework for guiding the UNCCD's four-year strategic work plan (2008-2011) and the forthcoming two-year operational programme.

National implementation: While participants agreed that the Strategy requires expedient implementation at the national level, they acknowledged associated challenges. Many delegates outlined their current efforts and national strategies, and the enormity and complexity of the task. While many expressed confidence in the Strategy to guide their work around DLDD, they listed a number of factors that may impede this work, such as funding, expertise and scientific knowledge. Participants suggested a number of issues to be addressed at the national level, including: revising national action plans; conducting management reviews; avoiding policy *ad hoc*-ism; instating DLDD-prevention schemes and local "greening" projects; reviving traditional land management practices; promoting sustainable agriculture; and conducting environmental impact assessments on a project-by-project basis. Indicators and review mechanisms were proposed as important elements of national implementation.

Funding: Many developing countries pointed out that a lack of finance for DLDD-related activities is a major impediment

to national implementation of the Strategy. While the GEF was praised for its focus on the land degradation focal area, some countries, including Cape Verde and Nigeria, pointed out that the current budget is inadequate. Others, such as Argentina, pointed out that where funds are available, national governments are not allocating them to combat desertification. Nigeria called on the GEF to create an adaptation fund, linked to the UNFCCC.

Science, technology and economics: A lack of readily available scientific and technical information on DLDD was raised by delegates as a factor hindering national level implementation. Colombia urged swift action, but only on the basis of "sound science." Switzerland pointed out that knowledge systems exist in countries affected by DLDD, and that donor countries should commission country/region specific research. Science and economics was also raised in the context of its effects on policy: a representative of the private sector pointed out that without estimating the cost of lost soil, policy makers are not always aware of the real value of addressing DLDD.

Engaging farmers and the private sector: Many participants recognized the connection between farmers and land use and recommended that national implementation directly engages small-scale and industrial farming practices. Incentives were raised in this context, with India stressing the need to train local farmers in non-degrading practices, and Venezuela highlighting the importance of national priorities, demonstrating that cash crops have a tendency to replace food production for local markets. The OECD encouraged private sector engagement.

Regional coordination: Participants agreed regional coordination is critical to effective national implementation. Guatemala and Honduras supported a coordinated approach in Central America; Mali mentioned the TerrAfrica programme and Brazil emphasized knowledge distribution among regional partners.

Coordination between the Rio conventions: There was general consensus that greater coordination is needed among the Secretariats of, and the parties to, the three Rio conventions and other MEAs. Many acknowledged that implementation of commitments would be facilitated if coordinated at the international level, and called for links between the Strategy and agreements that deal with climate change, biodiversity and water. The Czech Republic suggested that the UNCCD engage with the post-2012 climate negotiations to inject DLDD issues into the debate and that the UNCCD engage with the UN Commission on Sustainable Development and the UN Forum on Forests. Many mentioned poverty reduction as an overarching aim.

UNCCD Secretariat: China commended the Secretariat on its internal restructuring, and Colombia called on the Secretariat to be the "Al Gore" of desertification and raise its profile.

IN THE CORRIDORS

The 19th floor of the UN Campus building commands sweeping views of Bonn: a fine venue for a high-level policy dialogue looking towards the implementation of the 10-year Strategy. Discussions in the three segments were "a breath of fresh air" said one participant, happy to have moved beyond the fractious ESCOP negotiations. Others agreed that the Dialogue was useful to explore the bigger picture, including challenges for national implementation, regional cooperation and synergies between the Rio conventions. Others were more circumspect, with one saying wryly: "Dialogue is another word for talking. What is another word for action? Oh yes, implementation." The next meeting of the Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention in November, will address just that issue, and as participants left the Dialogue, the sharp drop in the elevator might have led them to recall Executive Secretary Luc Gnacadja's earlier request: to work with him to "bring the global community down to earth, down to the land."