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Contribution to the 2018 High Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development
Submission from the UNCCD

1. An assessment of the situation regarding the principle of “ensuring that no one is left behind” at the global level

The current pressures on land resources are huge and expected to continue growing: there is rapidly escalating competition between the demand for land functions that provide food, water, and energy, and those services that support and regulate all life cycles on Earth. A significant proportion of managed and natural land-based ecosystems are experiencing degradation. Over the last two decades, approximately 20-30% of the Earth’s vegetated surface shows persistent declining trends in productivity, mainly as a result of land and water use and management practices.

Biodiversity loss and climate change further jeopardize the future health and productivity of land: higher carbon emissions and temperatures, changing rainfall patterns, soil erosion, species loss and increased water scarcity will likely alter the suitability of vast regions for food production and human habitation. Land degradation decreases resilience to environmental stresses. Increased vulnerability, especially of the poor, women and children, can intensify competition for scarce natural resources and result in migration, instability and conflict.

Over 1.3 billion people are trapped on degrading agricultural land: farmers on marginal land, especially in the drylands, have limited options for alternative livelihoods and are often excluded from the wider infrastructure and economic development of a nation. The scale of rural transformation in recent decades has been unprecedented. Millions of people have abandoned their ancestral lands and migrated to urban areas, often impoverishing cultural identity, abandoning traditional knowledge, and permanently altering landscapes.

To ensure that no one is left behind, healthy and productive land must be recognized as one of the most important linchpins of our society. It is the central cohesive element for the maintenance of all life. Globally, the fruits of the land comprise 80% of our diet and millions rely directly on agriculture for their survival, livelihoods and security. Forests - trees on the land - account for 30% of the Earth’s surface, providing vital benefits for people and essential habitat for many other species.

A transformative vision for how we manage and protect our land resources must be a high priority if we hope to make a transition to a more sustainable and resilient society. This, of course, is strongly reflected in Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 15 which states: *“Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss”*.

2. The identification of gaps, areas requiring urgent attention, risks and challenges

SDG target 15.3 puts forward the ambition of achieving Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN), which aims for no net loss through a balance between three processes: degradation, rehabilitation/restoration and sustainable management. Given that over 40% of the world’s poor rely on degraded lands for essential services (e.g., food, fuel, raw material and water purification),



restoring their productive capacity will significantly reduce the economic vulnerability of the poorest and help promote long-term development for all.

The successful implementation of target 15.3 to achieve LDN can connect the dots between many of the SDGs and their targets. By safeguarding *Life on Land*, we deliver for all life on Earth and establish the basis for communities – all citizens - everywhere to not just survive but thrive by building a future protecting this essential foundation. The sustainable management and restoration of our landscapes – the main pillars for achieving LDN - will deliver many co-benefits, from biodiversity conservation and combating climate change to ensuring economic growth and human wellbeing. How we manage the land is closely linked to how many decent jobs we can create; to food and water security; migration and urbanization trends; real climate change mitigation and adaptation action; responsible consumption and resource conflicts.

Healthy land-based ecosystems contribute significantly to the delivery of many SDG targets and would act as an accelerator for SDG implementation across the board. This has been affirmed by the UN General Assembly in resolutions 71/229 and 72/220, where it recognized that upscaling the sustainable management of our land and water resources is a precondition for the achievement of almost all of the SDGs. Specifically, resolution 71/229 notes that *“the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals and targets, including Goal 15 and target 15.3, would serve as an accelerator to ending poverty and hunger, tackling inequality, empowering women and stimulating economic growth”*. It also *“reiterates that degraded land, if recovered, would, inter alia, contribute to restoring natural resources, thus potentially improving food security and nutrition in the affected countries, and in the process could, inter alia, contribute to the absorption of carbon emissions”*.

Life on Land requires urgent attention and needs to be prioritized at all levels.

The lack of secure tenure often inhibits smallholder farmers from adopting sustainable management practices and investing in the long-term health of the land. Many developing countries are confronted with the linked challenges of persistent poverty, unemployment and population growth while the natural resource base is being depleted and degraded, resulting in desertification, soil erosion and water scarcity. The mismanagement and over-exploitation of land and water resources often leads to serious disruptions in social and economic activity in the land-based sectors, exacerbating joblessness and contributing to famine and drought, forced migration, poverty and conflict.

Women are strategic agents of change and play a central role in the protection and restoration of land resources in order to provide for household needs, including food, water and energy. Yet most women neither own nor have control over these resources; globally, less than 20% of land holders are women and only 13% of the land users who make the major decisions on agricultural land are women. The purpose of the UNCCD’s new gender action plan is to make the implementation of the Convention and the UNCCD 2018-2030 Strategic Framework gender-responsive and transformative, and thus more effective, efficient and successful, by providing guidance to Parties and other actors on policies and measures to mainstream gender in land policies as well as achieve gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls.

Another serious and growing challenge is drought and water scarcity. Droughts and falling productivity reduce agricultural incomes, accelerate migration pressures and can trigger resource



conflict with significant secondary impacts in the energy, transportation, health, and other sectors. Droughts cost billions of dollars to the global economy with many people having to migrate for work and better economic opportunities. The world's drylands, in particular, are affected by both water scarcity and land degradation. The UNCCD's new drought initiative is building capacity in affected countries to develop national drought plans that enhance resilience and mitigate drought risks based on three important pillars of implementation: (1) drought monitoring and early warning systems, (2) vulnerability and risk assessment, and (3) drought risk mitigation measures.

3. Valuable lessons learned on transformation towards sustainable and resilient societies

Sustainable development requires integrated approaches to food, feed, fiber and fuel production applied at a much greater scale than today. As a globally agreed target, the LDN target can be used to galvanize action to address land degradation in all terrestrial ecosystems across entire landscapes. An estimated two billion hectares of degraded land are available to kick-start a real green economy, creating multiplier effects for reducing poverty, hunger and water scarcity as well as increasing employment, food security and economic growth.

We need to catalyze a shift from the current “age of plunder” toward an “age of respect” for biophysical limits. This new age would require a transformation in the way we consume, produce, work, and live together to address major pressures on land resources and associated environmental issues. The condition of our land resources is closely bound up with all aspects of human security now and into the future. It is clear that the next few decades will be the most critical in shaping and implementing a new and transformative global land agenda. In much of the developing world, achieving more secure rights in terms of tenure, gender equity, and social justice, will be an essential step to improving the long-term stewardship of land resources.

One example how the LDN target can be put into practice is the African-led Triple S (3S) Initiative on Security, Stability and Sustainably in Africa. The initiative seeks to ensure policy coherence by shaping an integrated approach to simultaneously address the range of issues that are poised to cause profound changes in the African continent in the decades to come. Its focus is on the restoration of 10 million hectares of degraded land and granting secure tenure by 2020, with the aim of creating 2 million green jobs for young people, women and return migrants. This land-based, jobs approach constitutes an effective solution that provides unemployed youth with an income and a sense of purpose and helps returning migrants with reintegration.

The Parties to the UNCCD, in their last review process (2016/2017), highlighted that the lack of functional monitoring systems at the national level is still considered a limiting factor that prevents the necessary assessment of land degradation processes, and hence restricts investment and the effective implementation of large-scale projects and programmes. Over the last two years, UNCCD capacity building efforts have focused on assisting countries with practical toolkits as well as a reporting platform for planning, implementing, and reporting. The current reporting cycle (2018) is now aligned with the SDG indicator framework and, as a result of the UNCCD's data and indicator outreach, demonstrates the capacity of many countries, for the first time, to assess land degradation hotspots and regularly monitor their activities to reverse the negative trends in land productivity.

To achieve the target of land degradation neutrality (SDG target 15.3) by 2030, large amounts of financial resources would also need to be mobilized. Public resources alone will not suffice, as



acknowledged in the Addis Ababa Action Agenda. New financial instruments and intermediaries, as well as enabling conditions, are needed to catalyze private capital around SDG implementation.

At COP 13, the UNCCD launched the LDN Fund, an impact investment fund bringing together several institutions committed to addressing the global issue of land degradation. The LDN Fund is a layered fund, designed as a public-private partnership for blended finance. It will complement and scale up existing financial instruments and funds for sustainable land management and rehabilitation by providing financing that would not otherwise be available in the market. The LDN Fund will invest in bankable projects on land rehabilitation and sustainable land management worldwide, including sustainable agriculture, sustainable livestock management, agro-forestry, sustainable forestry, renewable energy, infrastructure development, and eco-tourism, which generate environmental and socio-economic benefits. In addition to restoring degraded lands, it would generate revenues from sustainable use of natural resources, creating green job opportunities for local communities, increasing food and water security, and sequestering carbon.

4. Emerging issues likely to affect building sustainable and resilient societies

The current mass extinction of flora and fauna, including the loss of crop wild relatives and keystone species that hold ecosystems together further jeopardizes resilience and adaptive capacity, particularly for the rural poor who depend most on the land for their basic needs and livelihoods. Higher temperatures, changing rainfall patterns, and increased water scarcity due to climate change will alter the suitability of vast regions for food production and human habitation.

Our food system has rewarded short-term production and profit rather than long-term environmental sustainability. The modern agricultural system has resulted in huge increases in productivity, holding off the risk of famine in many parts of the world but, at the same time, is based on monocultures, genetically modified crops, and the intensive use of fertilizers and pesticides that undermine long-term sustainability. Food production accounts for 70% of all freshwater withdrawals and 80% of deforestation, while soil, the basis for global food security, is being contaminated, degraded, and eroded in many areas, resulting in long-term declines in productivity.

The widening gulf between production and consumption, and ensuing levels of food loss/waste, further accelerates the rate of land use change, land degradation and deforestation. The rapid expansion of global value chains and associated trade in land commodities (and their “virtual” components) has shifted many natural resource pressures from the developed to developing countries, where the direct effects of land degradation are unevenly distributed, especially when there is excessive speculation and/or weak governance. In order to hedge against future food insecurity and price volatility, large-scale land acquisitions or “land grabs” have increased dramatically since the year 2000, covering more than 42 million hectares dedicated to food, timber, and biofuel crops, primarily in Africa. About 25% of global cropland area, and its associated use of water and other inputs, now produces commodities that are exported to land-poor but cash-rich countries.

Small-scale farmers, the backbone of rural livelihoods and food production for millennia, are under immense strain from land degradation, insecure tenure, and a globalized food system that favors concentrated, large-scale, and highly mechanized agribusiness. These farmers often have limited options to pursue alternative livelihoods. If small-scale agriculture and family farming is to



survive, it will need positive recognition and support through government policies, informed consumer choices, and targeted investments in a variety of extension services, including access to markets and credit.

Land use planning and investment that recognizes rural-urban dependencies is one central emerging area where political commitment and guidance is required. The urban footprint extends far beyond their boundaries due to the demand for food and water as well as transport and energy infrastructure. If current projections are accurate, 66% of the world's population will be living in cities by the year 2050. This is having negative impacts on the environment and increasing pressure on limited land resources. Furthermore, future urban expansion is likely to result in the loss of some of our more productive croplands, much of which is twice as productive as national averages.

5. Areas where political guidance by the high-level political forum is required

While the SDG agenda is global, national ownership is critical in order to support practical solutions at the local and landscape-scale. It is at this scale that natural resources and ecosystem services are best managed and that people live their daily lives. Sustainable land management, rehabilitation and restoration activities can often provide immediate, cost-effective benefits across the board. In the long-term, the benefits of action will considerably outweigh the costs to society.

The multi-dimensional scale and aspects of land use and management call for more coordination and better cooperation in planning and decision-making. Government agencies need to work together with a common vision promoting multi-functional landscapes, especially those responsible for agriculture, livestock, forestry, land and water resources, environment, science and technology, finance, planning, legislation and tourism. This must include the coordination and harmonization of sustainable land management objectives and initiatives through mainstreaming within national budgets, poverty reduction, rural development and internal migration strategies as well as development plans and frameworks.

Scaling up efforts to restore and manage our land resources more sustainably will also require dedicated financing and other enabling policies and incentives. The current level of investment from national governments and international community, including the private sector and donors, has been limited in scale and scope compared to the severity and extent of desertification, land degradation and drought. While some essential policies and regulations exist, their implementation and enforcement on the ground at the local level remains weak.

6. Policy recommendations on ways to accelerate progress in establishing sustainable and resilient societies

The next few decades will be the most critical in shaping and implementing a new and transformative global land agenda. Bold decisions and investments made today will determine the quality of *Life on Land* tomorrow. In much of the developing world, achieving more secure rights in terms of tenure, gender equity, and social justice, will be an essential step to improving the long-term stewardship of land resources.

The UNCCD strongly advocates for bold new solutions to protect and restore our land resources for current and future generations: a new land agenda where rights (e.g., secure tenure, gender



equity), rewards (e.g., incentives, compensation) and responsibilities (e.g., regulation, stewardship, consumer choice) are fundamental for improving land and water management to secure the societal benefits needed to establish sustainable and resilient societies.

Structured processes and capacity building initiatives should be taken advantage of, such as the UNCCD's land degradation neutrality (LDN) target-setting programme which fosters national ownership and brings together multiple sectors and stakeholders to better understand and negotiate trade-offs. As of June 2018, 115 countries have committed to setting LDN targets with more than 60 countries that have already set their targets and begun implementation activities. An LDN implementation support programme is now being established to support action at country level, including assistance in the development of transformative LDN projects and programmes.

Policy and regulatory instruments that underpin a more sustainable and resilient land agenda are well-known and immediately actionable. These include many within a multifunctional landscape approach which prioritizes and balances different stakeholder needs at a landscape scale while incorporating site-level specificity on land use, demand and condition so that a full range of goods and services are produced. With forward-looking policies, tailored finance and incentives, and strong political will and ambition, the potential and competitive advantages within the land use sector can be fully exploited.

Implementing land use planning at broader scales helps identify those land uses that best meet the demands of people while safeguarding soil, water, and biodiversity for future generations. Sustainable cities depend on the rural areas for the delivery of food, water, energy and other essential services. Maintaining this healthy link between rural and urban areas will require targeted policy instruments that shift agriculture practices to support a wider array of social, environmental, and economic benefits that also address the current inequities of the rural-urban divide and the root causes of migration and instability.

National governments can formulate and mainstream land use and management policy interventions in line with the principles and framework of LDN, i.e., no net loss of healthy and productive land. This framework affords the ability to create links to national priorities and objectives on jobs, rural incomes, access to water and energy, climate change adaptation and pollution reduction. It can be readily supported by the enforcement of the existing rules or new regulations in the areas of spatial planning, land tenure and gender equity.

We already have proven technologies and good practices in both the public and private domains that contribute to a more stable and resilient land use sector. It is just a matter of scaling them up and out with supportive institutional and administrative mechanisms at the local level that accelerate their implementation. That said, we cannot rely solely on government policies and programmes to ensure progress. The private sector is increasingly recognizing its role and responsibility to undertake actions that contribute to the SDGs, including the impact of its value chains on land use and management. Indeed, businesses now face the same level of expectations as national governments to lead on the SDG agenda.

Consider prioritizing investments in sustainable land and water management and removing subsidies and disincentives that limit its uptake. While enacting bold but smart policies that will scale up sustainable land and water management practices and protect land functioning and rural



livelihoods is obvious and necessary, in many cases direct budget outlays are still needed. Many land-based practices can help communities and countries adapt to the impacts of climate change and halt biodiversity loss. Creating and strengthening synergies among the three Rio Conventions and other relevant agreements would lower the transaction cost while simultaneously supporting results-based land management practices on the ground.

An increase in government and private sector investment would open access to global funds, such as the GEF, GCF, LDN Fund and others, and help create new pathways for generating social, ecological and financial wealth, essentially decoupling economic growth from land degradation and the old destructive modes of natural resource extraction. As the world moves from a voluntary, philanthropic-driven conservation model to one that is more pragmatic and market-driven, these global funds can play an important role in establishing public-private partnerships that finance land stewardship, economic growth and sustainability at the same time.

For a more detailed discussion, please see the UNCCD (2017) Global Land Outlook, 1st edition. Bonn, Germany. www.unccd.int/glo