

LIVING SUSTAINABLY Grounding Security

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‘Never before, in the history of human kind, has the sustainable management of natural resources been so critical to human survival. Our generation will set human history on the path to either sustainable development or self-destruction. The good news is that we can still choose sustainability but there is no time for procrastination.’



Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, Dear Friends,

In the not so long history of humankind, our ancestors too often fought over land and water. Those days have returned. Our security as a global community depends on the extent to which we preserve our soils because “enhancing soil anywhere enhances life everywhere,” and grounds security. Here I would like to introduce you to the underlying concept of “soil security.”

Security is a legitimate aspiration of individuals, families, communities and nation states. It seems to me that it is the quest through which mankind has learnt to cooperate to realize mutual benefit from resources and for efficiency. As a societal value, security is linked to the protection, certainty, reliability, trust and confidence, and predictability of all that we depend on.

During the last few decades, the international community has realized that continuous and intensive degradation of the environment and related loss of ecosystem services can have major implications for public security at the national level, and threaten international stability.

For instance, six to ten inches (18-25 cm) of topsoil are all that stand between us and extinction. There’s far more to topsoil than food. The things that live in and grow from this irreplaceable and finite resource also keep us clothed, the air and water clean, the land green and pleasant and the human soul refreshed. In that regard soil is a common good, a common wealth. Only now are we starting to comprehend how the tiny life forms in soil sustain productivity and the greater environmental balance.

Land degradation spells the gradual death of soil’s complex web of biota. The disappearance of just a single species from this web can be devastating. But we take soil services as “free services”; we count them as externalities that can be depleted at no cost. Because we are

an all-powerful species, soil’s health – and thus our own – depends in large part on how well we sustain it. This is our capital duty. The front line agents of this sustainability are those who live in the areas most vulnerable to degradation: the drylands.

Drylands are the arid, semi-arid and dry sub-humid areas of the world. This excludes natural deserts. Drylands make up roughly one third of planet Earth’s land mass and are home to one third of the world’s population – more than 2 billion – half of whom are ranked at the bottom of the United Nations Human Development Index.

Drylands are also one of the most conflict-prone regions of the world. In 2007, 80% of the major armed conflicts that affected society occurred in such vulnerable dry ecosystems.

For instance and as rightly stated by the UN Secretary General, “the Darfur conflict began as an ecological crisis, arising at least in part from climate change.” The desert in northern Sudan has advanced southwards by 100 km over the past 40 years. Rainfall has dropped by 16%-30% and yields of the staple food, sorghum, could drop by 70%. The affected nomads of the Zaghawa tribe were forced to migrate southward in search of water and food for their animals. Their encounter with the sedentary farmer tribes of the Fur and Masalit ended in conflict. This is an instance of how our deeds impact climate change, with far reaching consequences in distant lands.

Land is a finite recourse that is acquiring new value nowadays due to the competing claims for more land and water resources, driving new phenomena such as global ‘land grabbing.’ So land degradation should be a matter of global concern, but it is not yet! Desertification is the name for land degradation when it occurs in the drylands. Due to drought and desertification, 12 million hectares of land are lost every year. This is an area more than the size of my country, Benin, or three times the size of Switzerland.

The world's media has a hard time telling the desertification story when there are plenty, more sensational disturbances and disasters to report on. Perhaps it is also because land degradation and drought are silent and slow killers. They have a way of creeping up on us, fooling us into underestimating their urgency. Desertification and drought are predictable, except where they couple with policy failure or a breakdown in governance. Therefore, drought and desertification should not claim lives. But they are! Why?

Drought and desertification are killing people due, in part, to public misconceptions and policy failures that stubbornly persist at all levels. Desertification is controlled and reversed whenever the soil is secured. Soil security is achieved when efforts succeed to conserve its fertility, contain land degradation and reduce the consequences of drought. Our security as individuals and as communities therefore, will depend on how we care for soil security everywhere.

Soils in the world's dry ecosystems are the most fragile and vulnerable to degradation due to water scarcity. But drylands and their people are not helpless liabilities, a burden on our efforts to achieve global sustainability. No, drylands people are vital agents of change and progress. But they have been neglected in development plans, policies and processes, despite abundant evidence that arid lands can be made productive by empowering the affected populations with the appropriate policy frameworks, incentives, technological innovations and investments.

Will they be forsaken, yet again, when the global community concludes the ongoing climate change negotiations? Time will tell! What could be the agenda for change and who will take the lead?

I would like to challenge the great minds gathered here today to pursue a decisive policy change in the way which we perceive the drylands and address the issues of its people in order to avoid environmentally induced conflicts.

We should securitize the ground in order to ground security.

- Securitizing the ground is creating a wider global political awareness of DLDD and their societal consequences. It is making combating DLDD a key international political commitment and upgrading DLDD to the security realm.
- Grounding security includes taking reactive and proactive short-, medium- and long-term strategies for coping with desertification (soil depletion/soil insecurity) by exposing its manifold societal, environmental and economic consequences.¹

¹ In "Securitizing the ground, ground security" Hans Günter Brauch & Ursula Oswald Spring – UNCCD Issue Paper n°2

Dear friends,

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