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IMPLEMENTATION OF GENERAL ASSEMBLY RESOLUTION 3337 (XXIX) INTERNATIONAL CO-OPERATION TO COMBAT DESERTIFICATION

REPORT ON THE REGIONAL PREPARATORY MEETINGS

This report summarizes the results of the four regional preparatory meetings for the United Nations Conference on Desertification held in response to General Assembly resolution 3337 (XXIX) of 17 December 1974.

Report by the Executive Director of UNEP and Secretary-General of the Conference

1. The General Assembly in its resolution 3337 (XXIX), when describing the preparatory arrangements for the Conference, requested the Governing Council of the United Nations Development Programme and the Governing Council of UNEP:

"as part of the preparatory process for the Conference and in consultation with the Governments concerned, to sponsor, in co-operation with the regional commissions, technical meetings at the regional and subregional levels as appropriate".

2. The Executive Director consulted the UNEP Governing Council at its fourth session on the arrangements that might best be made for such consultations. It was agreed that the meetings should be attended primarily by experts nominated by Governments, and should be grouped as follows: the Americas, the Mediterranean area, Africa south of the Sahara, and Asia and the Pacific.

3. The meeting for the Americas, convened jointly by the Executive Secretary of the Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLA) and the Secretary-General of the Conference, met at ECLA headquarters, Santiago, Chile, from 23 to 26 February 1977. The meeting for the Mediterranean area was held from 28 March to 1 April 1977 in Algarve, Portugal. The Secretary-General of the Conference issued invitations on behalf of the Executive Secretaries of the Economic Commission for Europe (ECE), the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), and the Economic Commission for Western Asia (ECWA) and on his own behalf, as well as in consultation with the Secretary-General of the Organization of African Unity (OAU). The regional meeting for Africa south of the Sahara was combined with the OAU Symposium on Drought and Desertification in Africa. Invitations were sent on behalf of the Secretary-General of OAU, the Executive Secretary of ECA, and the Secretary-General of the Conference. This meeting was held from 12 to 16 April 1977 at Nairobi. The fourth and last regional preparatory meeting, convened jointly with the Executive Secretary of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, was held in New Delhi from 19 to 22 April 1977.
4. The four meetings followed a similar pattern, having as their main agenda items the substantive items of the provisional agenda of the Conference itself, the causes and consequences of desertification and the draft plan of action to combat desertification. To these was added an item on the arrangements for the Conference.
5. Country papers describing the extent and characteristics of desertification in the country concerned and experience in programmes to arrest the process were submitted to the regional meetings. Many papers emphasized that socio-cultural and economic factors were the main elements behind desertification, and that those most likely to be affected by desertification should be more actively involved in campaigns against desertification. It was agreed that the country papers should, subject to Government concurrence, receive wider circulation.
6. Discussion of the country papers, an examination of the case studies in each region concerned and statements made on behalf of the executive secretaries reinforced the analyses contained in the component reviews and synthesized in the draft of Desertification: An Overview.
7. Detailed comments were made on two desertification maps that were exhibited at the meetings. Several representatives emphasized the preliminary nature of the maps and the need to have them revised in the light of technical comments by the Government services concerned.
8. The principal aim of the regional meetings was to conduct a detailed examination of the revised preliminary draft of the plan of action to combat desertification, to which were related the feasibility studies of trans-national projects to combat desertification. Special attention was given by each regional meeting to the proposed projects in its area.
9. Detailed technical review of each chapter and each recommendation in the draft plan resulted in many comments and suggestions for changes, additions and deletions. Prior to the Algarve meeting, two groups of experts met to make

recommendations on how to strengthen the sections of the plan dealing with insurance against the risk of drought and on monitoring the socio-economic, demographic and health conditions of affected or threatened populations. A summary of these recommendations was made available to the Algarve, Nairobi and New Delhi meetings. Also, at these meetings, those decisions of the United Nations Water Conference (held after the Santiago meeting) that related to the work of the Desertification Conference were kept under review.

10. In the detailed review of the draft plan of action to combat desertification, some delegations supported the deletion of recommendation 1 on assessment and planning. Some felt that this recommendation had priority over others because it appeared first, and that such priority would be contrary to the position taken by the senior consultants to the Secretary-General of the Conference that sufficient knowledge was now available to act effectively against desertification without awaiting the outcome of further research, however valuable that research might prove to be. The Santiago meeting urged that the content of this recommendation be incorporated elsewhere, for example within the section on strengthening indigenous science and technology. It was suggested at New Delhi that recommendations 1 and 2 be reversed, giving the first position to the recommendation on land-use management. Several other delegations, especially at the Algarve and Nairobi meetings, preferred to keep assessment and planning at the beginning, as a starting point for national campaigns against desertification.

11. In drafting the plan, the Conference secretariat had preferred to avoid assigning priorities to recommendations. At the Algarve meeting, it was suggested that priorities should be indicated, and that they should be defined on a regional and sub-regional basis.

12. There was reserve among some delegations at all four regional meetings with respect to recommendations 14 and 15, on institutional arrangements. The Santiago meeting recommended the deletion of these recommendations, because they felt that existing machinery could carry out follow-up measures as required by the plan of action approved by the Conference. Some delegations felt that it was premature to discuss the question at all before the Conference and before the adoption of the plan of action. Other delegations just as strongly urged the retention of both recommendations, because the magnitude and urgency of the problem of desertification seemed to require specific machinery to deal with it. At the Algarve meeting, the Conference secretariat was invited to prepare a detailed proposal for consideration by the UNEP Governing Council at its fifth session, meeting in its capacity as the Intergovernmental preparatory body for the Conference. The proposal should specify the activities to be entrusted to the institutional arrangements recommended, the costs and personnel entailed, and the possibility of making resources available from member agencies of the Environment Co-ordination Board.

13. At the New Delhi meeting, three new recommendations were proposed: on public education, on forestry in dry lands, and on land tenure reform. A new text for recommendation 5 on water management was presented, incorporating the language of the United Nations Water Conference resolution on use of water to combat desertification. The suggestion was made that the plan should make reference to the just and equitable distribution of the waters of international rivers.

14. On financing the plan, while at other meetings there was no disagreement with the consortium approach suggested in chapter IV of the draft plan and in the secretariat presentations, it was at Nairobi recommended that a new international fund to combat desertification should be created. It was also proposed at Nairobi that a new recommendation should be added calling for international action to ban bacterial and chemical warfare that caused desertification, particularly in southern Africa.

15. A large number of specific suggestions were made at all four meetings for improving the present draft of the plan of action. However, the basic structure of the plan and the outlined set of recommendations were generally supported.

16. The reports of the regional meetings */ reflect the views expressed. While the discussions often resulted in a broad measure of agreement, that was not the purpose of the meetings, which sought not so much consensus as an expression of views, however varied in emphasis and content. The comments made on the draft of Desertification: An Overview and the critical reviews of the revised preliminary draft of the plan of action to combat desertification will be taken into account when revising these and related documents for presentation to the Conference.

17. At each meeting the arrangements for the United Nations Conference on Desertification were discussed. The hope was expressed that, in view of the importance which the General Assembly attaches to the Conference, delegations would include high Government officials with policy-making responsibilities. At New Delhi it was suggested that consideration should be given to modifying the Provisional Rules of Procedure when they came to be adopted at the Conference so as to permit delegations to be composed of at least three members in addition to advisers and consultants. At Nairobi it was noted that countries acceding to independence before the Conference should also be invited to attend. The regional meetings also learned of arrangements for a scientific symposium to be held by non-governmental organizations on the eve of the Conference, and of an orientation seminar to be held immediately following the Conference for technical advisers on delegations of Governments whose countries were exposed to desertification or had experience in desertification control.

*/ The reports of these meetings are available as follows: the Americas in English and Spanish; the Mediterranean area in Arabic, English, French and Russian; Africa south of the Sahara in Arabic, English and French; and Asia and the Pacific in English and French; these being the languages of the regional commissions concerned.