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NEW FOCUS ON RURAL DEVELOPMENT: WHERE DOES THE UNCCD FIGURE?

The food price crisis and climate resilience appear to open new windows of opportunity for sustainable land management, but are we really facing an unprecedented situation?

The answer is both yes and no. On the one hand, many challenges remain the same. We are still doing landscape restoration so that sound natural resource management drives production and productivity and environmental services are provided for sustainable livelihoods. Environment induced migration to urban centers continues to leave in its wake an increasing number of women-headed households and uncertain land tenure rights. Governance and coordination, public debate, capacity building and knowledge exchange are still the call of the day. The validity of the paradigm shift from isolated project delivery towards programmatic approaches in development that came with the consensus on sustainable development at Rio in 1992 still holds true. On the other hand, there are new aspects to the development change agenda.

One is the urgent call for immediate action, finance and implementation. Yet we know there is no 'quick fix' when it comes to land issues in development. Long-term solutions that assess risks and weigh trade-offs as part of overall development planning processes are a prerequisite for sustainability. Could it be that we are putting programmatic approaches at risk, so as to avoid losing the political momentum offered by climate resilience and food security? We have no time, yet time is precisely what we need to develop commensurate, lasting solutions.

Secondly, there is a huge knowledge gap between implementing institutions in developing countries and those working at the international level and on global policy processes. The results of international negotiations need to be mainstreamed and repackaged for public consumption, to induce action on the ground, while national research institutes and civil society organizations have a role to play in transferring eco-compatible knowledge. Information on financial development opportunities under the emerging 'climate change

finance regime' must be easier to come by. Action plans - including UN Framework Convention on Climate Change National Adaptation Plans for Action and UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) National Action Plans - must be strategic documents that provide a framework enabling climate resilience and sustainable land management to be tackled in existing programmes, and not as a parallel process.

Thirdly, all stakeholders need to evaluate the potentially important role of subsistence and small-scale farming for the climate change market. Subsistence farming as the major driver behind adaptation in developing countries is a potential macroeconomic force that the international community needs to reckon with when designing its approach to post-Kyoto. Forests outside tropical rainforests therefore have to be part of the debate on Reduced Emissions Deforestation and Degradation (REDD), opening up the climate market to the poorer segments of rural populations.

The UNCCD is an important instrument to make ends meet in terms of climate resilience, food security and rural development. In order to achieve results, the UNCCD needs to be more flexible in its approach, grasp the opportunities that the Convention text presents, and continue to work to free itself from relative isolation.

The Ten Year Strategic Plan and Framework adopted by the eighth Conference of the Parties (COP 8) of the UNCCD in 2007, constitutes a solid consensus by Parties of the need to streamline and prioritize action, build scientific evidence and public awareness, develop and advocate for enabling policies, set standards, and mobilize financial resources. The basic issue of what the UNCCD has to lose or gain can effectively be addressed through strengthened debate at COP itself.

The new focus on rural development, agriculture and forestry induced by climate change and food security offers the UNCCD the opportunity to position itself at the interface of various processes, as an effective promoter of comprehensive and programmatic implementation of sustainable land management. Based on the Ten Year Strategic Plan, the UNCCD will be the service provider on integration urgently needed to package the results of various negotiations and emerging finance in a meaningful, action oriented way that will assist country Parties in addressing sustainable land management issues more effectively.

The outcomes of COP 9 in 2009 will be a measure of the Convention's capacity to turn the page and effectively support country Parties to meet the new demands on land, by providing social, economic and environmental services, as called for by the international community.



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