

DESERTIFICATION, LAND DEGRADATION AND DROUGHT AS PUSH FACTORS OF FORCED MIGRATIONS

Address by Grégoire G. de Kalbermatten,

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Distinguished Chair,

Ladies and gentlemen,

In these few remarks, I would like to introduce to you both a critical issue and a multilateral instrument, which, I believe, should cooperate more closely with IOM. I will do so in quoting the Secretary General of the United Nations, Mr. Ban Ki-moon, whose message addressed the International Conference on combating desertification

Which took place in Beijing, 22-24 January 2008

“The climate change pact’s sister treaty, the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification, is the most powerful tool for addressing land degradation in our international arsenal. The UNCCD offers a platform for adaptation, mitigation and resilience. The Ten-Year Strategic Plan adopted by its eighth Conference of the Parties provides an overall strategic framework for bringing broad-based local, national and international initiatives to fruition.

The UNCCD has enormous potential and deserves the support of all Governments. By fully backing this Convention in conjunction with efforts to

combat climate change, we can maximize synergies to reduce environmental, social and economic vulnerability and expand the outreach of the adaptation measures.”

The critical issue is the fertile soil we are losing; the instrument is this Convention.

Why does land degradation matter in a context of migrations? In delivering the message of the SG, Mr. Sha Zukang, Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs, observed that Desertification and land degradation are a complex challenge with long-term social, economic and environmental implications. While almost two billion people in the world today depend on the fragile ecosystems in arid and semi-arid areas, ninety per cent of them, most of them poor, live in the developing world, where increasing ecological stresses caused by desertification are threatening livelihoods. Small-scale farmers are particularly hard hit.

You of course realize that the issues of desertification and sustainable development should not be seen in isolation, but in their much wider social and humanitarian context. This has been acknowledged by Nobel Peace Laureate Wangari Maathai. In her acceptance speech, she referred to the nexus between peace, security and environmental degradation, thereby strengthening the basis for an integrated approach to sustainable development. She has also referred to desertification as “the new enemy”.

Isn't it easy it is to forget the ground on which we walk and the land which feeds us?

Yet we forget at our own cost.

Desertification is essentially a man-induced activity. And the result is that we are losing the biological productivity of the earth. And we can point our collective finger at unsustainable agricultural practices; overgrazing, deforestation; unsustainable water management; and unsustainable human settlement.

On current projections, vast parts of the world risk being left uninhabitable by declining agricultural capacity and reduced freshwater availability, two key items on the UNCCD agenda. To place this in context, beyond affecting freshwater, crop yields, cultivable land or fish stocks, climate change is adding other factors of environmental migrations such as rising sea levels. Resource scarcity has arrived and is here to stay, as many had predicted for decades in the face of demographic growth. The 2006 Stern Review of the Economics of Climate Change noted what we already knew: poorest countries are affected earliest and most.

In a context of these fast evolving patterns of natural resources scarcity and scenarios of climate change, combating land degradation, desertification and drought take an all-new meaning. It becomes part of a more holistic concept of public security.

Desertification, land degradation and drought (DLDD) severely erode the productivity of arable land. Food supply under stretched conditions shall be at the mercy of climatic conditions and extreme weather events and we know that we register over the last decade an amplification of frequency and impact of natural disasters. In various part of the world, DLDD is a causal factor of societal stress, humanitarian crisis and border disputes, as documented by several studies. A case study of the 2005 food crisis in Niger illustrates how

poorly the international community still responds on the preventive front of such emergencies. Since then, the clock goes on ticking.

Recently US grain stocks figures reached an all time low and set inflation worries. When the US Department of Agriculture warns us about the persistence of extremely low inventories, with wheat stocks at their lowest levels since 1847 and a 20 reduction in corn inventories, investors pay attention and invest in agribusiness. But how shall the billion of poor in the drylands adjust to higher food prices? According to FAO the World Food Price Index jumped by 40% last year.

Many are responding with their feet: they are on the move.

Land degradation is indeed a root cause of forced migration and the exodus has begun:

- Every year, between 700.000 and 900.000 Mexicans leave their dryland homes to seek a living in the United States.
- In Africa, over 10 million people have been displaced in the past 20 years
- By 2020, 60 million people are estimated to move from desertified areas of sub-Saharan Africa towards North Africa and Europe.
- Swelling numbers of immigrants are making their way from Africa the Middle East or central Asia to the European mainland. Many lose their lives in the attempt as is the case on the dangerous routes taken in flimsy boats, notably towards the canaries Islands, Samos or Lampedusa.
- Yet numbers are on the rise. Almost 10 000 migrants landed on Samos Lesbos and Chios in 2007 against 4000 in 2006. The strain on the infrastructures and services of the country of destination is considerable.

It is not easy for Greece to cope with the burgeoning numbers of detention centres in the Aegean Sea. The legal entanglements and procedures around illegal immigration and refugees seeking asylum are punishing for all involved.

Urban slums are swelling and the potential for poverty and conflicts is rising

- Within 25 years, the proportion of Mauritania's people living in the capital, Nouakchott, rose from 9% to 41%.
- Worldwide, desertification has played a role in sparking off a number of recent armed conflicts in arid lands.
- According to NATO, desertification poses a common security threat to the Mediterranean region.

Needless to say the resettlement of environmental refugees can easily produce its own environmental wasteland and the UNHCR does not always have the means to implement its own guidelines on the matter. Displaced persons rely heavily on the surrounding environment for food and fuel wood: for instance satellite aerial pictures taken by the University of Bern document the disappearance of forest and vegetation due to migrants encroachments in the Darfur area of Sudan.

Such forced migration has major implications for peace and security. A symposium organized by NATO in December 2003 in Valencia, Spain, concluded that desertification poses a very serious threat to security in the Mediterranean region. A train of events leading from poverty to forced

migration to conflict can then be set in motion, with potentially disastrous consequences.

When Foreign Secretary Margaret Beckett of Britain addressed the Security Council of the UN last year, she put it bluntly: “*what makes wars start – fights over water, changing patterns of rainfall, fights over food production, land use. There are few greater potential threats*” Others should pay attention too. In fact when the Heads of State gathered more recently in New York in the margins of the General Assembly were discussing climate change as a threat to peace, they were in fact often discussing DLDD issues.

The UN Agencies should arrive at an internationally accepted definition of “environmental refugees” since treaties recognize only political refugees as eligible for aid from the UN refugee agency. Again, there is some urgency to consider this issue. Indeed, meanwhile, over 135 million people, the equivalent of the combined populations of France and Germany, are in danger of being driven from their land.

Let me conclude. The UNCCD is the only international treaty to address the DLDD threat and the new 10 years strategy adopted by COP 8 in Madrid invites us to upgrade the issue of land on the international environmental agenda. Clearly, after a decade of benign neglect, we see today that the international community is finally taking note of our issues and more ready to take necessary measures.

Advocated measures

- A better understanding of migratory flows, its socio-economic and cultural dimensions and its impact on the economies of the region must include a method to disaggregate the push factors of migrations; UNCCD could cooperate with IOM on a study related to the topic of this presentation.
- National strategies adopted in response to natural resource degradation such as the NAP under the UNCCD – including Local Area Development Programmes to reduce poverty within local communities affected by desertification and drought must be advocated globally as reducing push factors of migrations and be prioritized as such by donor agencies still involved in the affected region;
- National decision makers and development partners (in particular the European Union) therefore ought to effectively prioritize support for investment in the sustainable management of rural areas at risk, in order to stem the push factors of further forced migratory flows.