

16 Session of the Commission on Sustainable Development Rio Group remarks on “Desertification”

May 7th, 2008

I have the honor to speak on behalf of the 21 Latin American and Caribbean countries that are part of the Rio Group, on the issue of “desertification”.

When we think on Latin America, generally we visualize a vast territory covered with dense tropical forests and infinite plentiful rivers. Regrettably, this picture is not fully valid.

Desertification affects a quarter of our region, that is, 5 million square kilometers. Our countries host the quarter part of all the desert and arid lands of the planet. These zones are present in all Latin America, including in many Caribbean countries. The Atacama Desert, in the west part of South America, is the most arid region of the planet.

15.7% of the soil in our region is degraded; that is equivalent to 3.1 million square kilometers. Huge land extensions are in the process of being transformed into deserts. This problem is even worse in Mesoamerica, where affects 26% of its territory, while in South America affects 14%.

Desertification is caused by many factors: deforestation, excessive use of lands for cattle grazing, erosion of the soil and inadequate irrigation, among others. The consequences of desertification had increased the effects of the natural catastrophes in our countries.

It is estimated that the impacts of climate change will increase the number and intensity of extreme weather events in our region, such as rainfalls, drought, hurricanes, and inundations.

In turn, this will increase the rate of desertification, causing an increase in poverty and migration, creating potential threats for food safety in our region, and loss of natural resources.

In light of the above, the Rio Group proposes the following measures aimed to mitigate desertification:

1. Adoption of concrete measures, through innovative programs at local, national, subregional and regional level, allowing an enhanced coordination in the design of policies regarding the use and exploitation of soil, which should be integrated into national action plans and be oriented to the quick recovery of soils for production. This should allow to the countries to reverse the lack of employment, which could have influence for people migrating from rural to urban areas, looking to safeguard its survival, trend that accentuates poverty and economic and social instability.
2. Development, dissemination and transfer of new technologies, suitable to face desertification and soil degradation efficiently. For this, it is necessary resources to have access to the technological and scientific means that allow the prompt adoption of early warning measures. Remote sensing allows improving the surveillance and mapping of the desertification processes, facilitating a more comprehensive analysis, and increasing the chances of detecting desertification trends. Having the regional information systems and weather sensing, will allow the analysis of the current conditions for a better decision making.
3. Capacity-building for communities to strengthen, with proper techniques that meet local needs, its fight against desertification and land degradation.
4. Access to financial schemes, promoting the development of industry at the local and regional levels, in order to mitigate and reverse desertification.
5. Development of techniques to avoid water shortage in irrigated areas, for example, through cisterns, wells and underground tanks. Additionally, evaluate when it is convenient to implement irrigation projects, since the excessive use of it can seriously affect land use.
6. Give priority to restoration of lands in process of desertification, in medium and extreme grades, which will result in an increased cost-benefit from the investment made in its restoration.
7. Finally, the review of the issue of desertification should be done having in consideration the measures arising from the Ten-Year Strategic Plan adopted by the Eighth Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification, as well as from the modernization and efficiency policies of the Convention activities, driven by its Executive Secretariat.

I thank you.