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and implement national, regional and local action plans.

No less than thirty national action plans were prepared and submitted to the Convention Secretariat by African countries between 2000 and 2004. They undertook this laborious process with enthusiasm. And they did so in the spirit of the Convention which is based on such innovative principles as a continuing effort to increase the participation of civil society stakeholders in decision-making and planning, and better interaction between policy sectors. There has clearly been much common ground and a high level of participation.

Strategic plan

This is possibly the first time in some countries that a process dealing with the environment has brought together such a diverse group of stakeholders and permitted political dialogue at such a high level. During last October's Conference of the Parties of the Convention, in Nairobi, there were significant advances in, for example, improving synergies between it and the climate and biodiversity conventions. New initiatives were adopted such as the strategic plan for long-term measures to fight desertification, TerrAfrique. And progress was made in financing them through a Memorandum of Understanding with the Global Environment Facility (GEF).

Financial support

But these advances should not disguise deficiencies which affect the feasibility of devising and implementing the programmes to fight desertification, as well as their effectiveness and impact. There is a big gap between the scale of the problem of land degradation and the limited initiatives so far undertaken. Few of anti-desertification programmes, particularly in Africa, have received sufficient financial support, despite the achievements of the Global Environment Facility and of some bilateral and multilateral agencies, and the mobilisation of civil society stakeholders. This sorry state of affairs is particularly acute in countries that face falling revenues from agriculture and animal husbandry, which in turn result in food insecurity and the conflicts over the control of natural resources. ▶

Need

a Fresh New Start

MASSE LO and **OUSSOUBY TOURE** challenge the international community to put its weight behind the fight against desertification as part of the assault on poverty

Compared with other international conventions, such as those on climate or biodiversity, the Convention to Combat Desertification has received little political support from the international community. This is a disgrace.

This multilateral agreement is, after all, a real social project – “a Convention for life” in the words of one participant. It calls for greater democratization and pluralism and creates conditions for a better participation by citizens and civil society in the development

of their country. And it even allows us to ‘fight’ immigration caused by desertification, the immigration so acutely felt and feared by the ‘Western’ public. Why, then, has it generated so little international public attention, and attracted so little funding?

The decision to designate 2006 as the International Year of Deserts and Desertification (IYDD) was taken ten years after the Convention was ratified and came into force. During that decade the countries most subject to land degradation have been forced to devise

The Convention stands for profound change in implementing development and cooperation policies. It is, indeed, a true development convention, relying on:

- Understanding the basic needs of local communities for education, access to clean drinking water, energy, and sanitation, etc.;
- Applying political and institutional pressure to reinforce the process of decentralization in managing natural resources;
- Widening the field of discussion to include non-governmental organizations, local communities, women's movements, youth, and other social groups who are often marginalized – demonstrating a dedication to democratic governance;
- Creating conditions that help to generate adequate revenue, allow local communities to improve their quality of life, and promote a policy of peace – all indispensable in driving sustainable development.

For all these reasons, it is no exaggeration to affirm that:

- Initiatives to combat poverty and its consequences (such as migration and conflict over the control of resources) which have led – under the aegis of the World Bank – to defining national strategies, are synonymous with combatting desertification;
- Action plans to combat desertification, within the spirit of the Convention, can help to make the Millennium Development Goals more concrete: as Klaus Toepfer, until recently UNEP's Executive Director, says: "Combatting desertification is crucial to the concretisation of the MDGs".
- Implementing action plans to combat desertification should favour more democratic governance and the principles of transparency and accountability.
- Combatting desertification means mitigating the effects of migration, caused by deteriorating conditions in dryland areas. Falling agricultural yields in areas affected by land degradation are the main cause of migration.

The International Year offers a new opportunity to kick-start the process of implementing the tools in the action plans to combat desertification at national, regional and local levels.

More money must be allocated, and the action plans must be better integrated with macro-economic policies to

overcome the constraints that inhibit the full functioning of the Convention, and to take advantage of all its opportunities. The new resources might take the form of 'new and additional resources', of public development aid, or of debt cancellation. What is important is that the Convention should be given enough to fulfill its vision.

Initiatives to forge new paths and formulate new objectives must be launched during the International Year. These could, among other issues, include increasing knowledge about desertification, its causes and consequences, especially in Northern countries, and highlight the relationship between desertification such other issues as food insecurity, poverty, etc.. Specific objectives that should be envisaged include:

- Mobilizing the largest Northern NGOs – the so-called 'Seven Sisters' – in the fight against desertification.
- Securing the international community's understanding that combatting desertification, attaining the MDGs, and the fight against migration and population fluctuations are all directly linked.
- Approaching (again) bilateral and multilateral development agencies and representatives of the G8 to persuade them to place the Convention at the top of their agendas.
- Finally creating the conditions to put in place an effective long-term

strategic plan for implementing the Convention.

Last year's World Summit appealed for more pronounced support to implement the Convention, leading to hopes that the last Conference of the Parties would be a turning point for the international community in considering desertification more closely. It seemed that it had come to understand the Millennium Development Goals cannot be achieved without addressing the root causes of poverty in rural areas, which are inextricably linked to soil degradation and the resulting loss of agricultural revenue.

The Conference of the Parties, however, ended on a rather more discordant note, with the Northern countries calling for 'reforms' and the Southern ones trying to convince their partners that the fight against desertification is crucial, because of its links to the fight against poverty.

We must remain hopeful that 2006, the International Year of Deserts and Desertification will yet mean a new beginning. And that, this time, it will be a good one ■

Masse Lo, a former Coordinator of the African and World NGOs Network in Desertification, is Regional Programme Director of LEAD Francophone Africa. Oussouby Toure is a sociologist, environmentalist and international consultant.



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