

## INTRODUCTION TO THE SEPTEMBER 21 AND 22 WORKSHOPS ON THE THEME : DRYLAND AREA PRIORITIES AND POLICY AGENDA

### 1 – Background

#### *Goal of the forum*

The overall meaning of the Desertif-Actions forum is to make possible the meeting of civil society organisations working in dryland areas in the framework of the Convention to Combat Desertification and other multilateral agreements in order to exchange on the significance of work in dryland areas to a large audience of NGOs, local communities, international institutions, and the private sector.

#### *Context*

The role of dryland areas in the global ecosystem is undeniable : they cover 30% of the area of the globe, and are divided over all continents and the biodiversity of species which compose them is endemic. This unique feature must be related to a second observation which is no less pertinent: one billion men and women live in these regions and are among the poorest on earth. The negative evolution of dryland areas in terms of desertification is acknowledged as a key issue, a present en future stake for all.

In spite of strong commitments, numerous field actors often act with inadequate means and experience great difficulty getting heard, they have more and more problems stopping the growth of problems related to environmental degradation, primarily that of lands, and their alarming consequences on the lives and incomes of rural communities.

National public policies and international reference frameworks, including the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification, are failing to bring together the critical mass of good wills and means indispensable to a collective dynamic of action. The lack of a consensus on a coherent strategy of intervention, as well as the definition of priority goals, strongly limits the effective scope of efforts engaged in the field.

The scientific community has completed numerous sectoral works on the subject, but often poorly known and little valued by the actors of the fight against desertification at all levels of action. Besides, they have not succeeded to-date in either producing global knowledge of the subject or in building solid arguments likely to have an impact - like the works on climate change – on policy decisions.

#### *Three significant observations of the international debate bring about questions :*

- The progressive disappearance of the fight against land degradation and dryland area development from the policy agenda of donors in spite of a few incantatory reminders in international declarations.
- Increased interest in multilateral institutions such as the World Bank for dryland areas focused mainly on economic aspects

- Persistence of a low involvement of civil society, both in countries from the South as countries from the north, in pooling together its assets for action and impacting on policy choices and directions,

## 2 – The forum approach

These combined developments might lead in the short term to the disengagement of the international community or to non sustainable development options both for these territories and for their populations. That is the reason why we believe that civil society organizations must get involved as stakeholders, determine possible actions, identify alternative sustainable development options and design a strategic discussion over the arguments and means to heavily impact in the determination of policy marker priorities.

Such an approach necessarily rests on the construction of arguments admissible to put forward in the competition between true and false global emergencies. This is to establish the diagnosis, gather the advocacy elements and define together the stages and strategic objectives to be reached that Desertif'Actions proposes to put these issues up for discussion. An electronic forum launched in June 2006 and 90 contributions provided by the participants focused on a set of open questions mentioned as follows:

- What are, according to you, the major characteristics of NGO, scientist, local (decentralized) authorities and private sector (businesses) involvement in your country and how do they work together in fighting against land degradation and for sustainable development in dryland areas ? Do you agree about their roles, or do you rather propose different roles for them to play?
- What support do you get or would you need from your government in order to better play your own role ?
- How could your government better involve itself in stimulating the sustainable development of dryland area?
- What would be the means for issues about dryland areas to be a higher priority on the agenda of your government if necessary ? For example, what would be the links to be made with other issues which are higher on the priority list in the agenda of your government and the subject of dryland areas?
- On what type of policies or reference framework – PAN, CSRP, PDD, ... do you base your own work ? What instruments would be pertinent according to you for the CSOs which would want to achieve more policy results, get more attention and secure more means for dryland areas?
- Is the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification such an instrument ? If so, could it be better utilised, and how? What role should NGOs, scientists, local authorities and the private sector play or not play in the national and international processes of the CCD? How should we go about it?
- What are your proposals and arguments for the Montpellier Declaration on this subject?

## 3 – The expected results of both workshops on this subject

Both workshops lasting a half-day on the 1st theme on September 21 and 22 are aimed at going further in the debate about the declared will to prioritize the issue of dryland areas in national and international policy agendas. Two types of results are expected:

- Establishment of arguments for investment in combating desertification,
- Defining at least four recommendations to decision makers, donors and international institutions on how they must support and reinforce civil society actions for poverty reduction in dryland areas.

#### 4 – Summary elements of the electronic forum on the web and preliminary participant contributions

Electronic forum : the assessemnt rests on the 35 messages available on August 31 on the forum, 66% of which are in French, 29% in English, and 5% in Spanish.

Contributions : 9 contributions from NGOs from Africa, Asia and Latin America : 67% of these contributions are in English.

Overall, it can be emphasized that the two types of participations are complementary and that their ideas overlap. The contributions on the forum are of a freer/ more spontaneous tone and often less formal than the written contributions, but they are also less backed up

##### *The consensual ideas*

First of all, the notion of desertification is far from clear and the dryland areas are labelled with a generally negative image, a fact which contributes to an overall lack of interest in the subject : on the one hand, the majority of opinions expressed point to a confusion between desertification and advancing deserts ; on the other hand, it is reminded that the media generally insist on armed conflicts, diseases or South-North migration issues when talking about dryland areas, thus contributing to disseminate a miserabilist and hopeless vision and implicitly leaving only to humanitarian organisations the legitimacy of relief actions ; finally the Convention to Combat Desertification remains to-date unknown to the greater public, including the numerous NGOs intervening in dryland areas.

Communication on the socio-economic stakes of desertification is deemed inadequate : for example people don't know about the cost of desertification to country development. It turns out that such information and its broad dissemination are perceived as necessary in order to convince policy makers and the entire civil society of the importance of the fight against desertification in development policies.

To persuade public authorities and civil society as a whole of the necessity to act for the development of dryland areas, participants propose to insist on the very negative societal consequences of desertification on a global scale : they relate to the destabilisation of rural societies in dryland areas, extension of conflicts, increased south-north migration, or even the emergence of other forms of desperate behaviors. These types of arguments however are conflicting with the will to convey a positive image of dryland areas which would lead to investments in these regions.

Other more positive arguments to make desertification a priority issue on policy agenda are developed and are sometimes conflicting : they involve either

- The linking of desertification to global environmental issues such as loss of biodiversity and climate change,
- Or linking the fight against desertification to the millenium goals,
- Or even confining the issue of desertification to that of land degradation..

These ideas also raise issues about the future of the Convention.

As a matter of fact, several participants point out the lack of benchmarks or specific timelines in the text and in the decisions of the Convention, as well as lack of any independant evaluation process of its works. They believe that this involves here factors which discourage countries' commitment to combat desertification.

Contributions are also critical towards governments and scientists involved in CCD, mentioning alternately the incompetence, lack of means, the will, or even the corruption of public authorities as well as lack of access to knowledge and scientific products. Beyond occasionally terse statements clearly come out issues of training, communication, coordination and clarification of roles among the major actors of CCD.

Thus the participants fully criticize : the lack of adequate training for the numerous national delegates to the Convention, which makes difficult constructive dialogue ; the inadequate solidarity of civil society organisations with one another, which prevents impacting on policy

decisions ; the lack of transmission structures between scientists and dryland users, a fact which limits the efficiency and replicability of CCD actions.

Finally, participants insist on the nature of the role of civil society organisations:

- see to it that governments fulfill their commitments as expressed in the NAPs
- have decision making power in the choice of investment projects concerning dryland areas.

Thus these organisations perceive themselves as lobbying structures at national and international levels rather than field actors. They request that the Convention to Combat Desertification explicitly recognize such role.

#### *Factors of conflict*

They can be summarized into three major elements, which can be deliberately referred to as follows, as far as the workshop is concerned:

(i) should people insist on the negative aspects of dryland areas which are likely to scare public opinion and policy makers in the hope of awakening them ; those include social and environmental aspects of climate unbalance, conflicts, migration, or even deprivation and diseases and their potential global contagiousness?

Or should we rather promote the qualities of dryland areas and their inhabitants, and their potential in terms of positive external factors for the rest of the planet in order to bring public opinion and public authorities to care more about it and find a reason for both ethical and economic investment ?

(ii) should we prioritize development and poverty alleviation aspects in the definition of the fight against desertification and thus bring it closer to the Millenium Goals ?

or should we limit the fight against desertification to controlling land degradation with the hope of achieving more global mobilization but with the risk of forgetting a little bit more the tragic character of the situation of dryland communities?

(iii) how do civil society organisations envisage the division of their role between the will to weigh on the decisions, notably international ones, and the investment which that represents in terms of policy monitoring, lobbying or even collective negotiation capability , and their more traditional actions in the field which enable them to stay in contact with the users of dryland areas and appear as the legitimat representatives of their demands?

#### *The salient points of the Montpellier declaration*

- Acknowledgement that desertification obliterates the rural development of the countries affected given the scope of its economic and social cost
- The solemn of the world/global aspects of desertification
- The importance
  - Of defining priorities of the CCD
  - Of specifying an timeline of actions and results in the course of UNCCD international meetings as well as contractual commitments by the Parties, including financial commitments.
- The recognition of the legitimate role of civil society organizations in national and international décision making in the area of dryland policies.

#### *On omissions*

Despite the wealth of these contributions, substantial elements have not been developed. The issue of the future of pastoralism has not been mentioned, although 80% of dryland regions are composed of seasonal pasture lands hosting mainly pastoral communities. Transhuming is henceforth recognized as a technique which is ecologically adapted to keeping the herd and dryland regions are the major suppliers of cattle to neighboring regions.

Why is pastoralism still ignored? Why do nomadic communities, which are presently considered as on a disappearing track, remain in fact communities without rights ?

No success story showing the vitality, inventiveness and combativeness of dryland populations in the face of desertification has been told. But, on the one hand, simple and traditional CCD techniques have proven their efficiency; on the other hand, new village forms of use of the environment as the management of forest plantations for supplying cities with fuelwood henceforth limit deforestation; finally, the will to invest in small scale business actions is part and parcel of dryland communities' mentality. Why should the capacities and human potential of dryland areas be thus omitted?

The gender issue, or the role of women in the fight against desertification, has remained ignored while more and more women become heads of households in dryland areas. Problems related to inadequate provision of water in these areas have not come out although this is a basic resource both in desertification and in controlling desertification. The land ownership issue which is often a priority issue in environmental management matters, but also highly political, has not been addressed.

Finally, most often were forgotten the links between desertification, loss of biodiversity and climate change and the more institutional issue of synergies with the three AME.

## 5 - Obstacles preventing CCD from being a priority on policy agendas

Several types of obstacles explain the lack of importance granted by policy makers and the greater public to desertification:

a) the problem of comprehension and agreement on what is desertification and which comprises several levels :

- Many people believe that desertification only occurs in the outskirts of deserts and as an expansion of the desert. This is often the very limited understanding by the greater public, but also by some more involved actors.
- Within development and cooperation quarters, the gap between the definition given of desertification and the diversity of policies gathered under the theme of desertification contribute to some confusion which limits or disperses action, its impact, or even legitimacy.
- Finally, the disparity of economic, political, and social situations according to continents and countries subjected to desertification makes difficult the establishment of global priorities. Thus, there is a lack of both cross-sectional and synthetic looks to even up and integrate the different forms of CCD.

b) the problem of defining the scale of comprehension of the phenomenon. The global dimension of desertification is not asserted enough as the analysis of its social and environmental impacts is little backed up: the links between desertification, conflicts and migrations remain poorly known and how to measure the global environmental impact of desertification is not known. There are no supporting arguments.

c) the lack of coordination and empowerment of CCD actors, including those from civil society to weigh on policy decisions.

d) the lack of general interest aroused by dryland areas. On the one hand the inadequate enhancement of their resources and opportunities could explain a lack of knowledge and mobilisation of the greater public. The poor translation of the stakes in these areas by the media still reinforces this fact. Taking it into account is of a lesser importance for policy makers

## 6 – Various aspects mentioned as challenges

Participants agree on the necessity to give to desertification and dryland areas the required significance they have on the policy agenda. But a few factors may limit the scope of their rethoric :

- Establishment of consensual priorities in terms of actions to be carried out is also a challenge, both because desertification depends on local contexts, and also because the actors involved have special and distinct fields of action. For this reason, it could be useful to make an inventory of the diversity of situations alluded to in relation with the actions considered as priorities in the course of the workshop.
- Coordination and synergy among actors involved in the fight against desertification are in fact difficult to achieve for many reasons which could be diagnosed and listed in the course of the workshop proceedings : problem of mutual knowledge, language and training, temporality, immediate and sometimes conflicting interests, competition, etc.

## 7 – Discussion items for the workshop

- Make clear what is meant by desertification and combating desertification, emphasizing that the phenomenon is different according to the local contexts and factors.
- Pool together knowledge on the global aspects of desertification, notably from issues of migration, conflicts and their impacts, but also relatively to environmental aspects, eventually the issue of water resources and the other multilateral agreements on the environment.
- See to what extent and on what grounds to use the economic argument of the costs of desertification and the sound returns on investments of CCD operations through success stories to convince donors of putting desertification on the priority of their agenda.
- Establish the foundations of a possible coordination between the various actors involved, to weigh on policy decisions, from the local to the global levels.
- Reflect on making CCD meetings more effective and operational for civil society organizations.

Lauren Navile (DCG), Mélanie Requier Desjardins (CSFD), Patrice Burger (CARI)

### **Information et secrétariat de coordination**

[www.desertif-actions.org](http://www.desertif-actions.org) - [info@desertif-actions.org](mailto:info@desertif-actions.org)

Adresse : Désertif'Actions - CARI – Rue du Courreau - F34380 – Viols le Fort - France

Tél. : + 33 4 67 55 61 18 - Fax : + 33 4 67 55 74 37