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Leading Article

Desertification Footprints



"Mankind has probably done more damage to the Earth in the 20th century than in all of previous human history"
Jacques Cousteau, French naval officer and researcher

The appearance of soils change when they cover with golden leaves, get wet with rain, dress in colourful flowers or hide under the snow. However, soil's appearance also changes due to the desertification process, which degrades the land in arid, semi-arid and subhumid dry areas. This threat reaches one-third of the planet's entire land surface.

Twenty-four billion tons of fertile soil is lost every year. This is due mainly to human factors, a fact established by the **United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD)**. According to this information, the UN states that human activities cause losses in biodiversity at a rate 50 to 100 times faster than expected.

AGENDA

March 16 to 22:
Postgraduate School,
Texcoco, Mexico State,
Mexico

VII International
Specialized Course:
"Rainwater Collection and
Management Systems
(SCALL, according to the
acronym in Spanish) for
Human Consumption,
Backyard Production,
Controlled Environments
and Temporal Agriculture".

The European Network for
Global Desertification
Research has sent us the
first edition of the
European Desertnet Digital
Newsletter.

We appreciate it and invite
you to visit their web page
at: [www.european-
desertnet.eu](http://www.european-desertnet.eu)

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"Building Strategic Financial
Partnerships to Consolidate
The National Action
Programme to Combat
Desertification in Argentina"

Overgrazing, unsustainable cultivation (inappropriate crop rotation, excessive plough, reduction in cultivation cycles, for instance.) and deforestation destroy the vegetation cover that prevents soil surface from being unprotected. The Millennium Development Goal N.º 7 was established in order to ensure environmental sustainability through both controlling and making good use of natural resources. This goal includes the following 3 targets:

- Integrate the principles of sustainable development into country policies and national programmes and reverse the loss of environmental resources.
- Halve, by 2015, the proportion of the population without sustainable access to safe drinking water.
- By 2020, to have achieved a significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers.



According to an UN report, there is a strong relationship between land, energy and misuse of natural resources; since the poorest populations in the world have not access to these supplies and, consequently, they are forced to cut trees down to obtain firewood, or to burn fuels that are harmful to health.

"If you feed the Land, it will feed you back"
Luc Gnacadja, *Executive Secretary of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification*

Bonn, August 19, 2008

Organized Work

On January 1st, 2007, the [Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations \(FAO\)](#) created the **Natural Resources Management and Environment Department (NR)**. One of the three divisions of the Department is the **Land and Water Division**, which is concerned with the productive and sustainable use of lands and water resources through their improved practices related to tenure, management, development and conservation. Thus, the Division is sought to increase food security, alleviate poverty and secure a healthy environment. The Division's work requires the synergy with member countries, to which it is related to meet present and future agriculture demands in order to ensure the preservation of environmental resources.

The Division also aims at assisting member developing countries through programmes, best practices and tools aimed at reducing drought, achieving land tenure, accessing to natural resources and improving land markets.

According to this FAO's Division's statistics, the main reasons for desertification in the Argentine Republic are the bad practices in agriculture, vegetation exploitation and overgrazing.



In relation to poverty and desertification, the **United Nations Development Programme in Argentina (Programa de las Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo, PNUD Argentina)** seeks to alleviate the current situation by means of a sustainable management of the land. To achieve this goal, the PNUD cooperates with countries and communities in the different aspects required for improving the relation between man and land, such as governability, measures to face drought, home alterations, promotion of sustainable practices and life forms and ongoing dialogue with local, national and global actors. Furthermore, this Organization specially focuses on women's role in arid areas and promotes both the adoption and integration of the most important environmental conventions to reduce land degradation.

Desertification, plus interethnic problems, will probably present a devastating perspective. Darfur is one of the thousand cases the [UNHCR - United Nations High Commission for Refugees \(Agencia de la ONU para los refugiados, ACNUR\)](#) has under the microscope. This region offers an extreme and cruel postcard, with 451,000 internally displaced persons because of desertification. One of the several conflicts Darfur must fight against is access to fresh water. Demographic growth and adverse climatic conditions make the situation alarmingly worse. To a larger or smaller scale, cases like this one multiply all over the planet and desertification is the backbone of all of them.

At the end of 2006, the amount of persons sheltered by the UNHCR came up to 32,9 millions. Among the refugees, there are people who found themselves forced to move to avoid starving to death due to environmental degradation and climate change. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees, António Guterres, stated: "When leaving is not an option but a need, it goes beyond poverty. Moreover, natural disasters are occurring more frequently, they are of great magnitude and have devastating impacts. Almost all forecasts made about the long-term effects of climate change predict that desertification will spread so much so that life possibilities in many places around the world will be lost (...)".

Since 1979, Argentina has been one of the member countries of the UNHCR Executive Committee, which is made up of those countries that have shown the strongest commitment to refugee-related issues, no matter how different the reasons for so doing are.



Land is not only the space we step on and but also the ground we are fed from. It gives us shelter and allows filtering the water that converts organic waste into nutrients. It is the natural resource that generates thousands of other resources. The English writer Aldous Huxley wondered if the Earth was nothing but the hell of another planet. And for those who suffer the reality of desertification, the answer to this question is not impossible of being proven.

A date to remember

July, 7. Land Conservation Day

☞ This date remembers the death of the father of soil conservation, Hugh Hammond Bennet, a remarkable scientist that devoted all his efforts to the fight against desertification.

Sources

* UNESCO/UNCCD, "The fight against desertification bears fruit", Pedagogical kit about the fight against Desertification, Madrid, 2001-2003.

Briefs

Buenos Aires, host country of UNCCD COP 9



On January 8 of the current year, Luc Gnacadja, Executive Secretary of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), has responded affirmatively to the request made by the State Secretary of the Environment and Sustainable Development Secretariat of the Argentine Republic, Dr. Homero Bibiloni, related to the Argentine offer to host the **Ninth Meeting of the Conference of the Parties (COP 9)**.

For the Argentine Republic, which was the venue for UNCCD First Regional Meeting in 1996 and for the Fifth UNCCD Implementation Review Committee (CRIC 5, according to the acronym in Spanish) in 1997, it is very important to be, once more, the host country of an international event of such magnitude, where the future policies and strategies to roll back the scourge of desertification and its serious consequences will be debated.

In the next publications of the Digital Newsletter, we will give more information about not only the preparation and execution of this remarkable event, but also when and where it will be held, and the subjects in agenda.

Institutional Representatives

Small Producers Association of El Simbolar Colony, La Rioja province

This Association was created in 2005 with the purpose of generating and consolidating opportunities to carry out specific projects. In its beginnings, it was made up of 40 members. Each of them received financial help to build a community aqueduct. Then, they obtained 2 tractors: one equipped for dam draining and another one to work land.

At present, the Association has 282 members from El Simbolar, Chañar, Bajo Hondo, Chañar Viejo, Loma Alta, Corral de Negros, Cortaderas, Castro Barros and Monte Negro. Two of their aims are the small producers' productive development in order to prevent them from emigrating to larger cities and the need of improving the inhabitants' life conditions. Furthermore, this Association is member of the **National Advisory Commission of the National Action Programme against Desertification**.



El Simbolar, the organization epicentre, is located in the General Belgrano Department, to the East of La Rioja Province, 188 kilometres away from the province's capital and it lies on the arid plains.

The population is made up of 154 families and most of them are engaged in goat raising for a living. At present, they have almost 18,000 goats, out of which 10,000 are breeders.

Women knit garment items with sheep wool. Although, the youngest had begun to work with goat leather, they were not able to go on with their enterprise due to the lack of money to buy consumables.

OUR PEOPLE



Franco Vargas

He has 33 years old and lives in La Punta, a city founded 5 years ago in San Luis province.

He has worked as an acting teacher at a school in his town for over 12 years. He gives half-an-hour classes in the 8 rooms of the kindergarten, and workshops in the primary and secondary levels.

Besides, he has a small theatre school called *Estudio Teatral Pierrot*, the first one founded in La Punta. 15 children between 6 and 10 years, 15 teenagers and 12 adults attend classes there. In order to face costume, light and sound expenses, Franco receives assistance from both the school and the Municipality.

Franco took his first steps to follow his artistic vocation in the different workshops he gave to children living on the streets. In turn, he created a band of street musicians with the purpose of keeping these children busy in a project.

In relation to the place Franco lives in, it must be emphasized that La Punta is a place that has been deforested in order to found the city. It is possible to find wild animals on the streets. One of them is the fox, a typical animal of the area. The inhabitants kill foxes because they get into their houses. Due to this reason, Franco and his group made a play to become



The annual average rainfall is 220 mm and, thus, the inhabitants should take advantage of any downpour that allows them to feed the cattle better in order to avoid overgrazing.

Due to the serious drought the province has been facing for over 10 years and to the fact that the area has always been very arid, the Association is working with dam valleys for water reservoirs and also with pasture implants under native land clearing.

The inhabitants of El Simbolar have not boreholes to extract water, as the upper groundwater layer is over 80 m deep. Therefore, water for human consumption must be carried by trucks from the Municipality to the residents' wells, and every family must pay for the fuel. Moreover, a truck carrying water for meeting the families' needs only lasts about 15 days. Through the Association, some actions are being taken before the provincial government to declare the colony a water emergency area with the purpose of evaluating jointly the different ways of alleviating the situation.



Furthermore, the Association is close to coming into an agreement with the provincial Secretariat of Livestock to sell livestock without intermediaries, because, now, it can only be traded with kid's meal sellers from Córdoba province at a ridiculous price. El Simbolar's greatest aim is to get a refrigerated truck to be able to sell their goats at a national level.

To date, the Association is working on the development of a socio-productive project that consists in the construction of 8 community reservoirs for several families that have not been benefited from earlier projects.

Moreover, the Small Producers Association collaborates with a 63-student country school (in some cases, students must travel 13 km on donkeyback to get home) by means of educative handbooks made by the National Action Programme against Desertification.

people aware of this problem.

At present, Franco has a new play called "The enchanted toy shop", which makes reference to environmental awareness-raising. He is also preparing another play whose main theme is desertification.

Franco thinks this is a very interesting subject to show from a theatrical point of view and, thus, to raise all-ages-audience awareness.

During 2009, Franco and his work team will organize the 2nd High School Theatre Meeting at a provincial level. Moreover, they will continue with Franco's great challenge: to create an audience, apart from forming actors, to encourage town inhabitants to attend plays. Another project is to build an amphitheatre within the plot of land of the *Estudio Teatral* to make performances about the origins of the Argentine theatre.

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