

UNITED NATIONS



NATIONS UNIES

Statement by
MR. SHA ZUKANG
UNDER-SECRETARY-GENERAL FOR ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS
TO THE OPENING OF THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON
COMBATING DESERTIFICATION
Beijing, 22 January 2008

Vice Premier Hui,
Minister Jia,
Minister Nhema,
Distinguished Delegates,
Colleagues,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of the United Nations, I would like to join the host Government in extending a warm welcome to all participants.

Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon attaches great importance to this event and the issues being addressed here. He has requested me to deliver his message to the Conference. I quote:

[Desertification and land degradation are a complex challenge with long-term social, economic and environmental implications. Some two billion people in the world today depend on the fragile ecosystems in arid and semi-arid areas. Ninety per cent of them live in the developing world, where increasing ecological stresses

caused by desertification are threatening livelihoods. Small-scale farmers are particularly hard hit.

The impact of desertification is intensifying due to climate change, which is reducing the availability of freshwater, fertile soil, and forest and vegetation. As the degraded land loses value, investments in agriculture and rural development decline even more. This only worsens rural poverty and hampers sustainable development, setting us back in our efforts to reach the Millennium Development Goals.

With this in mind, we must combat desertification as an environmental and developmental imperative.

We can take inspiration from local farmers who are more aware than anyone of this critical challenge, and are relying on their ingenuity and determination to respond.

Governments must play their part by integrating policies to combat desertification into national sustainable development strategies, and by providing incentives to attract investment to areas affected by desertification.

Promoting market access for farmers in these areas is crucial to their long-term prosperity. So is providing them with capacity building so they can adopt new technologies and sustainable farming practices. These support measures will be all the more effective when carried out through international cooperation as well as public and private partnerships.

The International Conference taking place today in Beijing offers a timely opportunity for combating climate change and achieving sustainable development in areas affected by land degradation.

At the same time, the potential of sustainable land management must be taken into full account during the upcoming negotiations on emissions reduction commitments under a successor to the Kyoto Protocol to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.

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.

I congratulate the Government of the People's Republic of China for convening this Conference and send my best wishes to all participants. Working together, we can make headway in the global struggle against desertification and land degradation.]

This concludes the Secretary-General's message.

* * *

Distinguished Delegates,

The Secretary-General makes clear that combating desertification must be a key component of the global development agenda.

As Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs, I have sought to raise global awareness of the serious sustainable development challenges facing local communities living in areas affected by land degradation.

Soil erosion, decreasing water supplies, and loss of forest and vegetation cover are serious enough. They are among the environmental factors leading to land degradation and desertification. Yet, local populations also have to contend with socio-economic hurdles - poor infrastructure, lack of market access, and lack of investment.

They are lagging behind in meeting the MDGs and other internationally agreed development goals.

Consider this: of the countries ranked "low" on the human development index, the great majority are suffering from drought and desertification. The average infant mortality rate for these countries is 10 times higher when compared

with the average infant mortality rate in developed countries. Their per capita income is also among the lowest in the world.

We cannot allow this scourge to continue, afflicting millions of people. We have a historical responsibility to act, and to act quickly, in partnership.

We act in partnership, because benefits from combating desertification are global, through afforestation and reforestation, re-vegetation, increased soil carbon capture, water and soil conservation, biodiversity preservation, and environmental protection. Only by acting in partnership can we achieve synergetic results of all three Rio Conventions –the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, Convention on Biological Diversity and UN Convention to Combat Desertification.

In addressing drought and desertification, we need to keep these broad dimensions in mind – to tackle environmental and ecological causes in an integrated and balanced manner, as well as social, economic and institutional barriers to action.

I encourage participants to examine the linkages among these dimensions, looking especially for any strategic opportunities.

Many of you are decision-makers and practitioners. Together with local communities, you are on the frontline in the fight against land degradation and desertification. We value your experiences and insights. This Conference provides a timely platform for exchanging lessons learned and best practices.

The Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), UNCCD, and other UN organizations have played a catalytic role in helping organize this event. Yet, this is your Conference. Its outcome will reflect your experiences and lessons learned. Equally important, it will be you who will take these lessons and put them into practice, making manifest the global commitment to sustainable development for all.

I look forward to your active contribution and wish you all a pleasant stay in Beijing.

Thank you.

* * * * *