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Special segment: interactive dialogue sessions

**High-level round table discussion on desertification
and adaptation to climate change**

Note by the secretariat

Summary

1. By its decision 30/COP.7, the Conference of the Parties decided to include in its eighth session interactive dialogue sessions with the relevant stakeholders, including ministers, non-governmental organizations and members of parliament, on agenda items of relevance to them.
2. This document was prepared in order to assist participants in the round table discussion which will take place on 12 September. It includes some questions that could constitute the basis of the deliberations.
3. Participants may wish to make recommendations on practical measures and options to enhance the implementation of action programmes to combat desertification and adaptation to climate change, with a view to fostering sustainable development in affected country Parties.

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I. Background

1. Desertification is one of the greatest environmental challenges facing the world today, and a major impediment to meeting basic human needs in drylands, according to the recent major report of the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment. The report also described desertification as “potentially the most threatening ecosystem change impacting the livelihoods of the poor.” Ninety per cent of the drylands population of almost two billion people live in developing countries.

2. The effects of another major environmental phenomenon, climate change, meanwhile, are hitting the headlines with increasing frequency. And there is growing recognition of the important links between climate change and desertification. This was reflected in the theme for this year’s World Day to Combat Desertification – “Desertification and climate change – one global challenge.”

3. These two environmental concerns impact upon each other at several levels. An increase in the frequency of extreme weather events, such as droughts and heavy rains, as a result of global warming will lead to further land degradation, while the desertification process also affects the climate. According to the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, dryland soils contain more than a quarter of all of the organic carbon in the world as well as nearly all inorganic carbon. Due to the reduced carbon sinks caused by desertification and related loss of vegetation, emissions are considerably higher in drylands. Rehabilitation of drylands could therefore have a major impact on global warming.

4. Many people fear that a time bomb is ticking. A recent report on desertification, compiled by a group of experts under the auspices of the United Nations University (UNU), claims that climate change is making desertification “the greatest environmental challenge of our times.” It says that unless current trends are quickly halted, enough fertile land could turn into desert within the next generation to create an “environmental crisis of global proportions.” The report also points out the alarming socio-economic consequences, warning that unless action is taken, some 50 million people could be displaced within the next 10 years.

5. The experts go on to state that “the loss of soil productivity and the degradation of life-support services provided by nature pose imminent threats to international stability.” In some developed countries, top military and intelligence officials invest attention and resources in assessing the impact of global warming on national security. They are well aware of the relationships between desertification and rampant poverty, forced migrations and conflicts.

6. The Third Assessment Report (2007) of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) confirms that drought and water scarcity are expected to increase. The rising socio-economic costs relating to weather damage and to regional variations in climate suggest increasing vulnerability to climate change. Social and economic systems have been affected by the high economic losses resulting from catastrophic weather events such as floods and droughts.

7. Europe must also brace itself for the impact of climate change. A recent European Commission report paints a disturbing picture of rising temperatures that will scorch southern Europe, melt Alpine and Scandinavian snows and flood low-lying coastal zones around the continent. The document warns that unless European countries engage in adequate advance

planning, they will be face “to increasingly frequent crises and disasters which will prove much more costly and also threaten Europe’s social and economic systems and its security”. Climate change makes the interaction between desertification/drought and natural catastrophes more lethal.

II. Capturing synergy

8. Under such evolving trends, the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) is at a crossroads. The intergovernmental review of its forthcoming ten-year strategic plan and framework to enhance the implementation of the UNCCD will make the Convention a better-recognized instrument of the international community for addressing these related environmental, socio-economic and security challenges.

9. Synergy between the national action programmes (NAPs) under the UNCCD, which are building bridges between development and environment policies, and the national adaptation programmes of action (NAPAs) under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) presents an as yet untapped opportunity to establish comprehensive policy instruments. Such an integrated approach to tackling desertification and climate change will have multiple benefits, especially for the poor in the world’s drylands who are suffering most from the double blow of desertification and climate change.

10. There are three main reasons why linking efforts to combat climate change with sustainable land management activities makes good sense:

(a) First, because many of those most vulnerable to climate change are poor people living in dryland areas, measures to adapt to climate change, as implemented through the NAPs/NAPAs, will necessarily focus on delivering the Millennium Development Goals;

(b) Second, the UNCCD focuses attention on particular development issues in a participatory manner, thus empowering end-users of natural resources to adopt sustainable practices and alternative livelihoods, which in itself constitutes a critical form of climate adaptation at the grass roots.

(c) Third, linking the activities of the two conventions, rather than designing, implementing and managing climate policy separately from combating desertification, makes sense from efficiency and mainstreaming perspectives. This is particularly true in countries with scarce financial and human resources. Indeed, coordinating mitigation and adaptation strategies to address aspects of climate change and desertification in one stroke will facilitate the development of innovative poverty reduction strategies, strengthen the adaptation capacities of vulnerable lower income groups, and fight climate change through carbon sequestration and emission reductions.

11. Carbon sequestration projects in the wide expanses of dryland agroecosystems, for example, could have much greater benefits than may be expected through forest conservation. The sequestration of carbon has the potential to counter degradation and increase the productivity and sustainability of these ecosystems. These projects could also provide major social benefits by increasing food security, which in turn would help prevent unsustainable land-

management practices. Local populations could therefore mitigate climate change while combating desertification and protecting biological diversity.

12. There are, however, several challenges in realizing synergy. For example, drylands populations often rely on access to ecosystem services in order to cope with drought. However, some desertification measures focus, unwisely, on the absolute protection of vegetation from human activity. Adaptation to climate change, on the other hand, demands continued, sustainable access to indigenous resources in order to support livelihoods during times of climate stress. It may therefore be necessary to re-think measures designed in response to drylands degradation alone.

13. A further challenge is institutional and financial. According to one of the authors of the UNU desertification report, "Policymakers and politicians are not aware of the gravity of the situation. As the problem is getting bigger, the resources allocated are getting smaller." Financial mechanisms relating to the UNFCCC provide new and more promising sources of funding than those relating to the UNCCD. However, the types of activities that can be funded through the UNFCCC are subject to restrictive conditions, and this may limit the opportunities to implement measures that focus also on strengthening livelihoods.

14. Hence, it is imperative to relate UNCCD activities more strongly to the essential entitlements of the affected population such as the right to food and to access to water. Access to water and water management is the cornerstone of successful implementation of the UNCCD and this is expected to be reflected in the forthcoming ten-year strategy.

15. It is essential to understand and anticipate the water demand in drylands in order to encourage improvement of water management as a means to ensure sustainable and equitable access to water.

16. The interactions between soil, water and the atmosphere are still to be fully understood and assessed in a context of climate change. Shared resources, primarily land and water, are cardinal issues for any sustainable development policy within a scenario of changing ecosystems, climate variability and population dynamics.

III. Challenges ahead

17. Many important questions arise from the consideration of the issues outlines above. For example:

(a) In addition to climate shifts, population growth is another driver of heightened vulnerability in dry areas. Local populations in drylands, where population densities continue to grow and where most global poverty occurs, have no choice but to expand their economies or migrate. How can such expansion be achieved while avoiding development processes that can lead to desertification and climate change? Could key areas such as science and education, agriculture, forestry, energy and water management offer platforms to meet this challenge in a synergistic and holistic approach?

(b) How can inclusive adaptation strategies devised with regard to climate variability and change better support environmental governance principles necessary for combating land degradation and preserving biodiversity?

(c) How can a framework and/or mechanisms be now defined at international level for reinforcing the joint delivery of benefits through the UNCCD and the UNFCCC, in particular through actions to be taken by the governing bodies of these conventions on adaptation so as to address the fundamental needs of people living in arid, semi-arid and sub-humid areas?

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