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Expert Group Meeting on reversing Land Degradation:
Issues and Options
Beirut, 25-27 July 2005

INFORMATION NOTE

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ESCWA

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REVERSING LAND DEGRADATION: ISSUES AND OPTIONS
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Information Note

I. BACKGROUND

Land degradation is a major global concern, as has been shown in a number of recent international conferences, including the Millennium Summit and the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) to name a few. The sustainable management and conservation of land resources is an even more important issue in West Asia and North Africa, as the Region is mostly comprised of arid, semi-arid and dry sub-humid lands highly prone to desertification. With an aridity ratio (defined by UNCCD as the mean annual precipitation to potential evapotranspiration) of less than 0.65, the entire Region is a dryland area, characterized by low and highly variable rainfall and limited arable land, which is under pressure from human activities and highly vulnerable to degradation.

Land degradation occurs throughout the world but is of paramount concern in this Region as it leads to desertification, which is affecting already large areas and thousands of people in the Region. According to UNEP (Global Environmental Outlook-3), over 80 percent of the land on the Arabian Peninsula is classified as degraded and the remaining area is becoming increasingly vulnerable. The growing land problems of the Region are aggravated by harsh climatic conditions, rapidly growing population, rapid pace of urbanization and the destruction of the vegetative cover.

However, the quality of the land is still not considered a high policy objective in this Region. Rather, it is viewed as an input into achieving other policy objectives such as high economic growth, greater agricultural productivity, achieving food self-sufficiency, etc. and as such its threat is only recognized when it threatens the attainment of those objectives. There is a need to draw the attention of policy-makers on the pervasive effect of this problem and to show them the extent of the problem (assessment of the current situation), the factors affecting the quality of the land, what has been achieved and what can be done to counteract land degradation.

ESCWA is convening this gathering so that experts could debate and propose innovative ways in which the land degradation problems of the Region could be addressed effectively, and propose action-oriented recommendations to foster the assessment and control of land degradation and the rehabilitation of degraded lands.

II. OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this Expert Group Meeting is to review and propose appropriate measures to assist countries of the Region in their endeavors to assess, control and reverse land degradation. Also, experts will be called upon to identify how the various efforts being undertaken in the Region could be linked to major global undertakings such as the FAO-implemented Land Degradation Assessment in the Drylands (LADA). At the completion of the Meeting, it is expected that action-oriented recommendations to encourage Member States to adopt a better and unified methodological framework to assess land degradation and evaluate the effectiveness of measures to control and reverse land degradation, would be formulated.

III. PRELIMINARY AGENDA

Tentatively, the Agenda of the Expert Group Meeting will include the following:

- (a) Review of applicable frameworks to assess land degradation;
- (b) Review of approaches to control and reverse land degradation;
- (c) Review of achievements and other endeavors to combat land degradation in the region: case studies
- (d) Harmonization of efforts at regional and international level and role of regional and international organizations;
- (e) Mapping the way forward.

IV. PARTICIPATION

The Meeting is expected to bring together regional and international experts on Land Degradation and Desertification, especially those interested and working in arid, semi-arid or dry-subhumid areas like those prevailing in the West Asia and North Africa region. It will also be opened to officials from the Region, namely representatives from Departments of Agriculture, Land, Water and Environment, Research Centres, Universities and other stakeholders. All participants will be expected to give a presentation/paper on their experience or the experience of their country/institution in assessing, controlling and reversing land degradation.

Experts participating in the meeting will attend in their individual capacities and not as representatives of the Governments or organizations to which they belong.

V. DATE AND VENUE

The meeting will be held from 25-27 July 2005 at the ESCWA Headquarters, United Nations House, Riad El-Solh Square, Beirut, Lebanon.

VI. MEETING LANGUAGE

The meeting will be conducted in English and Arabic and simultaneous interpretation will be provided. Participants are expected to discuss, present and share their experiences and lessons learned concerning the subject matter in either of the two languages.

VII. CONTACT INFORMATION

All correspondence concerning the meeting should be addressed to the following:

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