

Message from Luc Gnacadja, Executive Secretary, United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) on the Occasion of the International Day for Biological Diversity 22 May 2009

The focus in 2009 of the International Day for Biological Diversity is Invasive Alien Species. We welcome the efforts of the Convention on Biological Diversity, on this occasion to increase understanding and raise awareness of the threats of Invasive Alien Species (IAS) to biodiversity, and the ecological well being of society and the planet.

The focus is timely for the dryland communities due to the threat to food security posed by IAS. Species loss in drylands is also common. For example, by 2006 15 known dryland species were extinct or known to be extinct in the wild.

The vulnerability of drylands to IAS is perhaps less known to the public as it tends to gain media attention only when disasters such as the Desert Locust invasions strike. Yet, drylands are particularly vulnerable to invasive alien species, with grave consequences for dryland communities whose livelihoods and those of their animals are highly dependant on plants.

A major dilemma associated with IAS in the drylands is managing tension of forestalling land degradation and rehabilitate drylands degradation using new plant species without compromising the long-term livelihoods of dryland communities. Forestalling dryland degradation can make a significant contribution to biodiversity conservation.

Generally, measures to rehabilitate and reclaim drylands have involved the introduction of plant species, with a view to re-green arid lands, stabilize dunes, restore degraded land, and provide shelterbelts, animal fodder and fuelwood. Over time, however, alien species have manifested unanticipated negative consequences for local communities.

In some cases, IAS, have contributed to the recent increases in wildfires in dryland areas. Some of Africa's drylands where non-native varieties of the *Prosopis species* were introduced have become impenetrable thickets that have outgrown native plants and blocked access to important water bodies and in addition, been found to be unpalatable for the animals. Under such conditions malnutrition, famine and food security can be rampant.

Complicating the ability to effectively address these challenges for many dryland communities are the mediating effects of widespread poverty, cultural breakdown following the migration of men to urban areas and fragile ecologies. These factors make remedial efforts a costly affair. Moreover, these outcomes have spiraling effects. The consequent land use and land-management changes have long term implications on local ecological processes and consequently, on biological diversity.

The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) has responded to the Convention on Biological Diversity's (CBD) call to pay greater attention to these issues. In response to the request by the CBD Conference of the Parties to the CBD

Executive Secretary to promote fuller consideration of issues relating to IAS through the joint liaison group of the CBD, the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and the UNCCD, we have paid greater attention to addressing IAS in land rehabilitation projects.

For example, following the 2005/6 forest fires and insect invasion in North East Asia, we provided technical assistance to the Government of China in the design of their Clean Development Mechanism projects in which we emphasized the use of mixed cropping and of ecological forests with varying canopy levels. This approach minimizes the potential for IAS to thrive.

The UNCCD's increasing emphasis of Sustainable Land Management (SLM) as a response to drought, land degradation and desertification challenges promotes these kinds of measures. SLM calls for consultation with local technicians, the avoidance of monoculture and the use of native species that attract different animal and plant species. Further, the UNCCD's Ten Year Strategic Plan's initiative to strengthen the scientific basis of the Convention will, no doubt, increase our ability to understand the issues, measures and public awareness needed to mitigate and respond to IAS issues.

The UNCCD commends the Convention on Biological Diversity in its efforts to raise awareness and understanding of the significance of IAS to biological diversity, the global economy and livelihoods of individuals and communities. This is laudable, for a most important lesson that we have learned from recent global health crisis such as SARs, the Avian Flu and most recently the Swine Flu, only through rapid information dissemination and global awareness and cooperation can we tackle problems associated with invasive pathogens and species.

We congratulate the Convention on Biological Diversity on this auspicious occasion celebrating the International Day for Biological Diversity.