

**Side Event of EUROPEAN DesertNet and Oasis**

**September 4, 2007, COP8, Madrid**

**Desertification: Science, Policy and the Web of Stakeholders**



**A UNCCD COP-8 SIDE EVENT**



Fig.1 – Illustration of one of the most ambitious political decisions to reverse desertification: the Toshka project, South of Egypt. The Toshka valley irrigation project was inaugurated in 2003. Its ambitions to transform part of the country's scorching hot southern desert into a region dotted by lush, neatly tended vegetable plots that are supplied with water and fertilizer by drip irrigation systems. The Egyptian Government considers that it could host some 5 million people. This image shows the four artificial lakes created in that area thanks to the most powerful pumping station in the world that pours some 25 million cubic meters of water from the Nasser lake into the irrigated area. Needless to say, cutting edge scientific research and technology were mandatory to turn a 'pharaonic' political vision into an actually feasible and sustainable megaproject, which appears quite promising in the present phase. It is fair to mention that some scientists expressed concerns about possible adverse impacts on the downstream Nile delta, which were not observed so far, but should be monitored on the long run.



## THE CONCEPT

Desertification is a complex phenomenon resulting from natural and anthropic drivers. These drivers as well as their short-, medium- and long-term impact need to be analyzed and understood. Some decisions on ways to combat desertification can be taken by local populations themselves, but managing such a pervasive phenomenon requires decisions at all levels: local, provincial, national, sub-regional, regional and global; and engaging a wide range of stakeholders, including policymakers, researchers, development practitioners, communities, farmers, pastoralists, the private sector, and many others, across local, national, regional, and international scales.

How can these disparate communities be led to talking and working together? They have different institutional cultures, and are separated by large distances and even different languages. The web of communications involves elements of social learning as well as communication and exchange between different components/stakeholders, with ‘horizontal’ and ‘vertical’ linkages between local, regional and global scales.

## THE FRAMEWORK

The UNCCD represents a worldwide consensus to combat desertification. This covers both fighting against natural phenomena and unsustainable anthropic actions at all level scales, which is demonstrated among others by the concepts of Regional, Sub-regional and National Action Plans (RAP’s, SRAP’s and NAP’s).

The Conference Of Parties (COP) is a formal event in which decisions are taken within the framework of the Convention by official representatives of the Parties. It also offers the opportunity of ‘Side Events’ which allow debates that can feed the vision of the parties without being binding for them. The Eight Conference of Parties (COP-8) met in Madrid during the two first weeks of September, 2007.

The Committee on Science and Technology (CST) is the UNCCD subsidiary organ that is responsible for stimulating scientific input into the UNCCD, and for monitoring and translating the most relevant and important scientific advances worldwide into actionable recommendations for the COP.

European DesertNet (EDN in short) is a ‘bottom-up’ initiative of scientists to set up a worldwide network of individual scientists. It includes a users’ group that may raise the most relevant and pressing questions, five working groups to bring the best possible answers, and managing structures.

Oasis is an initiative to bring together research-for-development efforts of the Alliance of CGIAR Centers (CGIAR = Consultative Group on International Agricultural research) into a collective approach for the dryland regions of the developing world in support of the UNCCD. Oasis is convened by the International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT) and the International Centre for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas (ICARDA).

EDN and Oasis are complementary efforts and therefore decided to closely cooperate. So, they decided to jointly organize a Side Event during the COP-8 of UNCD in order to address the abovementioned issues, including the signing of a joint Memorandum of Understanding outlining future collaboration (see Fig. 2).

The title of the side event was: *Desertification: Science, Policy, and the Web of Stakeholders. The key questions discussed were: Is there a straightforward path from science to end-users? Who must be involved, and how can the interactions be made more effective?*



**Drynet** is an association of 14 NGO's from all over the world that have joined forces to combat drylands degradation, recognizing that climatic change and destructive land use are or will cause drylands to degrade more rapidly than before. **Drynet** is supported by the EU. Considering that NGOs have to play a crucial role in the issues addressed by UNCCD, the Side Event partners considered it important to invite Drynet.

## THE PROGRAMME

The programme of this EDN-Oasis Side Event which took place on September 4, 2007 was as follows:

- Lunch at the venue<sup>1</sup>
- Welcome address; structure and aims of the side event (chair: Dr. Gérard Begni, Steering Committee European DesertNet)
- What is European DesertNet? (Dr. Carlos San Juan Mesonada, chair of European DesertNet and Dr. Mariam Akhtar-Schuster, co-chair of European DesertNet)
- Bridging science and development: the Oasis Challenge Programme Initiative to Combat Desertification (Dr. William Dar, ICRISAT and Dr. Richard Thomas, ICARDA; Oasis co-convenors, CGIAR)
- Signing of the Memorandum of Understanding between European DesertNet and Oasis
- Desertification: science, policy-making and the web of stakeholders. Is there a straightforward path from science to end-users? Who must be involved, and how can the interactions be made more effective? (Gérard Begni)
- Linking Civil Society Organisations and Science Community: the EU funded project "Drynet" develops capacities to adapt to land degradation and climate change (Dr. Silke Brehm, Science and Technology Officer, Drynet)
- Discussion of the Background and Objectives Statement

## THE KEY QUESTIONS ADDRESSED

Some key questions were prepared as guidelines to focus the discussion. They were listed in the invitation to the side event. In his presentation, G. Begni elaborated these issues in a basic (and perhaps provocative) way and then introduced them as follows:

**Scales and levels** (the two first items address the highest level):

- How can IIWG bring the most practical answers to the issues addressed in the JIU report? How can their implementation be improved?
- How can links between European DesertNet/Oasis and the UNCCD be organized in view of the Convention's call for greater flows of scientific information? This is both a political (formal endorsement) and a scientific question (what should European DesertNet/Oasis bring to UNCCD?)
- Are communications links between science and policy levels scale-dependent, and how? Where are the weaknesses in such links (e.g. different languages, policy makers want quick solutions, science wants more time, data exchange ethics...)? How can these be overcome at all time scales?

**Knowledge-sharing and channels:**

- How to build consensus within and between different actors, and how can such a consensus be channelled between these groups?

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<sup>1</sup> Cordial thanks to GTZ CCD Project and the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development for sponsoring the activities of European DesertNet at COP8.



- What are the actual information needs of each stakeholder group? What types of information need to be exchanged at which nodes of the network?
- How can European DesertNet act as a communication platform for multidirectional communication, social learning and validated information provision, helping to improve multi-stakeholder communications, including links between scientists and other parties?
- How to introduce information technology at the level of people as end users of scientific information for decision-making?

#### **Scientists' role and incentives:**

- Efforts to combat desertification have to be mainstreamed within policy addressing such issues as education, health, water management, etc. What role can scientists play in this mainstreaming/integrating process?
- What incentives can be developed for scientists and local stakeholders to motivate medium-to longer-term coherent participation of these two stakeholder groups?

#### **People's participation:**

- How to stimulate the development of policies for people's participation in monitoring activities?
- How to organize the direct participation of land users in environmental monitoring, using easy-to-understand indicators related to their local knowledge?

## **KEY CONCLUSIONS**

The debates addressed many issues, bringing into light experiences and thoughts from quite various horizons. Ranking the conclusions while avoiding gaps and overlaps is not easy. It can be tentatively presented as follows.

#### **Top level: UNCCD, EDN and Oasis**

EDN and Oasis must be made more visible to the UNCCD Secretariat and to the CST. The EDN User Board must be made as representative as possible, raising clear questions to be addressed and answered by the ad-hoc Working Groups (WG's) of the CST under the supervision of the Steering Committee (SC) and Advisory Board (AB) of EDN. The whole system has to be consolidated by a peer-review mechanism.

A key question is: what are the organic links between the CST and networks as EDN, and research partnerships such as Oasis? A formal answer to be developed further on can be found in Article 24 of the UNCCD, which establishes the CST, the roster of independent experts and paves the way to appoint ad-hoc panels to provide the COP with information and advice on specific issues<sup>2</sup>.

In order to better represent the international community, the EDN Advisory Board should be open to non-European members. Appropriate members need to be identified. In depth contacts have been already taken with the Chinese community, while Central Asia is represented in the Science/Policy Interface Working Group of EDN. This is just a starting point since EDN is a quite recent initiative.

The EDN-Oasis partnership opens new horizons. Combining leading-edge research with results-oriented action in this way delivers a powerful capability and resource to the CST and UNCCD. The election of Dr. William Dar, also Director General of one of the Oasis convening Centers (ICRISAT)

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<sup>2</sup> The contact between UNCCD, CST and EDN can be greatly eased by the nomination of Dr. Richard Escadafal, an active EDN member, as European representative within the CST, and Dr. Dar, Chairman of the CST from The Phillipines, also Director General of an Oasis convening Center (ICRISAT).

as CST Chairman, provides a direct channel for the input of EDN-Oasis science advice into the CST-UNCCD mechanism.

### **Finding the way for a fruitful dialog is a major issue**

Either under quite centralized political regimes (e.g. Aral Sea environmental situation) or in more decentralized and democratic ones (e.g. production of biofuel) decision makers consider short-term issues as a priority, while most of scientific issues and sustainable development in itself are usually long-term issues. These scientific long-term issues may be conflicting with short term specific or public interest ones. So, the scientists are often considered as ‘radical’ minded people and their conclusions and recommendations are most often pushed away as such from the political debate.

One issue could be to consider those people who are in charge of supporting the decision process of policy makers themselves. They often consider medium-scale issues and can understand and take into account long-term concerns. A major role can be played here by NGO’s and CBO’s in close contact with scientists, who most often do not have the right language to be understood by these staffs. It is important for scientists to make efforts to channel information and knowledge through quite short arguments and documents based on sound scientific knowledge and worded to convey proper messages to the decision making world. For instance, such an effort is currently being made by CSFD, the French Scientific Committee on Desertification. The actual question to be kept in mind is: how to convince a decision maker in five minutes?

Similar considerations can be developed about finding a proper and understandable language between scientists and people involved. Here also, NGO’s and CBO’s can play a key role. The private sector<sup>3</sup>, and especially the industry sector is a key actor but can face some concerns from the general public and decision-makers, since the interests that it supports can be quite different from those of the local citizenry and/or of the country in which they are operating.

### **About interdisciplinary research**

International interdisciplinary research is essential. Research programmes must be user-driven. Trans-national discussions are required to define the objectives of research projects and programmes, and lead them to take their results into full account in decision-making and implementation. To reach such a goal, it is important to create a common language. This was illustrated by the following motto: ‘invite scientists, NGO’s and policy makers to change frontiers’.

Scientists are considered to produce academic outputs. It is not only a matter of dialogue with decision makers and other stakeholders, as underlined above. It also implies an interdisciplinary approach between physical and social sciences.

Large development projects have to be developed. Such projects imply integration at a wide scale. This means in particular integrated science and integration of science with action. This implies in turn a better definition of scientific issues to be addressed by researchers, and a better way to make a proper use of them.

Integrated research does not mean that targets have not to be segmented in terms of final applications, which is quite different from basic disciplines. Such sectors as education, health, agriculture have to be developed. But for instance, agriculture also implies economic and social sciences.

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<sup>3</sup> According to the personal opinion of the author based on many discussions and interviews, the ‘private sector’ covers such a wide domain that it is almost an abstraction. For instance, from the ‘end-users’ point of view, large industrial companies that sell GMO’s patented in developed countries have nothing to do with local and national engineering offices that are deeply rooted in day-to-day national events.



### Ways to communicate

The EDN-Oasis MoU (mutual understanding agreement) is considered as a good start. The partnership needs to be extended to create a forum that makes it more proactive and push its members to be more involved. Communicating means first that the above questions described related to finding a proper way to communicate with stakeholders has to be achieved.

Issues related to information technologies, in particular diffusion of information through Internet, were widely debated. This appears to be a key issue for many persons present in the Side Event.

Contributing to the THEMANET (<http://www.unccd.int/cop/officialdocs/cop8/pdf/cst2add2eng.pdf>) website for the CST of UNCCD should be considered.

THEMANET is the master directory on combating desertification devoted to improve information and communication flow between and within the scientific and policy community of UNCCD.

The EDN Website – whose open communication and information exchange structure is already been taken as an example by other emerging scientific networks - will be further developed and be made more interactive. Developing a forum to exchange ideas would be beneficial to debates within and between regional scientists. This could also be beneficial to disseminate important information, such as for instance relevant call for proposal opportunities.

The Oasis website ([www.oasisglobal.net](http://www.oasisglobal.net)) emphasizes solutions to desertification, which is a welcome counterpart to the CST emphasis on more effectively measuring and monitoring the problem. Ultimately the public will judge and invest in the UNCCD based on the quality and effectiveness of the solutions that it offers.

EDN and Oasis managers fully agree but underline that this requests a minimum funding, which in turn raises several key organisational and management questions that will be discussed during the second working meeting of the Steering Committee and Advisory Board on September 5, 2007 in Madrid. The Side Event conclusions will be key inputs for that meeting.



Fig. 2 - The side event jointly organized by EDN and OASIS during the COP-8 of the UNCCD in Madrid was an unique opportunity to sign a Memorandum of Understanding between the two structures (September 4, 2007 – © Michael Bock) From left: Dr. Gérard Begni (Chair of the Side Event and member of Steering Committee of European DesertNet), Dr. William Dar (Director General of ICRISAT and CST Chairman), Prof. Dr. Carlos San Juan Mesonada (Chair of European DesertNet), Dr. Thomas Richard (ICARDA), Dr. Mariam Akhtar-Schuster (Co-Chair of European DesertNet)