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“Key challenges to ensure environmental security and sustainable development in the OSCE area: Land degradation, soil contamination and water management”.

Plenary session V
Key Note Speech:
Land degradation and desertification
under climate change scenarios

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It is an honour for me to join you here in this historical city at the very heart of Europe. I enjoyed Part I of the Forum in Vienna and would like at the outset to thank the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe for again inviting the UNCCD Secretariat to attend this meeting.

A couple of days ago, I returned from the CSD session in New York that was dealing with energy and climate change and there was a palpable frustration in the air regarding environmental governance. A secretary of state from the North asked, “*I am almost depressed; how come we know the problems, we have the means to address them but we do not take action?*”. An ambassador from a like-minded country added, “*problems confronting everybody must be answered by responses coming from everybody*”. At the same time a delegate from the South was complaining, “*we do not need new mandates or new reviews but just the translation of past commitments into action*”. So it does sound like acting together is the problem and we need to find a way to address it.

THE EMERGING OF ENVIRONMENTAL GEO STRATEGIC ISSUES

In this respect I may submit that the task of OSCE is of particular significance. The League of Nations was created after WW I and the UNO after WW II as peace building responses to the breakdown of public security in Europe. Yet mankind's memory is dangerously short and the hot peace that followed the cold war is boiling with rampant, overt and in all cases, deadly conflicts. Are we forgetting that security matters?

OSCE is here to remind us all that it does. Moreover it can use its convening power in its regional sphere to clarify the links between natural resources scarcity and security in order to enable a more vibrant responses of States as they face probable environmental emergencies. This means a lot to the UNCCD and we thus welcome opportunities for a sharply focussed cooperation.

I recalled in Vienna that, with the support of Spain this secretariat highlighted the relationship between desertification, migrations and conflicts over ten years ago and, yet another time, those who thought that our Convention is an instrument for philanthropic soil scientists handled our call with benign neglect. But see where is the issue today:

On the occasion of the session of the Security Council on climate change, April 17th, the British Foreign Secretary told reporters "*what makes war start-fights over water, changing patterns of rainfall, fights over food production, land use. There are few greater potential threats*" The memory seems to return. Her ambassador to the UN listed "*border disputes, migration, energy supplies, resources shortages, societal stress and humanitarian crisis*" as threats to peace and security. (Herald Tribune 18th April)

Much in the debate of the UN Security Council, including the awful situation in Darfur, was the stuff our Convention is meant to address if given the means to do so. The international community has already recognized the UNCCD as an important tool to address related global challenges such as soil conservation, afforestation, poverty reduction, integrated management of water resources, the prevention of conflicts related to land use, the mitigation of drought as a natural disaster.

The awareness that environmental scarcity is a causal factor of conflicts is not confined to diplomatic conference rooms. The New York Times in its 12th May issue tells us that intelligence agencies in the USA are undertaking a comprehensive and very expensive study to project the impact of global warming over the next three decades, examining political, social, economic

and agricultural risks. The director of national intelligence reported to the House Intelligence Committee it is “*entirely appropriate*” that the intelligence community prepare an assessment of the “*geopolitical and security implications of climate change*”.

Now common sense helps us to figure out all this brings a renewed call for combating land degradation and drought. Indeed, under present scenarios of climate variability and climate changes, the challenges this Convention was meant to address are worsening.

- Climate Change is now seen as having a profound impact on natural resources and societies, challenging some basis assumptions concerning the reliability of the production and consumption patterns of our emerging global civilization.
- Some 1.8 billion people live in drylands (semi-arid and dry sub humid climates), and large scale growing environmental scarcity in these endangered ecosystems can have wide ranging geo political consequences: conflicts, forced migrations. Entire regions are at risks in eastern Europe and central Asia.
- Yet these areas also offer opportunities: space is drylands’s great luxury. The vast expands of drylands, where most rural poverty occurs, present also untapped opportunities for carbon sequestration in soils and revegetation and for renewable energy.
- At the same time, as local populations have no choice but to scratch a living from increasingly scarce natural resources, the challenge there is also to meet their requirements for sustainable livelihoods while, combating desertification in a manner that is adaptive to climate change.
- Adaptation to climate change, for most of developing countries, involves the protection of land against further degradation, which in turn strengthens the resilience of ecosystems,
- We can address climate change through an effective implementation of the UNCCD in a way that ensures land cover through forestry/agro-forestry activities and water and soil conservation. In this regard, adaptation and mitigation activities, in many instances, must include investing in combating land degradation and mitigating the effects of drought.

- Hence, as we face together the uncertainties of the new millennium, the OSCE and the UNCCD can provide impulses for selective and well-targeted areas of support in order to reduce vulnerabilities of ecosystems and people in the concerned regions, reducing or preventing the occurrence or impact of natural catastrophes such as droughts, sand storms, forests fires or flash floods.

AXIS OF INTERVENTIONS

OSCE role in early warning, conflict prevention, crisis management and post conflict rehabilitation can be meaningfully discharged along three possible axis of interventions that are promoted under the UNCCD programmes dealing with land degradation, land pollution and drought management. These are :

1) Data monitoring and assessment

Early response to an environmental problem - before it turns into a security issue, - calls for quick answers to such question as “where is the hotspot?”, “how steep is the trend?”, “who is most affected?”. Therefore, in affected areas, an effective and reliable sub regional mechanism for collection of data as well as for analysis, monitoring and assessment of information on land pollution, land degradation or drought is essential. This mechanism would provide an operational early warning system at both technical and political levels. Of course, ensuring provision of independent and accurate data on a neutral basis one of the challenges to be addressed.

The establishment of a subregional drought management centre in Central Asia in the context of the UNCCD, similar to the one that is being established in South-Eastern Europe with Slovenia as host country, is a first step towards emergency or conflict prevention. Subregional and national monitoring activities and early warning tools for decision makers relating to land pollution could be developed through increased support to the Action Programmes of the UNCCD. Their integration within more comprehensive security perspectives would be also an asset to mobilize political will in support of sustainable natural resources management approach.

2) Land rehabilitation

When a disaster strikes, land rehabilitation is a very important phase in the process of maintaining local stakeholders in place and preventing forced migration of population. Cooperation with different kinds and types of technical and/or development organizations to this effect could contribute to

strengthening the national technical and scientific capacities through activities of transfer of technology and know how.

Whenever methods for rehabilitation of polluted land already exist, possible activities in support of operational land rehabilitation programmes in affected areas, including exchange of experience between similar affected countries and regional training of technicians and trainers, could be explored by OSCE, in cooperation with the UNCCD and with other interested organization. Some regional activities developed in the context of the UNCCD are currently targeting the development of regional training programmes and thematic networking.

When there is a need for effective methods and techniques for land rehabilitation, in particular with respect to specific instances of pollution, the development of transboundary pilot projects and the establishment of ad hoc West-East task forces of independent and neutral expertise_scientific would strengthen the national and subregional research community dealing with land pollution. The secretariat facilitated such exchanges in the case of Tschernobyl.

3) Prevention of land pollution

Good monitoring systems of land degradation, land pollution and drought at sub regional level are naturally more useful if environmental laws and conflict settlement mechanisms exist and if they are enforced. OSCE, with its field presence and knowledge of local conditions, could facilitate the development of joint agreements to prevent conflict that may erupt in the context of land pollution. It could also assist in addressing potential crises resulting from the consequences of drought . This could be achieved in the context of more support to the implementation of action programmes of the UNCCD.

INSTANCES OF POSSIBLE COOPERATION

Now just a few words about recent activities within the framework of the UNCCD. Since the last Conference of the Parties to the UNCCD, held in 2005, the Secretariat was engaged in various activities to widen worldwide support to the Convention. This has particularly been the case in the support of preparation of National reports on the implementation of the UNCCD and the successful celebration of the International Year of Deserts and Desertification, marking the 10th Anniversary of the entry into force of the Convention.

The Committee for the review of the implementation of the Convention (CRIC5), held in March this year in Buenos Aires, was seen as a defining step to move from assessment to action as most of the countries, which had submitted their national reports, had also indicated their readiness to fully engage in the implementation of their national action programmes to combat desertification. Indeed the call for action is deafening.

I trust you will share with me the belief that this Convention provides an appropriate framework for facilitating the outreach of the OSCE in support of the international community attaining environmental security thus contributing to sustainable development and that the OSCE can thus contribute, either through political dialogue or through the promotion of concrete projects. I am sure the OSCE, in the light of its mandate, can bring a useful contribution in enhancing capacity building to address these multiple challenges.

In this context I would like to recall the following possible areas for cooperation with the OSCE at different levels in Europe. We are ready to consider concrete avenues for immediate cooperation. For instance, in the light of the emerging environmental threats I have tried to briefly describe, we could consider cooperation in the following initiatives:

National level

There are five regional implementations annexes to the Convention. In particular the Regional Implementation Annex IV for Northern Mediterranean countries and the Regional Implementation Annex V for Central and Eastern Europe. The UNCCD Secretariat is following the efforts of the countries concerned in formulating and launching by affected countries, in accordance with provisions of the Convention, of their National action programmes (NAPs) to combat land degradation/desertification and the effects of drought.

As you may know, 190 countries and the European Community have ratified the Convention. 20 countries out of 23 from CEE region are parties to the UNCCD. Ratifying the UNCCD is not only an expression of solidarity with affected countries facing land degradation and the effects of drought, it is also a commitment to contribute to the efforts of the international community to promote sustainable development worldwide.

Therefore the accession to the Convention of remaining three CEE countries is desirable.

Subregional level

In accordance with provisions of the UNCCD the affected countries may also prepare and implement Subregional Action Programmes. Drought is becoming more and more a crucial issue in Europe. Since 2003, the UNCCD secretariat, at the request of Balkan countries has launched a process for the establishment of a Drought Management Center for South Eastern Europe (DMCSEE) in the context of UNCCD. It's being done in cooperation with WMO. Slovenia was selected as a host country of this Center and a project proposal is currently being established by Slovenia, in cooperation with WMO and UNCCD and the concerned countries.

- This project proposal will be presented soon to potential partners for cooperation, including OSCE.
- Furthermore I would like to inform you that further to requests of the Central Asian states, the Secretariat together with OSCE have started the process of establishing a drought management centre for Central Asia. In cooperation with all interested countries and the WMO, and it expected to become an important element of the Sub regional Action Programme to combat desertification in Central Asia.

The UNCCD also provides a basis for integrating synergistic programmes with other Multilateral Environmental Agreements such as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, the Convention on Biodiversity and the Convention on Wetlands.

- There is a need to organise sub regional meetings in Tran Caucasus, Eastern and Southern-eastern Europe on ensuring synergy between these conventions The OSCE is invited to participate in this process.

Regional activities

In accordance with the provisions of the UNCCD the affected countries may prepare and implement Regional activities. Agreements have already been reached on:

- Launching of a) regional training centers in Armenia and Bulgaria, establishing a regional network on "Afforestation in temperate zones affected by drought" to be hosted by Romania; b) a regional reference center on "Soil conservation strategies and planning" to be hosted by Czech Republic. There are plans to organize in Turkey a regional workshop on "Watershed rehabilitation techniques in the degraded

areas" and a regional training programme on " Afforestation and plantation techniques", as well as a regional workshop on resource mobilization for CEE countries to combat desertification and land degradation. The OSCE is invited to participate in these initiatives.

- There is also need to establish on a regional level a network of non-governmental organizations.

Inter-regional activities

Beyond regional cooperation, interregional cooperation between Europe and Central Asia, notably involving the Russian speaking countries in the context of the UNCCD, can build mutual trust, and lead to extended partnership in other policy areas as well as to confidence- building measures.

Ladies and gentlemen, let us conclude:

Memories from the twentieth century have given to countries in this membership an acute sense for prioritizing security issues. The challenge now is to widen the concept of public security so as to eradicate the deeper roots of conflicts. The activities identified under the UNCCD contribute, in a modest but effective way, to more sustainable land leading to improved livelihoods in rural areas. We hope that cooperation between the UNCCD and the OSCE will gradually strengthen this trend.

Thank you for your attention.