

## **Report on Outcomes of the Side Event on 'Providing Inter-Disciplinary Advice to the UNCCD'**

(Side Event held on 17 February 2011 at the CST S-2 in Bonn, Germany)

By Dr Mariam Akhtar-Schuster<sup>1</sup> and Dr Richard Thomas<sup>1,2</sup>, Prof Elena Abraham<sup>1</sup>, Dr Pam Chasek<sup>3</sup>, Prof. Giuseppe Enne<sup>1</sup>, Dr Richard Escadafal<sup>1</sup>, Dr María José Marques<sup>1</sup>, Dr Lindsay Stringer<sup>1</sup> and Ms Chiara Zanolla<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>DesertNet International (DNI)

<sup>2</sup>United Nations University (UNU-INWEH)

<sup>3</sup>International Institute for Sustainable Development, Manhattan College, NY, USA

An electronic forum jointly organised by DesertNet International and UNU-INWEH solicited 172 responses from 52 countries on how to improve the use of science by policy makers and the UNCCD. The e.forum was an independent, voluntary global e-consultation primarily of scientists which lasted from January to June 2010, and is considered an important independent scientific contribution to the COP-request made to the CST for advice on how to organise international, interdisciplinary scientific advice (Decision 18/COP9). The greatest number of responses was received from the Latin American and Caribbean region. There were no patterns to the answers of 9 questions of the e.forum when examined by either by geographic region, country or institutional affiliation.

Although the e.forum principally addressed the international scientific community, other experts from ministries, UN agencies, European Commission, CSOs and development agencies participated, thus, providing multi-stakeholder assessments and comments on global scientific needs and options for an independent, international, interdisciplinary scientific advisory body on land degradation/desertification.

The results of the e.forum were presented by DesertNet International and UNU-INWEH to a multi-stakeholder audience at a Side Event of the CST-2 meeting in Bonn, Germany on Feb 17, 2011. Dr. Steve Twomlow (UNEP) presented the current development status in the newly emerging *Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services* (IPBES, [www.ipbes.net](http://www.ipbes.net)).

An overwhelming majority of the respondents to the e.forum considered that science was not informing policy well on the issues of land degradation and that new avenues were required. Desertification remains a low priority by policy makers even for affected countries unless it is linked to either climate change or food security and poverty reduction.

Discussions at the Side Event underlined that in order to overcome this science-policy divide the focus of the political and public awareness aspects of the convention should shift from a negative perspective which is usually based on desertification, erosion, biodiversity loss, famine and migration and rather create a positive spin by scientifically supporting dialogue and knowledge on the links between land, food and water security and improvement of human livelihoods in drylands.



It was emphasised that more research needs to be done on the balance that dryland inhabitants achieve in their livelihood strategies through production activities that depend mainly on pastoralism and agriculture, but also on the other, alternative income generating or income diversifying activities and payments for ecosystem services (e.g. artisanal crafts, eco-tourism and renewable energy generation). Improving the enabling environment for investments in drylands, strengthening value chains, and creating incentives to implement sustainable land use strategies at the local level should receive more attention from scientists and from the political level.

It was clearly highlighted by NGO representatives *and* by scientists at the Side Event that also *local knowledge* evolves continuously, indicating rich and creative knowledge and information in local communities, which should be considered and scientifically validated in the process of developing and implementing SLM measures. In order to strengthen the required integrated and participatory research approaches, policy and research funding agencies at the national level have to create incentives for multi-stakeholder interactions in the areas of research, development and implementation.

Discussions highlighted that science can be more effective in the policy arena if an independent interdisciplinary panel could be established to inform the UNCCD in similar ways to the existing *Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* (IPCC) or the IPBES). However, land issues will urgently require an intergovernmental science-policy agenda which is also driven by practitioners and civil society organizations. The architecture of such a panel should enable 'policy-relevance' without being 'policy prescriptive'. As stated by Prof Joachim von Braun (ZEF, Bonn/Germany) recently, science must be independent from political influence as non-independent scientific advice has zero credibility.

While the overwhelming desire of scientists responding to the e.forum canvassed was in favour of the establishment of a new international body, participants at the Side Event underscored that the current global economic realities suggest that science-policy dialogues on 'land degradation' can start by linking existing experts and networks on dryland research

and land degradation/desertification to either the IPCC or the IPBES; the latter will also be underpinning all issues on land.



Side Event on the e.forum and the status of IPBES held during CST S-2 in Bonn, Germany on 17. Feb. 2011

The urgency of land degradation, desertification and drought requires immediate attention. Therefore, full priority should be given to any emerging opportunities to inject dryland science into intergovernmental bodies as potential donor countries could be reluctant to the idea of creating a third intergovernmental body. As some respondent at the Side Event stated, persisting at this point on any particular institutionally self-centred discourses would delay the implementation of urgently needed timely actions, and also 'dilute' scientific influx into science-policy dialogues by fragmenting scientific expertise under different panels.

The establishment of temporary or permanent *ad hoc* technical working groups could tackle very specific aspects of land degradation and would allow sound and multi-speed outputs under the umbrella of IPBES. Participants to the e.forum and to the Side Event however did underscore the risk that if dryland or land degradation issues are placed entirely under the IPBES or the IPCC umbrella, they might not be sufficiently visible to policy and to the general public, thus hampering ample political will and general acceptance by the public for implementing measures or attracting investments in drylands. A focal issue at the Side Event was on how it can be guaranteed that dryland and land degradation issues will receive constant attention in IPBES?

Participants of the Side Event expressed their desire for a strong and immediate exchange between the dryland research community, the UNCCD/CST and the IPBES process in the forefront of the first plenary of IPBES, which is due to be held in the second half of 2011. This might support a strong rooting and good visibility of dryland relevant issues under IPBES, as budgetary, structural and thematic issues have yet to be installed in this newly emerging intergovernmental science-policy panel. UNEP, as the current convening centre of IPBES, was asked to provide pathways that start the necessary discussions between IPBES, scientific networks on dryland research and UNCCD/CST. DesertNet International and UNU-INWEH were invited by UNEP to continue these discussions and to elicit pathways how dryland scientists can support setting the dryland agenda in the IPBES process.

For more information contact the coordinators:

Dr. Mariam Akhtar-Schuster, Chair DesertNet International ([makhtar-schuster@botanik.uni-hamburg.de](mailto:makhtar-schuster@botanik.uni-hamburg.de))

And Dr. Richard Thomas, Assistant Director (Dryland Ecosystem), UNU-INWEH ([rthomas@inweh.unu.edu](mailto:rthomas@inweh.unu.edu))