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**BACKGROUND INFORMATION FOR THE REGIONAL CONSULTATIONS
OF AFFECTED COUNTRY PARTIES OF THE REGIONAL
IMPLEMENTATION ANNEX FOR ASIA**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This document is divided into two key segments. First, an overview is presented of major issues relating to land degradation and desertification within the Asian context. Secondly, a regional review and assessment of implementation activities in Asia with specific reference to issues such as resource mobilization, accessing technology for the implementation of the national action programmes (NAPs), the subregional action programmes (SRAPs) and the regional action programme (RAP), progress with regard to the implementation of the Bonn Declaration, outstanding problems encountered in the implementation of the Convention, specifically with regard to preparation and capacities for updating the NAPs, and finally, the procedural aspects for communicating national reports to the Conference of the Parties (COP). Where applicable, the discussions also cover some valuable lessons learned relating to Asian country Parties' experience with the preparation of NAPs and the reporting process. This document will be tabled during the regional consultations scheduled for the beginning of the Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention (CRIC) with a view to eliciting concrete recommendations that will contribute to the deliberations and exchanges during the CRIC 3.

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I. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

1. At the fifth session of the COP, the CRIC was established and mandated to undertake a comprehensive review of implementation of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD).¹ The Committee's deliberations are to be guided by a transparent, inclusive, flexible and facilitative review format to be conducted thematically, taking into account the geographic regions and subregions. At the sixth session of the COP it was decided that the third session of the CRIC (CRIC 3) would review the implementation of the Convention through national reports received from affected African country Parties according to seven key thematic topics defined in decision 1/COP.5.² In addition to this and in recognition of the broad focus of the CRIC, decision 9/COP.6 identified four other topics for in-depth review at CRIC 3.

2. This document is prepared with the aim of providing background for the CRIC 3 deliberations, reflecting the perspectives of the affected country Parties of the Regional Implementation Annex for Asia with regard to the additional agenda items identified in decision 9/COP.6 (items 4 to 7 of the provisional agenda (ICCD/CRIC(3)/1)). The document contains a synthesis report based on previous national reports submitted by affected Asian country Parties, other existing official documentation, and primary information collected through consultations conducted by several representatives of the various subregions in Asia. The document is meant to assist affected Asian country Parties in an exchange of information during their regional consultations leading towards consensus building on some of the major issues to be discussed at CRIC 3.

II. OVERVIEW OF RECENT DEVELOPMENTS TOWARDS AN UNDERSTANDING OF DESERTIFICATION AND LAND DEGRADATION IN ASIA

3. Desertification and land degradation, as sustainable development issues, have gained wider recognition over the past decade. In a region that is socially, economically, politically and geographically as diverse as the Asia region, a wider appreciation of the dynamics of desertification and land degradation is deemed important in the deliberation process of the Convention, as it provides better understanding of the developmental and environmental processes taking place in Asia. This consideration is critical, especially if the issue of land degradation is to be advanced as a priority sustainable development agenda in Asia. Given the present pattern of growth, it is certain that current environmental problems will intensify further in Asia, especially in problem areas that have not received adequate attention. Despite the threat that desertification and, particularly, land degradation pose to Asian countries, most decision makers consider climate change and water resources management to be their main environmental problems. Desertification and deforestation rank third among the environmental issues requiring their attention.³ Despite the advocacy work already undertaken within the region, the approach to environmental problems is still predominantly sectoral in its orientation, usually responding to one development aspect while being potentially detrimental to others in the long term. Although a number of lessons have been

¹ Decision 1/COP.5, paragraphs 6, 7, 8 and 10, Additional procedures or institutional mechanisms to assist in the review of the implementation of the Convention, October 2001.

² Decision 9/COP.6, paragraphs 1, 2 and 3.

³ Asian Development Bank, *Asian Environmental Outlook 2000* and *World Development Report 2003*.

drawn from past experience, the challenges remain, since most of the policy decision makers still do not understand exactly how these issues interact or what would be the most effective measure for addressing the problem. This implies continuing effort and support for advocacy work at the political level, but also in the field of applied research and organized dissemination of lessons and techniques, which should be inclusive and accessible to all levels of actors. It is to be noted that the RAP in Asia, with its thematic approach and its mission to increase information exchange and exchange of expertise, could be of specific help in achieving this objective.

4. It might be worth highlighting that the Convention was framed to bolster collective action in addressing one of the most pervasive environmental problem areas – desertification. The UNCCD is among the few multilateral environmental agreements that explicitly acknowledge the inextricable link between social dimensions and environmental and sustainable development issues.⁴ In the Asia region, the Convention provides stakeholders through the SRAPs and the RAP with a platform via which the varying interests and shared concerns of all country Parties come together. The Convention provides and establishes appropriate mechanisms for exchange of information which link national/local development objectives with global interests in problem areas that historically have not received sufficient attention. The promotion of participatory processes ensuring that sustainable development policies are implemented at the local level and become beneficial for end users is one example where the UNCCD has contributed to achieving progress within those developmental parameters that have been repeatedly discussed as part of an international agenda on sustainable development. More importantly, the Convention promotes partnership arrangements involving national and international groups and linking indigenous communities with the scientific community to develop solutions to desertification by integrating partners, financial resources and land degradation concerns into ongoing programmes. These features of the Convention are slowly being recognized and at the same time multilateral agencies are showing renewed interest in supporting developing countries in their efforts to find sustainable solutions to the perennial problems of sustainable development. In the light of the evolving perspectives on land degradation and desertification in Asia, and as a consolidation of lessons that can be learned from more than ten years of shaping the Convention, the following aspects need to be considered in setting the course for its implementation in the future:

- Population pressure on arable land in Asia is expected to expand further as demand for agricultural productivity intensifies. Both the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the World Bank estimate that some 35 per cent of productive lands in the region are already severely degraded.⁵ The most affected country Parties are Afghanistan, China, India, Pakistan and most of the countries in Western Asia and Inner Asia's high steppe, the largest remaining pastureland in the world, which includes Mongolia, north-western China, and parts of Siberia.
- Land degradation has been identified by many Asian countries as one of the major environmental threats leading to desertification. Preventive measures are important to avoid further degradation of soils in those countries in Asia which may not be perceived as primary beneficiaries of the Convention. Advocacy work

⁴ World Development Report 2003.

⁵ FAO and World Development Report 2003.

is needed in order to raise awareness among decision makers of the need for a comprehensive strategy to combat land degradation and desertification. Within the context of the UNCCD deliberations, there is a growing appreciation that land degradation issues cover not only areas in arid, semi-arid and dry sub-humid zones but also desertification-threatened countries.⁶ These country Parties, which are not by definition within the category of arid, semi-arid or dry sub-humid zones, have acceded to the UNCCD due to the onset of severe land degradation, a circumstance that necessitates an appropriate response mechanism.

- The utilization of fragile lands has made it more challenging to find the right balance between traditional land management and demand for higher agricultural productivity. The decisive shift of some Governments towards discouraging nomadic lifestyles, herd movement and the temporary use of patchy grasses has consequently increased dependence on agricultural livelihoods and sedentary herds which creates greater pressure on local ecosystems and further increases the potential for land degradation.
- Investment returns in dryland areas are now showing greater prospects in the light of advances in technology and the lowering of the cost of access. On the other hand there have been notable diminishing returns to investment in many of the high-potential areas. This development is particularly welcome if one considers the potential and immense social benefits that can be generated, especially in reducing rural poverty. The World Bank states that a number of multilateral organizations are beginning to recognize the potential of supporting research and development for people in marginal lands (by means of, for example, new technologies for drought-resistant crops, efficient use of water resources, managed agricultural intensification including the use of fertilizers, the development of ecosystem-friendly farming and grazing practices, the application of innovative insurance schemes, the development of community-based early warning systems (such as those in Kenya) and the promotion of local knowledge and new initiatives). But the absence of public sector support that would hasten such a transition remains a major obstacle.
- Since population density is likely to remain high in the drylands, the strategies to be developed need to account for the attributes of land resources that can be harnessed in providing a sustainable livelihood. The prospects for providing livelihood opportunities in dryland areas are vast. However, developers and policy makers must recognize that drylands are not homogenous and cannot be converted into areas that function as non-drylands.
- Peace and security at national and subregional level can have a major influence on the economic and social development of country Parties. In 2003, the West Asia subregion was affected by a war which had a major impact on the socio-political

⁶ Desertification-threatened country Parties are those countries in the humid tropics and in the small island countries in the Pacific where climate anomalies (floods and El Niño) occur more frequently and continuously, affecting land productivity and the livelihoods and incomes of subsistence farming communities. These countries are likewise suffering from increasing competition for the use and availability of productive lands and water for sanitation and irrigation. If not properly addressed, the human-induced land degradation in these countries could lead to further loss of agricultural productivity.

and economic stability of the subregion, with considerable consequences for the environment, land resources and human safety and health. While, on the one hand, the situation contributed to the acceleration of political reform processes, the event nevertheless relegated matters of environment and land degradation to having a lower priority on the development agenda.

- Increased public participation by civil society in development processes and the socio-economic policy reforms initiated in the region are seen as a very positive development. At the global level, the UNCCD received recognition as a sustainable development convention at the World Summit for Sustainable Development (WSSD), a circumstance that reflects the growing concern of the international community that land degradation has a considerable impact on sustainable socio-economic development. The challenge remains of translating this recognition into tangible results at the national and local level with financial resources allocated to implementing NAPs. Slow progress in NAP implementation may hamper the initiatives promoted by the UNCCD and WSSD and slow the trend towards sustainable development and the achievement of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

III. A REVIEW AND ASSESSMENT OF REGIONAL PERSPECTIVES IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE UNCCD

5. Operational paragraph 1 of decision 9/COP.6 defines the scope of the review process at CRIC 3, which includes a review of the Bonn Declaration (8/COP.4). Decision 8/COP.4 stressed “the need to enhance special efforts to combat desertification and prevent desertification and/or mitigate the effects of drought during the first decade (2001-2010) of the 21st century” and decided on specific thematic and sectoral areas.⁷ Three of these strategic areas will be the subject of review in this paper; the annex presents a summary matrix of the analysis along with the sources of information obtained from the subregional representatives involved in this exercise.

A. Resource mobilization for the UNCCD process, including information on the activities of the Global Environment Facility (GEF) and the Global Mechanism (GM) and its Facilitation Committee (FC)

6. The issue of mobilizing financial resources is a standing item of the COP agenda. Since COP 1, discussions have taken place on the need for the Convention to mobilize additional resources for combating desertification and land degradation and achieving a greater involvement of international partners in the implementation of NAPs, SRAPs and the RAP in Asia. The progress of mobilizing financial resources in the region has been generally mixed, with positive developments at the global level while remaining a major challenge at national and/or local levels. Despite repeated appeals for increased efforts to mobilize

⁷ Decision 8/COP.4 and its annex identified seven strategic areas for action at all levels: (a) sustainable land use management, including water, soil and vegetation in affected areas, (b) sustainable use and management of rangelands, (c) development of sustainable agricultural and ranching production systems, (d) development of new renewable energy sources, (e) launching of reforestation/afforestation programmes and intensification of soil conservation programmes, (f) development of early warning systems for food security and drought forecasting, and (g) desertification monitoring and assessment.

financial resources for UNCCD implementation, the resources provided out of national government budgets remain inadequate to support priority activities laid out by the NAPs and even to a lesser extent by SRAPs and the RAP. As continuously pointed out by developing country Parties in the Asia region, gaps remain in linking national, subregional and regional efforts with international support. The preparation of NAPs is viewed by affected Asian country Parties as a mechanism for building a solid basis for the streamlining and consolidation of domestic resources for combating desertification. But even among country Parties which have prepared their NAPs, the critical mass for attaining a considerable level of external financial assistance has not been reached. To date, 22 countries in Asia have adopted their NAPs, while none has been able to secure considerable external financial resources through partnership initiatives for NAP implementation. In the light of more and more affected country Parties in Asia formulating and finalizing their NAPs, it would be desirable for CRIC 3 to discuss mechanisms between affected country Parties and their development partners for achieving improved support to NAP implementation.

7. Some progress is being noted by the stakeholders within the Asia region with regard to potentials for resource mobilization at the global level. Recent developments in the decision of the GEF to include land degradation, primarily desertification and deforestation, as a new focal area, as well as GEF's Operational Programme 15 (OP 15), were very much welcomed by many of the country Parties in the region. The Programme offers opportunities for many of the developing country Parties to meet their commitments under the UNCCD. Furthermore, under OP 15 the definition of land degradation was expanded to include land degradation in desertification-threatened areas which are not necessarily within arid, semi-arid and dry sub-humid zones. The scope of what can be funded by the Programme covers not only specific implementation activities but also capacity development initiatives which strengthen the capabilities of entities and institutions involved in desertification control programmes. To date a total of 25 projects (comprising four projects having global coverage which include several Asian country Parties, two regional, five subregional and 14 country projects) are being implemented and considered for funding under OP 15. However, caution needs to be expressed with regard to the utilization of funds through this Programme. National focal points (NFPs) of affected country Parties need specific guidance in accessing GEF funds, and emphasis should be placed on projects that are emerging from the NAP process. Awareness raising and guidance with regard to accessing GEF funds has only recently started. Despite the fact that OP 15 has broadened its scope in terms of supporting project implementation in areas that are not strictly speaking arid, semi-arid, or dry sub-humid areas, attention needs to be given to the fact that GEF funds under OP 15 should be geared to the implementation of the Convention and more specifically to the implementation of activities promoted through NAPs, SRAPs and RAP. Likewise, enabling activities such as support for the drafting and formulation of NAPs, national reports, as provided by the GEF for other environmental conventions are important in order to enable country Parties to respond adequately to the obligations of a multilateral agreement.

8. Private sector involvement in desertification control and management has vast potentials. Income generation in the drylands could strengthen the production of dryland products while investment in infrastructure could facilitate the marketing of such products to not only national but also international markets. Eco-tourism has likewise been promoted in some countries and has created much-needed income in the affected regions. Similarly, clean development mechanism (CDM) related initiatives should be further explored and appropriate guidelines could be issued which would promote such arrangements.

9. In the light of these developments, many country Parties in the region feel strongly the critical role of the UNCCD secretariat and the GM in facilitating this process at both the political and the practical level. A number of country Parties in the region suggest that the current institutional arrangement of the GM and the secretariat should be reviewed with the aim of further strengthening partnership mechanisms. Of particular importance is the need to enhance the capacities of developing country Parties to utilize the developed NAPs for resource mobilization purposes.

B. Consideration of ways and means of promoting know-how and technology transfer for combating desertification and/or mitigating the effects of drought, as well as of promoting experience sharing and information exchange among Parties and interested institutions and organizations

10. The Asia region is rich in both traditional and contemporary knowledge with regard to natural resources management. A wide range of knowledge, techniques and technologies has been utilized to rehabilitate degraded land, prevent desertification and land degradation, mitigate the effects of drought and promote revegetation and reforestation. This circumstance was one of the premises for the establishment of the thematic programme networks (TPNs) under the RAP, to foster the exchange of information and knowledge in the six core areas dealing with the effective management of land resources in arid, semi-arid and dry sub-humid zones. The Asian members of the group of experts to the Committee on Science and Technology (CST) have highlighted the experience obtained in the region and proposed documentation of best practices as one of the major activities to be carried out by the TPNs, SRAPs and NAPs and to be disseminated via the CST. Country Parties also acknowledge the necessity of disseminating and applying traditional knowledge and best practices in combination with modern technologies, adapted to local conditions where appropriate. For the moment many of the proposed activities under the TPNs cannot be carried out due to financial, technical and other support constraints. As the programme is still in its early stage, it is emphasized that the development of a monitoring and evaluation mechanism built into the programme is of critical importance. Since its establishment, the Asian TPN may already have enabled all stakeholders to exchange details of successful experience in implementing appropriate technologies and techniques. The extent of the knowledge that has been generated by the TPNs, SRAPs and NAPs cannot be ascertained, however, because of the absence of clear indicators for measuring the level of knowledge that has been transferred from the network and from the implementation of the NAPs. Of equal importance to the adoption and adaptation of technologies is the means for the transfer of knowledge. A further outreach programme to civil society, and its participation, is vital to the processes of access to technology and consolidation of knowledge.

C. Consideration of necessary adjustments to the elaboration process and the implementation of action programmes, including review of the enhanced implementation of the obligations of the Convention

1. Bonn Declaration (8/COP.4)

(a) Sustainable use and management of rangelands

11. Many of the developing countries in the Asia region have vast areas devoted to pastoralism, where communities have retained their traditional herding customs and customary tenurial arrangements for land management. For years Governments allowed people and herds to move families around different grazing areas. However, as these areas were considered to be State-owned, support was built around this customary practice and Governments set up public enterprises around the system. The effects of these policies varied considerably, depending on the cultural and political milieu of the countries involved. In China, settled pastoralism and the conversion of grasslands to arable cultivation led in some areas to salinization and wind erosion. A common policy framework was applied to highly diverse circumstances and ecosystems, resulting in perverse consequences that encouraged unsustainable farming practices. Subsidies encouraged mixed farming systems, which put more pressure on fragile land than the traditional pastoralism. In Mongolia, public enterprises offered alternative employment which reduced the number of herders and kept the herds at low numbers. However, the economic transition of 1990s brought about significant changes in this structure, which also affected State subsidies to agriculture and the social services. As unemployment increased, particularly in rural areas, people turned back to herding and unsustainable practices of pastoral management. This consequence has had a negative impact on vulnerable pasturelands which is believed to be contributing to noticeable increases in the frequency and intensity of dust storms. For the Central Asian States, the previous centrally-controlled economy, which promoted agricultural policies favouring highly mechanized and industrial production, has resulted in overgrazing of grasslands. In western Asia, increasing demand from a growing population and over-exploitation of the fragile and limited areas has degraded many of the productive grasslands. This problem is considered to be acute in the subregion, considering that more than a third of its total land area is in arid and semi-arid zones.

12. Governments in the region are fully aware of the magnitude of the land degradation problems, especially in pasturelands and grazing areas. Aware of the fact that this issue is central to alleviating poverty in marginalized rural areas, and recognizing that major economic reforms are currently being pursued, leading towards a more market-oriented economic approach, several measures are being pursued by Governments intending to achieve the sustainable development objectives reflected in the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation and the MDGs. The reform measures currently being pursued vary from major structural policy changes in agriculture, land tenure and the promotion of agricultural trade to specific project initiatives. More specifically, the spectrum of Government initiatives in the region aimed at promoting sustainable use and management of rangelands includes, among other initiatives, the promotion of secure livelihoods in the pastoral livestock sector through asset diversification, risk management, micro-finance, assistance to improving population mobility, setting up a fund to finance service delivery in remote areas, support through research programmes into effective stock breeding of pasture animals, setting proper pricing for the use of natural resources such as water and for the harvesting of products, and the balanced

offering of incentives and disincentives aimed at reducing the number of herders in pasturelands. In a number of cases, funding support to implement these initiatives has been obtained from bilateral and multilateral donor institutions. Where private sector involvement is appropriate, certain Governments have allowed this participation in the programmes. It is perhaps worth mentioning that community and stakeholder participation has been a core principle in the design and implementation of a number of these programmes. A vital element also being injected is the improvement of governance, aiming to ensure that initiatives are sustained beyond project completion.

(b) Launching of reforestation/afforestation programmes and intensification of soil conservation programmes

13. All country Parties in the region acknowledge the urgent need for sustainable management of their remaining forest resources. In meeting this need, countries have developed policy frameworks, reflecting a comprehensive approach to forest resources management which includes soil conservation programmes. Generally, these forest policy frameworks reflect topical concerns about deforestation and forest degradation, plantation development, curbing illegal logging, linking biodiversity resources management with forest resources management and the active promotion of community-based forest management. The policies essentially provide the backbone for designing the countries' programmes of actions to address various forestry and soil conservation issues. They reflect a wide range of measures for rehabilitating degraded land, preventing desertification/land degradation, mitigating the effects of drought and promoting re-vegetation and reforestation in dry and degraded land areas. An outstanding aspect of the policy framework is the serious effort to rehabilitate degraded lands through reforestation and afforestation supported by Governments and in some cases by the private sector. The trend in reforestation and new plantation establishment in the region is quite impressive and is the highest rate in the world. Five countries in the region, namely China, India, Indonesia, Japan and Thailand, rank among the world's top ten countries for afforestation (excluding Australia and New Zealand, which have large and contiguous plantation forests supplying substantively quantities of wood products to the global market). Other countries in the region are also embarking on this effort with significant outcomes and are relieving pressures on natural forests in terms of meeting domestic wood and forest product demand. The success in the afforestation and reforestation programmes can be attributed largely to reforms in the policy environment which now combines market-based incentives with a strong political will to carry out the programme. The programmes are also being carried out through large-scale projects and small-scale community-driven activities. Agroforestry is now a conventionally accepted approach for encouraging community participation in land and ecosystem management, while contributing to soil conservation and providing immediate economic benefits. Substantial results have been achieved by means of measures to arrest sand dune movements using various techniques, and by water conservation measures through large-scale irrigation systems and micro water reservoirs and harvesting facilities and the use of treated wastewater. Other policy reforms such as the granting of resource access, favourable product pricing, and promotion of the use of local technologies for conservation and production have combined to produce positive results. With the possible promotion of the CDM, the prospect of reforestation and afforestation is expected to improve further.

14. While there is no common forest policy framework in the region, all countries advocate the promotion of sustainable management of natural and man-made forest. Two important aspects of forest policy reforms worth mentioning have a considerable impact on the general progress of forest management in the region. These are:

(i) Preparation of forest management plans

15. Thirteen countries in the region (Australia, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Japan, Malaysia, Nepal, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines, Republic of Korea, Singapore and Sri Lanka) have reported that they have full and nationally approved forest management plans for some areas.⁸ Undoubtedly, the preparation of forest management plans is a step in the right direction towards sustainable forest management. For developing countries, the challenge lies in implementing or enforcing these plans. Despite the existence of the plans, reported violations are not uncommon. Some experts even argue that forest management plans do not curtail forest degradation but even exacerbate the situation as they legitimize wood harvesting for as long as the operations are reflected in the plan. Countries are aware of this loophole and are complementing this strategy with other tools and policy incentives that will enforce its efficacy. Due to the fact that almost all Asian countries have included reforestation and afforestation in their NAPs, the accelerated support for NAP implementation could contribute considerably to achieving forest management plans.

(ii) Forest certification and labelling

16. The idea of forest certification as a tool for ensuring sustainable forest management is gaining wider acceptance in the region. Similar to the International Organization for Standardization/Environmental Management System (ISO-EMS) process, forest certification deals with ensuring that the management and production processes follow a number of prescribed environmental standards that are nationally or globally observed. Two certifying organizations are operating in the region: the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), which certifies forest management, and the ISO through its ISO-EMS series. A number of wood producers in 10 countries in the region (Australia, China, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, New Zealand, the Philippines, the Solomon Islands, Sri Lanka and Thailand) are certified under the FSC systems⁹. On the other hand, no particular information can be given as to how many wood processing companies have been certified under the ISO-EMS. In conjunction with these certification systems, a number of Asian and Pacific countries (Australia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar and New Zealand) are implementing, or are in the process of formulating, their national certification and eco-labelling systems. Parallel to the certification are the ongoing efforts to develop and implement criteria and indicators for sustainable forest management which will establish benchmarks for measuring progress in the pursuit of an overall sustainable development objective. Within the region the efforts supported by the International Tropical Timber Organization (ITTO) and the Montreal Process Working Group on Criteria and Indicators for the Conservation and Sustainable Management of Temperate and Boreal Forests are being implemented. Some national certification and eco-labelling systems use the indicators developed by the ITTO as the system baseline, as is the case with Indonesia and Malaysia. Another set of indicators are being discussed which would apply as criteria for the dry forests of the region.¹⁰

⁸ FAO, *State of Forestry in Asia and the Pacific – 2003*, 2003.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ FAO, A Workshop on National-Level Criteria and Indicators for Sustainable Management of Dry Forests

(c) Desertification monitoring

17. Monitoring and assessing land use are activities that have repeatedly been emphasized as being vital to the whole effort of combating desertification and land degradation. Their importance to policy makers cannot be more emphasized, as the information generated from the monitoring exercise provides the basis for future initiatives that will address the issues of desertification and land degradation control. Efforts have been made at national, subregional, regional and global levels to consolidate information and harmonize actions for monitoring desertification. More specifically, continuing discussions and initiatives are taking place to harmonize the varied benchmarks and indicators and their diverging levels of application with the aim of establishing relevant spatial and sequential comparative information on the extent of desertification at the national, subregional and regional levels. The initiatives spearheaded by the secretariat for linking with other international efforts such as that undertaken by FAO under the Land Degradation Assessment for Drylands (LADA) and the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment are steps in the right direction and need to be further supported. The current CST programme on benchmark and indicators should also be further boosted in the light of its importance to current efforts. Worth mentioning as well are the efforts undertaken at regional level through the TPN 1 on monitoring and assessment, hosted by China. At the subregional level, activities on monitoring and evaluation as reflected in the SRAP for Western Asia under its Thematic Network 2 (TN 2), and relevant monitoring activities currently being developed by Central Asia within the framework of the Central Asian Countries Initiatives on Land Management (CACILM) merit the full support of the donor community. As with NAP activities, the limited human, institutional and financial capacities in these areas represent constraints in undertaking effective monitoring and assessment.

18. A recent effort which shows vast potential in its use and widespread application, particularly for national Governments facing challenges in prioritizing and formulating sustainability initiatives, is the Environmental Sustainability Index (ESI).^{11/12} The ESI is made of five core components measured through 20 indicators (see table below), each consisting of two to eight variables for a total of 68 underlying data sets.¹³

in Asia. Bhopal, India, 1999.

¹¹ Sherbinin, A., *The Role of Sustainability Indicators as a Tool for Assessing Territorial Environmental Competitiveness*, 2003.

¹² Three groups were involved in the development of the ESI, the World Economic Forum's Global Leaders for Tomorrow's Environment Task Force, the Yale University Center for Environmental Law and Policy and the Center for International Earth Science Information Network (CIESIN) of Columbia University.

¹³ Ibid.

Components and indicators of the Environmental Sustainability Index

Core components	Indicators
Environmental systems	Air quality
	Water quantity
	Water quality
	Biodiversity
	Land
Reducing stress	Reducing air pollution
	Reducing water stress
	Reducing ecosystem stresses
	Reducing waste and consumption pressures
	Reducing population growth
Reducing human vulnerability	Basic human sustenance
	Environmental health
Social and institutional capacity	Science and technology
	Capacity for debate
	Environmental governance
	Private sector responsiveness
	Eco-efficiency
Global stewardship	Participation in international collaborative efforts
	Greenhouse gas emissions
	Reducing transboundary environmental pressures

Source: CIESIN, Columbia University 2003.

19. The use of the ESI poses several advantages in terms of making cross-national comparisons of environmental sustainability. As the data sets are quantifiable they can be collected and analyzed more rigorously and therefore used constructively in making environmental decisions. More specifically, the value of the ESI can be summarized as follows:

- It tracks environmental trends and conditions;
- It quantifies assessment of the progress of measures taken according to their success or failure rates;
- Relating to the above, it identifies cases where performance is either below or above expectations;
- It provides a good mechanism for priority setting of policies and programmes to be formulated on a national and even regional basis; and
- It provides a holistic and interactive perspective on the environmental, social and economic factors as they influence environmental sustainability.

20. In short, the ESI goes beyond the measurement of trends but, most importantly, measures the prospects for long-term environmental sustainability.

2. Outstanding issues and barriers to effective implementation of the UNCCD

(a) Issues relating to the necessary adjustments to the elaboration and implementation of action programmes

21. The preparation of NAPs is central to the implementation of the Convention and thus is one of the obligations of affected country Parties within the Convention. Within the Asia region, twenty-two countries (China, India, Indonesia, Iran (Islamic Republic of), Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Lao PDR, Lebanon, Mongolia, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Syrian Arab Republic, Tajikistan, Thailand, Turkmenistan, United Arab Emirates, Uzbekistan, Viet Nam, and Yemen) have already reported completion of their NAPs and are in different stages of either implementing them or seeking to do so. Other countries are in the process of preparing their NAPs. As prescribed, the preparation of NAPs involves a wide range of stakeholders and covers varied activities that include awareness-raising seminars, NAP formulation workshops, institutional measures, synergy workshops and information networks.

22. Through the UNCCD secretariat and the GM, modest funds were made available to affected country Parties within the region for the preparation of their NAPs. It is to be noted, however, that in all cases the financial means provided did not match the expenditures necessary to address comprehensively participatory approaches, stakeholder integration and the integration of NAPs into broader development strategies. With regard to NAP formulation and implementation, two main constraints are encountered: the challenge of mainstreaming the document within the national agenda and policy-setting process and utilizing the document for mobilizing resources that will support the priority activities identified. It is emphasized that the preparation of NAPs needs to be made in conjunction with the preparation of the National Sustainable Development Strategies (NSDS) which constitute a key indicator of the MDG, and should bolster the preparation of the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs), especially for countries identified as least developed. The NAP is also recognized as an iterative plan of action which should be updated when necessary. Lessons from the NAP process indicate that current levels of support to the NAP preparation process need to be further intensified. As experienced by country Parties which have completed the process, the requisites for its preparation are quite complex, needing significant resources as well as capacities to ensure that the document adheres to the principles promoted by the Convention and is embedded in the national framework for action. Many country Parties have scant resources and limited capacities to see the process through, and for that reason are lagging behind in the preparation of their NAPs. In the same vein, the present levels of funding support extended by the secretariat and the GM have been deemed inadequate. Considering these constraints, a number of country Parties are suggesting that inasmuch as land degradation is now eligible for funding under GEF OP 15, funds to support NAP preparation should be considered as expedited funds similar to the enabling support for the preparation of the National Biodiversity Strategic Action Plans of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the National Communication Reports of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).

(b) Capacities for preparing and implementing the NAPs(i) Building capacities

23. Vital to a successful strategy for combating desertification and land degradation is the capacity of societies to take positive action to identify and meet development challenges in a sustainable manner. Essential to such capacity is the increased ability of individuals, groups, organizations and society in general to use and increase existing resources in an efficient, effective, relevant and sustainable way. It is in this context that the gap in capacity for implementing the Convention is recognized to be fairly wide, as manifested by the slow progress in mobilizing resources to support the activities of the NAP. Hence the initiatives to build capacities at all levels of implementation merit full support. Recent developments in the global effort to synergize the implementation of the multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs), particularly on biological diversity, climate change and land degradation, has led the GEF to support the preparation of National Capacity Self Assessment (NCSA). The NCSA seeks to initiate processes which will ensure that through a country-driven consultative process, countries' self-assessment of capacity building needs for implementing the three conventions can begin immediately. The overall aim of GEF support for NCSA is to provide countries with the opportunity to take the lead in articulating their own capacity needs and priorities with respect to the global environment.¹⁴ Objectives to be accomplished through the NCSA include:

- To identify, confirm or review priority issues for action within the thematic areas of biodiversity, climate change and desertification/land degradation;
- To explore related capacity needs within and across the three thematic areas;
- To catalyze targeted and coordinated action and requests for future external funding and assistance; and
- To link country action to the broader national environmental management and sustainable development framework.

24. Of the 56 countries in the Asia region, 41 have contacted the GEF with a view to undertaking NCSA. The levels of assessment vary, with some countries having already set the assessment process in motion while most are still in their early stages of implementation. It is desirable to ensure that findings from this regional process will be used effectively towards enhanced UNCCD implementation at the national level.

(ii) Linking with SRAPs and RAPs

25. At the Second Asian Ministerial Conference on UNCCD Implementation in Preparation for the Sixth Session of the Conference of the Parties, held in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, it was decided that interlinkages between the NAPs, SRAPs and the RAP should be established so as to maximize the benefits of action programmes in general. Many country Parties agree to the principle that NAPs, SRAPs and the RAP should be mutually reinforcing. Despite some preliminary work undertaken and the establishment of TPN-specific Internet sites, appropriate mechanisms for coordinating them have yet to be worked out. Further support is needed in order to deliver the core objectives of the RAP, namely the exchange of information and expertise. Information on best practices obtained through NAPs

¹⁴ GEF *Operational Guidelines for Expedited Funding of National Self Assessments of Capacity Building Needs*, 2001.

should be made available to the subregional and regional networks. There is general agreement among country Parties that the formulation of the protocols for interactive links would have to be developed in the immediate future. This is not yet urgent, since the SRAPs for West Asia and South Asia are the only ones to have reached implementation stage, and the SRAP for Central Asia is entering this stage. A working paper for the establishment of a SRAP for South-East Asia is now under preparation and may be presented at CRIC 3.

26. There is a growing appeal from country Parties for a review and assessment of the current mechanism for the operation of the RAP. While it is recognized that funding limitations remain the key constraint in the operation of the RAP, country Parties also believe in its importance to the region. The TPNs, with the continued support of the secretariat, the GM, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) and other interested agencies, are lauded but greater efforts should be made to promote best practices in land management and to implement more systematically the priorities and recommendations of the CST. The TPN host countries and task managers are commended for their role in advancing the implementation of the Asia TPNs as useful regional instruments, particularly in support of capacity-building activities. TPN 3, with its first experience of exchanging expertise, is one of the good examples which can be cited. However, strengthening of the Asian TPNs should be vigorously pursued, especially in activities that facilitate the harmonization of benchmarks and indicators applied to the monitoring and assessment of desertification, and the use of TPNs to facilitate capacity building.

(iii) Linkages with other sustainable development efforts

27. The imperatives for linking the Convention with other sustainable development efforts have never been more prominent. It would be beneficial to promote the Convention as one of the core elements in achieving sustainable development, including climate change mitigation, biodiversity conservation and wetland conservation. The promotion of synergistic policy and programme implementation should be facilitated in order to tackle other environmental issues such as climate change and biodiversity in a more integrated manner. Some of the Asian UNCCD countries convened synergy meetings at national level that led to the formulation of project proposals, but unfortunately these workshops fell short of establishing the administrative and institutional mechanisms needed in order to coordinate synergistic implementation. Yet again, capacity building is needed in order to establish an enabling environment in which different line ministries involved can launch joint implementation. Generally, focal points are of the opinion that the efforts are insufficient to maintain the momentum for meaningful and lasting interaction. These problems were mentioned in earlier discussions, and efforts need to be intensified to strengthen the linkage with other sustainable development efforts.

(iv) Integrating the NAPs into national development processes

28. The Convention NFPs in Asia and their national coordinating bodies (NCBs) spearheading UNCCD implementation have undertaken efforts to integrate the NAPs into the overall framework of national policies for promoting sustainable development. However, cross-sectoral coordination remains a significant challenge apart from the limited resources and the inadequacy of capacities of individuals, institutions and society in general to support effective implementation of the UNCCD at the national level. The effort to implement the

NSDS is an opportunity for ensuring inclusion of the NAP in the national development process. Similarly, the inclusion of civil society representatives in the NCBs has enhanced the effectiveness of the NCBs' coordination work and the implementation of the NAPs. Increased private land ownership, especially by women, supported by appropriate domestic legislation, is proving to be a powerful incentive for landowners to undertake appropriate land-use measures, especially if coupled with economic instruments. The value of NAPs is also reinforced if they are strongly linked with forest management plans that have been developed by country Parties. Support needs to be directed specifically to the implementation of the UNCCD and the institutional mechanism promoted by the Convention. Capacity building is needed and administrative procedures must be streamlined. The promotion of the NAP as the overarching framework for addressing land degradation, which should be mainstreamed in the policy agenda of national Governments, will go a long way towards ensuring its long-term implementation.

D. Consideration of ways and means of improving procedures for communication of information, as well as the quality and format of reports to be submitted to the Conference of the Parties

29. The current procedure for communicating information and submitting reports to the COP needs to be strengthened. The following problems have been identified:

- Country Parties have different human resources capacities available to draft reports, collect information and relevant statistical data, and submit national reports in time. The capacities of countries in Asia vary widely and the lack of reliable basic communication facilities such as computers, email, or even fax machines for some country Parties, hampers the effective drafting and communication of reports. In order to improve national reporting and the quality of reports submitted to the CRIC, it is necessary to assess the capacity needs of countries in order to streamline reporting requirements. This also applies to the drafting and formulating of NAPs where specific institutional strengthening and capacity building are needed.
- The level of measures for conservation of natural resources and for combating land degradation is affected by the levels of funding made available to Government ministries and NGOs in each country.
- Benchmarks and indicators are country specific and would require scientific assessment for their transferability. The CST and other relevant institutions would have to provide guidance and assistance in this respect.

IV. CONCLUSIONS AND EMERGING TRENDS

30. This desk study review of UNCCD implementation in Asia, undertaken following items identified by decision 9/COP.6, finds that, despite progress made in the implementation of activities relating to land degradation and desertification, particularly in the very important field of sustainable forestry management, much needs to be done with regard to fully positioning the NAPs, SRAPs and the RAP within the framework of support provided by the international community. This applies both to support received through bilateral donors and

to multilateral support through the GEF. Despite a considerable number of Asian country Parties' having finalized and adopted their NAPs, experience of implementation directly emerging from this exercise is rather scant, and support, when provided, is not necessarily accounted for through the mechanism provided by the Convention. This circumstance affects the way country Parties communicate information to the COP as part of their obligations; that is affected country Parties have up until now not been able to report on real implementation of the UNCCD, despite the fact that support is provided by development partners. Likewise, due to the present lack of support for UNCCD implementation and of bilateral and other support from development partners in the area of land degradation and desertification, the reporting process as it is currently practised is flawed by a sort of parallelism in reporting that hinders the CRIC from assessing real progress made in UNCCD implementation. Adjustments to the NAPs, SRAPs and RAP process would have to focus, therefore, on the potential to enhance support from the international community to these programmes, including the adjustments needed in order to make them more attractive to the donor community. NAPs and resource mobilization strategies should be seen as one and the same, needing consistent capacity building in order to address comprehensively the cross-sectoral nature of the Convention and the complex task of ensuring participatory approaches and the question of resource mobilization. Separating the two could eventually lead to a marginalization of the NAPs, which is seen by the Convention as one of the mainstays of coordinated implementation.

31. With regard to resource mobilization and the opportunities for affected country Parties interested in accessing GEF resources, clear guidelines and capacity building is needed to enable affected Asian country Parties to gain from the potential provided by the GEF. This is seen as a priority by country Parties in Asia and should be addressed through the ongoing efforts of implementing agencies as well as of the GM and the UNCCD secretariat. Similarly, mechanisms for an improved and accelerated partnership process for NAP implementation in Asia should be established with the main institutions providing coordinated services to the country Parties involved.

32. Potential for an enhanced transfer of technology is perceived by Asian country Parties through the SRAPs, but more so through the RAP and its related TPNs. Again, the lack of support and the fact that the RAP seems to be unable to attract sufficient interest from the international community needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency. Potentials to combine the mandates of both the CST, with particular reference to the request made for the collection of best practices, and the mission statements of the respective TPNs should be seen as one of the encouraging signs that could enable the TPNs to address more adequately the objectives set by country Parties. Capacity building and ongoing support for scientific research is needed in order to make progress in dealing with the problems experienced by the country Parties.

Annex

SUMMARY OF INFORMATION OBTAINED FROM SUBREGIONAL REPRESENTATIVES

Resource mobilization		All countries in the subregion have been mobilizing both domestic and external resources to support the identified priority activities for addressing land degradation issues and combating desertification. Experience is varied, with some countries successful in generating and mobilizing domestic resources. However, most face difficulties given the other priorities of their respective Governments. All developing country Parties obtain funds from external sources through multilateral and bilateral arrangements. A key constraint faced by many countries is in putting up the necessary counterpart funds required by donor countries. There may be a need for strong representation with donor countries to request a relaxation in counterparting requirement for poverty reduction projects, especially those focused on rural and marginalized areas. Efforts to entice greater private sector involvement needs also to be actively promoted. The formulation and activation of OP 15 under the GEF window is a welcome development.
Access to technology and know-how through NAP, SRAP and RAP implementation		The region is long recognized as having a wealth of traditional and modern knowledge and information of addressing land degradation concerns. This among other factors, served as a basis for the establishment of regional and subregional networks which aim to enhance and hasten the sharing of information, thus allowing access to technology which will improve techniques and methodologies suitable to dryland areas. However, this situation has not been optimized, as links between the NAP, SRAP and RAP have not been clearly established. Linkage between the RAP and SRAP through the discussions of the CST needs also to be strengthened and to be made to reinforce the action programmes at all levels. The absence of benchmarks and indicators to measure the level and degree of access of information to technology and knowledge also makes it difficult to ascertain the level of adoption exchanged among country Parties.
Issues relating to adjustments and elaboration of NAPs, SRAPs and RAP		The preparation of NAPs is central to the implementation of the Convention. Within the region nineteen countries (China, India, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Lebanon, Lao PDR, Mongolia, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Syrian Arab Republic, Tajikistan, Thailand, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Viet Nam and Yemen) have prepared their NAPs and are implementing them. Others, however, are still in the process of preparation. Two key problems are encountered; the first is the challenge of mainstreaming the NAPs in the national development agenda and utilizing the developed action programme for mobilizing resources to implement the identified programme areas. There is also a need to incorporate the NAPs into the preparation the NSDS of countries as part of the commitment of the MDG.
Progress made on strategic areas of the Bonn Declaration	Sustainable use and management of pasturelands	Governments in the region are fully aware of the magnitude of the land degradation problems, especially in pasturelands and grazing areas. Central to the issue is alleviating poverty in marginalized rural areas in the context that major economic reforms are being pursued. The spectrum of government initiatives in the region aimed at promoting sustainable use and management of rangelands include: the promotion of secure livelihoods in the pastoral livestock sector through asset diversification, risk management, microfinance, assistance in improving population mobility, setting up a fund to finance service delivery in remote areas, support through research programmes into effective stock breeding of pasture animals, establishing proper pricing for the use of natural resource assets such as water resources and the harvesting of products, and the balanced offering of incentives and disincentives aimed at reducing the number of herders in pasturelands.
	Launching of reforestation/afforestation programmes and intensification of soil conservation programmes	The trend in reforestation and new plantation establishment in the region is quite impressive; it is the highest rate in the world. Five countries in the region rank among the world's top ten plantation countries namely China, India, Indonesia, Japan and Thailand. Other countries in the region are also embarking on this effort with significant outcomes and are relieving pressures on natural forest. Success in the afforestation and reforestation programmes is attributed largely to the reforms in the policy environment. Agroforestry is now a conventionally accepted approach for encouraging community participation. Other policy reforms such as the granting of resource access, favourable product pricing, and the promotion of local technologies for conservation and production have combined to produce positive results. With the possible promotion of the CDM the prospects of reforestation and afforestation are expected to improve further.
	Desertification monitoring	Efforts have been made at national, subregional, regional and global levels to consolidate information and harmonize actions for monitoring desertification. Continuing discussions and initiatives are taking place to harmonize the various benchmarks and indicators. The initiatives to link with other international efforts such as the LADA and the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment are steps in the right direction. The current programme of the CST on benchmarks and indicators should also be further boosted. Worth mentioning are the efforts undertaken at regional level through TPN1. At the subregional level the activities on monitoring and evaluation under the SRAP for West Asia under its TN2 and the one that is being developed by Central Asia through the CACILM merits full support from the donor community. The limited human, institutional and financial capacities represent constraints in undertaking effective monitoring and assessment.

Issues relating to procedures for communication of information	Capacities for preparing the NAPs	The underpinnings of capacities are the increased ability of individuals, groups, organizations and society in general to use and increase existing resources in an efficient, effective, relevant and sustainable way. It is in this context that the capacity gap for implementing the Convention is recognized to be quite wide, as manifested by the slow progress in mobilizing resources to support the activities of the NAP. Recent developments in the global effort to synergize implementation of the MEAs, particularly biological diversity, climate change and land degradation, have let the GEF to support the preparation of NCSA. The overall aim of GEF support for the NCSA is to provide countries with the opportunity to take the lead in articulating their own capacity needs and priorities with respect to the global environment.
	Procedural issues	The current procedure for communicating information and submission of reports to the COP needs to be strengthened. The following have been identified as key issues for reporting and communicating information to the COP: The report does not have a common format and is not organized by a common/global platform to combat land degradation. Although guidelines are issued by the secretariat, they are not designed to track progress on a reporting sequence basis. The quality of the report is related to the level of capacities and technologies available in the country concerned. Levels of funding made available to Government and NGOs in each country. Benchmarks and indicators are country specific and would require scientific assessment for their transferability. The capabilities of countries in Asia vary widely and the lack of reliable basic communication facilities such as computers, email, or even fax machines for some country Parties, hampers the effective communication of reports.

Subregions^a (Country Parties marked in *italics* indicate those which have formulated their respective NAPs):

North-East Asia: *China*, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, *Mongolia*, Republic of Korea

Central Asia: *Kazakhstan*, *Kyrgyzstan*, *Tajikistan*, *Turkmenistan*, *Uzbekistan*

South Asia: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, *India*, Maldives, *Nepal*, *Pakistan*, *Sri Lanka*

Western Asia: Bahrain, *Islamic Republic of Iran*, Kuwait, Jordan, *Lebanon*, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, *Syrian Arab Republic*, *United Arab Emirates*, *Yemen*

South-East Asia: Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, *Indonesia*, *Laos*, Malaysia, *Myanmar*, *Philippines*, Singapore, *Thailand*, Timor-Leste, *Viet Nam*

Pacific: Australia, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, New Zealand, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu

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^a Listing of country Parties within a subregion does not necessarily represent United Nations recognized affiliations to any subregional groupings, but is based only on geographical locations.