

UNITED NATIONS



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THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

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**MESSAGE ON THE WORLD DAY
TO COMBAT DESERTIFICATION AND DROUGHT
17 June 2008**

The theme of this year's Day, "Combating land degradation for sustainable agriculture" reminds us of the importance of land as a global heritage which no human being can live without. Land degradation affects a significant portion of the Earth's arable lands, directly impacting the well-being of people and economic development of countries. It causes agricultural economic losses, disorganizes local and regional food markets, and causes social and political instability.

As the population grows, and with it the demand for agriculture production, traditional systems of managing the land are collapsing. This is aggravated by the adoption of new practices, often monocultures. More and more of the good land is pressed into service, without proper attention to conservation, and poor farmers and pastoralists are forced onto marginal land. Land degradation impacts women particularly hard, since traditionally they devote time and effort to the land -- growing, processing, managing and marketing most of the food and other natural resources.

These issues are holistically covered within the framework of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification, which serves as the nexus between poverty reduction and ecosystem protection in the drylands. Today, the Convention is the sole international legal framework to reclaim dry and degraded land, and could offer a long-term solution to producing more food for more people. These unused lands could also serve for biofuel production, and thus offer new benefits for their inhabitants.

The time has come for the international community to recognize that drylands and marginal lands, where nearly half of the world's poor live, are not waste land. Rather, they are potential areas for agricultural intensification for both food and energy needs. Let us renew our commitment to reversing land degradation and desertification. Let us ensure that the 10-year strategy adopted last year in Madrid is fully supported and implemented. On this World Day to Combat Desertification and Drought, let us rededicate ourselves to this mission.