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Contribution to the 2021 High Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development Submission of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD)

(a) Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the implementation of the SDGs under review in the 2021 HLPF from the vantage point of your intergovernmental body, bearing in mind the interlinkages with other SDGs;

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted all countries. While all livelihoods and sectors are in some way impacted, the crisis has necessarily involved restrictions and the curtailment of economic activities in the land-based production sector. The pandemic again brings to light the very intimate relationship between human health, desertification, land degradation and drought. Land use change and ecosystem degradation played a significant role in the creation of the pandemic.

Most zoonotic pandemics result from a collision course between wildlife and humans. The more we encroach on their habitat, the more we are exposed to zoonotic diseases. In this respect, the UN General Assembly (UNGA), in its resolution 75/218, affirmed that combating desertification, land degradation and drought, and the achievement of land degradation neutrality, have emerged as a pathway to accelerate progress toward achieving the Sustainable Development Goals as well as contribute to safeguarding livelihoods. In the same resolution, the UNGA also recognized that combating desertification, land degradation and drought was important to our efforts in building back better after the COVID-19 pandemic as well as contribute to preventing and preparing for future pandemics.

Beyond the devastating public health crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic has evolved into a complex emergency with significant humanitarian, socio-economic, political and security dimensions. It has laid bare the vulnerability of both our human and natural systems, which were already threatened by climate change, land degradation, and biodiversity loss.

The land-based sectors have and will continue to experience adverse economic consequences due to job losses, market declines, food supply disruptions, and tenure insecurity. Recession and the contraction of per capita income is taking place in more countries simultaneously than at any other point since 1870, with socio-economic inequalities becoming more and more pronounced. (SDG 8) The pandemic poses a real challenge to the global goal of ending poverty by 2030 (SDG 1), which is now projected to increase for the first time since 1990.

The poor and marginalized communities, without any support or safety net, are most vulnerable, with the number suffering from hunger easily doubling over the next few years. (SDG 2) The agricultural labor force is also feeling the strain of the lockdown response to the pandemic, with almost 1.6 billion informal economy workers were significantly impacted at the start of the pandemic. The resilience of global systems in most sectors has taken a tremendous hit, leading to dramatic swings in commodity markets and serious food supply chain disruptions as well as a sharp contraction in remittances—the largest source of foreign exchange earnings for emerging markets and developing countries -- and reverse migration between countries and from urban to rural areas.



Livelihood impacts continue to disproportionately affect the most vulnerable and marginalized peoples as land-based production operations (e.g., agriculture, forestry, energy) are forced to reduce labor to save costs. This loss of jobs directly affects communities in rural areas with limited resources and alternative livelihood options. Moreover, those who cannot survive the loss of employment often migrate back to their hometown or regions. These areas, in turn, suffer an additional burden resulting in increased pressures on and competition for natural resources. Conversely, the sudden lack of mobility across borders and within countries has caused labor shortages in countries that are reliant on seasonal migrant workers in the agri-food sector, affecting livelihoods, food availability and prices both locally and globally.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also put a bright spotlight on the importance of tenure security and resource rights. Those with tenure or other forms of security in using and managing resources have been less affected by the pandemic. However, those who have no property rights or access to land resources, such as women and farm workers, have been more significantly impacted. While a distinct possibility, it is still unclear if a continued economic downturn will trigger widespread dispossession of land, creating social upheaval or resulting in more informal tenure arrangements and unplanned slum formations. For some rural communities living near forests, the exploitation of these resources has become one of the most accessible alternatives to provide immediate incomes and basic needs, leading to additional forest loss and degradation.

The pandemic's socio-economic and environmental impact on the land-based sectors will take a long time to fully realize, but we can predict from current trends that there will be increased pressures on forest and land resources in some areas. As with those lacking secure tenure, people living in conflict zones, refugee camps and informal settlements will continue to be most vulnerable. In developing countries, many land agencies have stopped receiving receive donor aid for the development and maintenance of land administration, resettlement, return migration and job creation schemes. In addition, the tourism sector has been one of the hardest hit by the COVID-19 crisis, including wildlife tourism and eco-tourism where local communities depend on this income to manage parks and conserve biodiversity that benefits all of us.

(b) Actions, policy guidance, progress, challenges and areas requiring urgent attention in relation to the SDGs and to the theme within the area under the purview of your intergovernmental body;

Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) target 15.3 states: “By 2030, combat desertification, restore degraded land and soil, including land affected by desertification, drought and floods, and strive to achieve a land degradation-neutral world.” At the twelfth session of the Conference of Parties of the UNCCD held in October 2015 in Ankara, Turkey, country Parties reached a breakthrough agreement to endorse the vision of Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN) and explicitly link the implementation of the Convention to the SDGs in general and SDG target 15.3 in particular.

SDG target 15.3 has become a strong vehicle for driving UNCCD implementation, while at the same time contributing to the achievement of multiple SDGs, including those related to climate change mitigation and adaptation, biodiversity conservation, food and water security, disaster risk reduction, and poverty reduction. National LDN targets are expected to address SDG target 15.3 and many other SDGs in a synergistic and cost-effective manner, and in accordance with countries’ specific national contexts and development priorities, including strengthening the implementation of the UNCCD National Action Programmes.



Through the LDN Target Setting Programme, the Global Mechanism (GM) and the secretariat of the UNCCD, in collaboration with multiple international partners, are supporting interested countries with their national LDN target setting process, including setting national baselines, targets and associated measures to achieve LDN. To date, over 120 countries have committed to setting LDN targets. More than 80 countries – over two thirds – have already set their targets, and many have secured high-level government commitment to achieve LDN.

In resolution 75/218, the General Assembly has agreed that LDN also serves as accelerator to achieve other SDGs, particularly those on poverty, food and water security, environmental protection, and climate change. In response, the UNCCD is now supporting countries to act on their national LDN targets and develop transformative projects and programmes that deliver multiple benefits, enhance national capacities and leverage innovative finance by tapping into multiple sources of finance, both public and private.

Significant capacity building at the national level will be required to support country-level project developers and their partners in the design of effective LDN transformative projects and programmes. To overcome this challenge, the GM in collaboration with the UNCCD secretariat and the Science-Policy Interface of the UNCCD has developed a voluntary checklist for developing and financing LDN transformative projects and programmes. The essential elements of the checklist¹ are:

1. Ensuring transformation and innovation by translating the LDN Scientific Conceptual Framework into practice, including the LDN response hierarchy (avoid, reduce and reverse land degradation) and the principle of counterbalancing (losses are balanced by gains in land-based natural capital);
2. Promoting responsible and inclusive governance, including gender equality, inclusiveness, accountability and transparency;
3. Ensuring sustainability, including conducive policy environment;
4. Delivering multiple environmental, economic and social benefits and enhancing (sub)national ownership and capacity; and
5. Leveraging innovative finance, especially from the private sector.

(c) An assessment of the situation regarding the principle of “ensuring that no one is left behind” at the global, regional and national levels against of background of the COVID-19 pandemic in achieving the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs, within the respective area addressed by your intergovernmental bodies;

Faced with an increasingly uncertain future, as a global community, it is crucial that we take all steps to reduce the risk of future pandemics and find ways to recover the lost resilience in our global systems. Protecting and restoring natural ecosystems is crucial for avoiding the risks of the emergence of novel infectious diseases. Moreover, land management and restoration can be one of the means to building back better. By avoiding future land and ecosystem degradation and reversing the damage of the past we can accelerate the progress on all 17 SDGs in the face of both the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change and other threats.

¹ <https://knowledge.unccd.int/knowledge-products-and-pillars/land-degradation-neutrality/ldn-tools/checklist-land-degradation>



The UNCCD calls on all stakeholders to treat land resources as a limited and precious stock of natural capital. Land degradation must be avoided, reduced, and reversed to sustain a healthy planet and to deliver opportunities and essential benefits for all people, particularly women, youth, and the rural poor, to ensure that no one is left behind. The UNCCD prioritizes human wellbeing, health, and livelihoods through efforts to combat desertification and land degradation and mitigate the effects of drought.

The UNCCD 2018-2030 Strategic Framework reaffirms this commitment, with objectives that emphasize ecosystem and community resilience, and the living conditions of affected populations. The overarching objective of the UNCCD is for people living in areas affected by desertification, land degradation and drought to create a resilient livelihood base and secure long-term benefits while enhancing the healthy functioning of ecosystems. This includes reducing the socio-economic and environmental vulnerability of affected populations, especially women and youth, to climate change, drought, and water scarcity.

The full involvement of all stakeholders, including women, children according to their evolving capacities, young people, elderly persons, persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and local communities is indispensable. Youth, as the torchbearers of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, have a pivotal role to play both as beneficiaries of actions and policies under the Convention and as partners and participants in its implementation. Land and ecosystem restoration can be an important building block to engage youth in sustainable development, delivering immediate outcomes and a longer-term sense of hope for youth at risk.

Creating opportunities for rural youth remains a particular challenge. Countries have a critical choice to make: either create employment opportunities, especially in rural areas, and reap the demographic dividends of a young vibrant workforce or face the social unrest and political instability that high rates of youth unemployment may bring. Young people can play a significant role in combating desertification and land degradation if they are able to harness the relevant knowledge, science and technology for their land restoration endeavors.

Youth-oriented programmes should be inclusive, not limited to academia or young professionals but extended to young farmers and entrepreneurs, indigenous and vulnerable groups, such as young people with disabilities. Agroecology, eco-tourism, and other innovative approaches could bring young job seekers back to their communities, giving them an opportunity to create sustainable livelihoods while addressing the impacts of land degradation, climate change, depletion of natural resources, and waste disposal. The UNCCD is working to mobilize the youth to take care of the land while creating a sustainable future for all.

The UNCCD also recognizes the importance of women in the implementation of the Convention, and identifies three critical areas for their engagement:

1. Awareness-raising, and participation in the design and implementation of programmes;
2. Decision-making processes that men and women adopt at the local level in the governance of development, implementation and review of regional and national action programmes; and
3. Capacity-building, education and public awareness, particularly at local level through the support of local organizations.



The adoption, in September 2017, of a Gender Action Plan to accompany implementation of the UNCCD 2018-2030 Strategic Framework enhances the implementation of the Convention, making it a more powerful and strategic instrument for transforming the livelihoods of millions of families.

(d) Cooperation, measures and commitments at all levels in promoting sustainable and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic;

Drought ranks among the most damaging of natural hazards resulting in short- and long-term economic and social losses to millions of people worldwide. Climate change will increase the odds of worsening drought and water scarcity in many parts of the world. A single year of drought can undermine years of development, especially for vulnerable members of society. Many countries still lack a comprehensive plan of action at the first signs of drought. Drought and water scarcity – interconnected phenomena that often aggravate each other's effects and which can trigger major setbacks for the most disadvantaged populations, from famine to migration and displacement. Water scarcity alone could cost some regions up to six percent of their GDP by 2050, in turn triggering mass migration and conflict over diminishing resources.

The UNCCD helps address these challenges through the recently launched Drought Initiative that works to enhance the resilience of communities and ecosystems to drought by helping countries develop national action plans. The goal is to promote a paradigm shift in drought management approaches, from a reactive and crisis-based one towards a proactive and risk-based one. Today over 70 countries are designing comprehensive national plans of action ready to be activated well before drought strikes. The Drought Initiative aims to support decision makers, water- and land managers by advocating for a proactive, coordinated and holistic drought risk management based on three key pillars: 1) Early warning and monitoring systems; 2) Vulnerability and impact assessment; and 3) Drought risk mitigation measures.

Healthy land is a natural storage for fresh water. If it is degraded, it cannot perform that function and loses its natural ability to absorb and store water. Water run-off is so high that, in many parts of the world, the aquifers are not being adequately replenished. Managing land better and massively scaling up land rehabilitation are essential for building drought resilience and water security. The UNCCD Science Policy Interface promotes a novel concept of Drought-smart land management (D-SLM), based on scientific evidence on the linkages between land use and drought, as well as their connection to water use. To advance this proactive approach and support implementation of the drought risk management, the UNCCD Parties decided at COP14 to establish an intergovernmental working group on effective policy and implementation measures for addressing drought.

Land restoration is the cheapest and most effective solution to improved water storage, mitigating impacts of drought and addressing biodiversity loss. On average, every \$1 spent on ecosystem restoration gives a return of around \$10 in ecosystem goods and services. Some of that is direct monetary returns, such as from sustainable wood, improved agricultural yields, and ecotourism revenues but the greater part are global common goods, such as clean air and water, pollination, pest control, nutrient recycling, carbon sequestration, fewer animal-transmitted diseases and greater resilience to extreme weather and natural disasters.

The Great Green Wall (GGW) and other land restoration commitments in the Sahel are prime examples of cooperation and finance to further long-term COVID-19 recovery efforts at the local level. The recently announced GGW Accelerator Initiative expects up to USD 20 billion of funding by



2025 from new and existing partners such as the EU and its Member States, World Bank, AFDB, EIB, GCF and IFAD. As part of this effort, the UNCCD helped trigger the new Green Climate Fund Umbrella Program (USD 1 billion) for scaling up land restoration activities in GGW countries. The GGW Accelerator program is structured around five pillars:

1. Investment in small and medium-sized farms, and strengthening of value chains
2. Land restoration and sustainable management of ecosystems
3. Climate resilient infrastructures and access to renewable energy
4. A favorable economic and institutional framework for effective governance, sustainability, stability and security
5. To build capacity to further expand resilient practices in the region.

Projects will be implemented by different partners, following agreements with recipient countries. To assist in the tracking and the overall coordination, a small GGW Accelerator Coordination Unit will be created and hosted by the Pan-African Agency of the GGW. The UNCCD will provide technical support to the Pan-African Agency during the initial phase. The first objective is to link up more effectively the already available financing sources with the available project opportunities. The second objective is to record progress and bring in new sources of funds for the GGW program.

(e) Various measures and policy recommendations on building an inclusive and effective path for the achievement of the 2030 Agenda in the context of the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development;

The greatest prospects for reversing land degradation, reducing GHG emissions and biodiversity loss lie in systematically transforming how we use and manage natural, human, and financial capital to produce food and ensure food security. The UN Secretary-General's Food Systems Summit 2021 offers a timely opportunity for countries pursuing Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN) response actions to align with the game-changing solutions, investment models, and innovative partnerships. LDN response actions focus on avoiding, reducing, and reversing land degradation – when applied in the context of food production, consumption, and supply chains will advance progress towards the wider sustainability goals of improved local livelihoods, ecosystem resilience, and climate stability

The UNCCD is the UN Anchor Agency for Action Track 3 (*Boosting Nature-Positive Food Production*) of the Food Systems Summit. The game changing solutions emerging from Action Track 3 are based on the principle that systemic change requires cross-cutting levers of policy reform, coordinated investment, accessible financing and innovation, traditional knowledge, local governance, sound data and gender equity. This integrated approach is also key to managing the impacts of climate change, reducing emissions, increasing carbon sequestration, regenerating ecosystems, protecting biodiversity, curbing food waste, and reducing energy consumption while supporting healthy and nutritious diets.

Leveraging the synergies between UNCCD stakeholders, LDN response actions and the objectives of the Food Systems Summit will increase the technical and governance capacity as well as the financial resources available to meet multiple objectives, including environmentally healthy landscapes, nature-positive food production and resilient agroecosystems. Building the capacity to deliver a suite of coherent LDN national-level response strategies, when aligned with other development priorities, will help deliver on the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration and the Decade of Action and help translate commitments into meaningful outcomes at the scale needed.



(f) Key messages for inclusion into the Ministerial Declaration of the 2021 HLPF.

Land restoration offers multiple solutions. First and foremost, it is cost-effective and socially viable way to create jobs to assist with the post-COVID economic recovery. In addition to more secure livelihoods, land restoration benefits span multiple sectors of society including risk mitigation and improved public health; greater food, water and energy security; opportunities for landscape and cultural renaissance; and above all the protection of species and ecosystem services. At larger scales, land restoration is key to enhanced resilience to future pandemics and epidemics, climate change, drought, floods, wildfires, sand and dust storms, and other disasters.

The UN General Assembly has recently reaffirmed that achieving LDN has the potential to act as an accelerator and integrator for achieving the SDGs and respond to the overall objectives of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and recognized that land-based solutions, as part of nature-based solutions, constitute promising options to evaluate and consider in connection with sequestering carbon and enhancing the resilience of people and ecosystems affected by desertification, land degradation and drought, as well as the adverse effects of climate change.²

Healthy ecosystems are vital for human health, welfare, and survival. However, today, land and ecosystem degradation threaten the livelihoods and food security of over 3 billion people. If left unchecked most of our land resources – soil, water, and biodiversity -- will be severely degraded by 2030. This human transformation, degradation, and fragmentation of the natural world in which we live, aptly referred to as encroachment or over-exploitation, endangers our survival.

Protecting and restoring nature is fundamental to achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Land and ecosystem regeneration efforts, supported by the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration, are only one part of a comprehensive solution that requires rapid decarbonization and the rapid uptake of renewable energy, more sustainable production and consumption behaviors, and ultimately realizing the transition to a circular economy that significantly reduces waste and reuses products and materials.

² <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3896583?ln=en>