

Tuesday, April 24, 2007

Dear colleagues,

As you are aware, the European Net-Europe scientific network which brings together some 191 of you is acting to gain its own impetus and some initial practical actions and results to be acknowledged as a key actor in the worldwide community (scientists, institutions, service providers, decision makers) in charge of desertification and land degradation issues.

A twofold key strategic decision was taken among others at the Bonn workshop on 16./17. October 2006 and in the follow-up discussions since then. Firstly, European DesertNet addresses desertification anywhere in the world, and not only in Europe. Secondly, European DesertNet is a European bottom-up initiative open to scientists from all over the world. Being fully aware of this ambitious dimension of our network would allow you to fully play an important role of within this scientific network.

The network is chaired by Prof. Dr. Carlos San Juan Mesonada (Department of Economics, University Carlos III of Madrid, Spain). Its Co-Chair & secretariat is Dr. Mariam Akhtar-Schuster (University of Hamburg, Germany). A Steering Committee and an Advisory board have been set up. A key structure is the user board, which is under completion.

This is the management structure.

In parallel, we have also set up the working structure by defining five Working Groups:

- Science-Policy Interface, which I have been invited to chair,
- Dryland Observation Systems,
- Economic Drivers and Social-Economic Consequences,
- Internal Structures,
- Training and Capacity Building, chaired by Prof. Dr. Stefano Grego.

All these information can be retrieved in the network Website:

<http://www.european-desertnet.eu/>. Kindly contact Dr. Mariam Akhtar-Schuster (makhtar-schuster@botanik.uni-hamburg.de) in case you would like to join one of the working groups.

I would like to ask you first to consider joining one (or several) working group(s) in order to give its full potential to our network and take advantage of the skills of its members, and second to advertise about the network. It would be great to expand it to new colleagues both within and outside the EU.

I also would like to mention that our approach was warmly welcomed among others by the European Commission and the UNCCD Secretariat, which leads to the key message that I wished to convey to you.

It happens that UNCCD is now in a critical phase. The Conference of Parties requested the Joint Inspection Unit of the UN to carry out a comprehensive review of the UNCCD secretariat. The COP7 established an Intersessional Intergovernmental Working Group (IIWG), in charge among others to issue a draft 10-years strategic plan and framework to enhance the implementation of the UNCCD.

European DesertNet has been requested to review the 'draft final' version of this 10-years strategic plan. This is a strong signal of confidence from the highest international authority in the working domain of European DesertNet.

In a practical way, the Science-Policy Interface Working Group (one of the five established working groups as mentioned above) was requested to review this 'final draft' and to send comments and recommendations. Time was very short. We had about one week to lead the job, which I had to coordinate.

I have here to say that the Science-Policy Interface Working Group worked in a very efficient way. In spite of the short time given to us to formulate the statement of European DesertNet, we could send our comments and recommendations in due time to the German Federal Ministry for Economic Development and Cooperation who presented our scientific statement to the draft version of the 10-year strategy plan at the third meeting of the IIWG in Namibia. Please find enclosed both the document under consideration and the comments that we issued and sent. In my mind, it worked also in a sound scientific and strategic way. The conclusions and recommendations issued are all but neutral, and also all but negative or restrictive. Indeed, I see them as a top-down sound contribution of the scientific community to the improvement of the objectives of UNCCD and the way how to lead them. Needless to say, the fact that this happened through European DesertNet is a strong positive signal for our network – and beyond that for the European capacity to mobilize a worldwide community for worldwide interests. We will keep you informed about the further development of the IIWG 10-strategy process.

I will conclude by writing that this success story is not the success story of a small group of scientists. It is a success story for our network, a success story for each of you. We are a bottom-up network. We need to be structured for sound management purposes. But the link between each of you and the management structure has absolutely nothing to do with any kind of top-down mechanism as they exist in formal organizations. It is a peer relationship. The managing structure is here only to properly channel your ideas, your initiatives, your knowledge, and your recommendations. So, I would encourage you to go on contributing to the network future achievements, to advertise about it and to encourage newcomers to join us.

Best regards,

Gerard BEGNI
Chair, WG Science-Policy Interface,

DesertNet Europe