

Workers and Trade Unions Major Group

UN Commission on Sustainable Development
Thematic Discussion: Drought and Desertification
Intervention for May 8th, Morning Session

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Good Morning, Thank you for allowing me to speak on behalf of Workers and Trade Unions. I would also like to thank the panel for your presentations.

In rural areas drought and land degradation generate huge amounts of stress on poor households, increasing malnutrition, child mortality, aggravating unemployment, spurring migration, and endangering rural economies.

Rural communities and workers suffer the most from these factors and therefore are also the most receptive to change. We must invest in them through education, job training and building infrastructure and government sponsored public works programs that create a sustainable workforce and environment.

Trade unions are not usually considered as solutions to environmental problems. But Unions have a long history fighting common foes. Subsistence wages and crushing poverty leads to the desperate overuse of arable land. The same pollutants that Unions fight in the workplace are poisoning our air and waterways. By protecting the rights of rural workers, by generating higher wages, providing job training and job security and by giving access to basic health services, we can reverse the current cycles of environmental degradation. And we can save the community at greatest risk to these disasters.

Therefore, Governments should enforce the ILO's concept of 'decent work,' which includes respect of rights at work, secure and safe employment, social protection and social dialogue. Ensuring the rights of workers to organize, so that they can sustain themselves, their communities and culture.

We must also consider the relationship between the exploitation of labor and exploitation of land. International trade policies should move from the promotion of export crops that deplete soil resources, food security and depend on cheap labor to policies that allow governments to promote sustainable work conditions and agricultural practices.

International deregulation encouraged countries to dismantle government-run grain buffer stocks. They could have played a vital role in alleviating current food shortages and if re-implemented can be a safe guard for rural communities in times of drought.

A planned transition is required to protect workers in environmentally-vulnerable sectors, such as agriculture. 'Just transition' measures must protect workers from loss of employment or livelihood due to environmental stresses or due to sustainability measures in response to these. Adaptation of agriculture to altered weather patterns, economic diversification, and skills development are essential.

In conclusion, sustainable rural development offers the opportunity to commit to new paths for economic development that put people at the center and is respectful of workers rights and the environment. There are institutional, financial, human and technological challenges that need to be addressed for achieving a more sustainable land management. Workers and their organizations are valid partners in the transition towards secure and sustainable environment.