



Regional Conference on Land Degradation Issues in the Arab Region
Shepherd Hotel, Cairo-Egypt, 30 October-1 November 2007

Information Note

I. BACKGROUND

The Arab region has limited fertile land that is subject to different levels of degradation. With few exceptions, it is also considered a land scarce region. The degradation of agricultural land in the region to a large extent is caused by human induced factors, but natural factors such as, low and erratic rainfall and droughts are also playing a part. Pressures on the resource base due to high population growth rates, rapid urbanization, and lack of land use plans further aggravate the situation for agriculture in the region. Furthermore, unsustainable cultivation practices, over-cultivation of marginal lands, overexploitation of water and land resources, and insufficient support given to the integrated management of land and water resources in agriculture are also negatively affecting the productivity of agriculture. The low levels of agricultural productivity and competitiveness, along with the degradation of natural resources in the region are further aggravated by the absence of proactive policies for encouraging the efficient and sustainable use of land resources.

The degradation of natural resources (land, water, biological diversity) is endangering the livelihoods of the poor, particularly in rural areas, where there is more reliance on such resources. The loss of livelihoods and natural resources leads poor farmers to adopt non-sustainable survival strategies that further deteriorate their resources base. Increasing poverty, also limits the range of available options with regard to the sustainable management of these finite resources. There is a strong correlation between population growth, land degradation, food insecurity and poverty. As such, promoting the sustainable use and management of the region's limited natural resources in agriculture is a great challenge that requires immediate consideration.

Despite some efforts exerted to assess and combat land degradation and desertification at local, national and regional levels, the achievements are limited thus far, and the approaches are not integrative; as a result, land degradation and desertification continue to intensify in the region. Furthermore, land degradation and desertification transcend political borders and one needs to take into consideration the regional impact of such occurrences. Responding to the complex and interconnected challenges of sustainable development also requires increased regional cooperation. As such, setting up regional cooperation mechanisms, and coordination of efforts on combating land degradation are crucial so that national efforts remain in harmony with regional initiatives. The promotion of inter-and intra-country cooperation and coordination in the region as well as that of regional and international organizations is essential to combat land degradation and desertification.

The current Conference, organized by ESCWA in cooperation with LAS Technical Secretariat of the Council of Arab Ministers Responsible for Environment, UNEP/ROWA and ACSAD as co-organizers, and it will be held back to back with the Ninth Session of the Joint Committee on Environment and Development in the Arab Region (JCEDAR), 4-6 November 2007, Shepherd Hotel, Cairo Egypt, which is a forum for the Regional Implementation Meeting (RIM) for the Arab Region within the framework of preparation for the 16th Session of the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD-16). The main thematic areas to be covered during the CSD 16 and 17 cycle are: Agriculture, Rural Development, Land, Drought and Desertification. Major Regional Cooperating Partners have been entrusted with the preparation of background papers on each of those five thematic areas. During the ninth session of JCEDAR the background papers will then be synthesized into major reports, which will constitute the Arab region's input to CSD-16.

The Conference would constitute a good forum for experts who could share lessons learned and debate and propose innovative way for enhancing regional cooperation in combating land degradation, and propose action-oriented recommendations in order to encourage national and regional efforts aimed at fostering regional cooperation in combating land degradation.

II. OBJECTIVES

The first objective of this Conference is to identify modalities for and to instigate regional cooperation in the prevention and reversal of land degradation.

The second objective of the Conference would be to review and assess inputs prepared by the concerned regional Cooperating partners for the ninth session of JCEDAR as the Arab Region RIM inputs for the 16th Session of CSD.

III. TOPICS TO BE COVERED BY THE CONFERENCE

(a) Assessing the current status of cooperation on reversing land degradation in the region; and identifying modalities for promoting and stimulating regional cooperation in assessing and reversing land degradation.

(b) Discussing the following inputs for consideration of JCEDAR, which is the forum for the RIM of the Arab Region:

- Agriculture in the Arab Region
- Rural Development in the Arab Region
- Land Resources in the Arab Region
- Drought in the Arab Region
- Land Degradation and Desertification in the Arab Region.

(c) A working session on “The Role of the Regional Center for the Monitoring of Drought and Early Warning, and the possibilities of achieving linkages and complementing the national activities and the activities of the concerned regional organizations”.

IV. PARTICIPATION

The Conference is expected to bring together national, regional and international experts on Land Degradation and Desertification, especially those involved and working in arid, semi-arid or dry-subhumid areas similar to those prevailing in the West Asia and North Africa region. Officials and experts from the Region, namely representatives from the Departments of Agriculture, Land, Rural Development, and Drought Mitigation; Research Centres, Universities and other stakeholders could also attend the Conference.

Officials from major Regional Cooperating Partners involved in the preparation of inputs to JCEDAR, RIM, and CSD-16 will also participate, namely representatives from, ACSAD, AOAD, ICARDA and the Center for Environment and Development for the Arab Region and Europe (CEDARE), LAS Technical Secretariat of the Council of Arab Ministers Responsible for Environment, and UNEP/ROWA.

All experts attending the Conference will be expected to prepare a presentation/paper not exceeding 20 pages on their experience or the experience of their country/institution on topics related to the Conference.

V. DATE AND VENUE

The Conference will be held from 30 October to 1 November 2007 at the Shepherd Hotel, Cairo, Egypt.

VI. LANGUAGE OF THE CONFERENCE

The Conference 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. ORGANIZING COMMITTEE

Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA):

- Ms. Anhar Hegazi, Director of SDPD, Chairperson (hegazi@un.org)
- Mr. Mohammad E. Osman, Team Leader, SARD Team, Member (osmanm@un.org)

The LAS Technical Secretariat of the Council of Arab Ministers Responsible for Environment:

- Ms. Fatima Al-Mallah, Director of Environment, Housing, and Sustainable Development, Vice-Chairperson (Envsusdev.dept@las.int)
- Mr. Jamaledine Jaballah, Deputy, Director of Environment, Housing, and Sustainable Development, Member (Envsusdev.dept@las.int)

The Arab Center for the Studies of Arid Zones and Drylands (ACSAD):

- Mr. Khaled Ramadan Ben Mahmoud, Director of Division of Land and Water Uses, Member (k-Benmahmoud@acsad.org)
- Mr. Gilani Abdel Jawad, Advisor, Member (a-abdulgawad@acsad.org)

The United Nations Environmental Programme/Regional Office for West Asia UNEP/ROWA:

- Mr. Ahmad Ali Ghosn, Regional Programme Officer and Regional Coordinator for UNCCD, Member (ahmad.ghosn@unep.org.bh)