



**MESSAGE OF THE EXECUTIVE SECRETARY  
OF THE CONVENTION ON BIOLOGICAL DIVERSITY  
BRAULIO F. DE SOUZA DIAS  
on the occasion of the  
WORLD DAY TO COMBAT DESERTIFICATION  
17 JUNE 2015**

*“No such thing as a free lunch. Invest in healthy soils”*

Close to 1 billion people, or roughly 1 in 8 people, presently lack sufficient nutritious food, with the most vulnerable of them living on degraded land. And while the earth’s fertile land is limited, the vast majority of our food calories still come from the land. When you then factor in that the fresh water needed to produce our food is filtered by the land, there is no question that the quantity and quality of the land directly affects our lives and thus our well-being. As we celebrate this year’s World Day to Combat Desertification, the message could not be clearer; in order to attain food security for all through sustainable food systems we must invest in our land. We cannot underestimate the importance of healthy soils. The soil under our feet plays a critical role for food security, as it does for climate change adaptation and mitigation, essential ecosystem services, poverty alleviation and sustainable development.

Soils represent at least a quarter of global biodiversity. It is the basis for the food people eat, the feed for their livestock, the fuel they use to cook with and the production of fibres for clothes and other uses. It plays a key role in the supply of clean water. It is the basis for soil resilience to the effects of floods and drought. Plant and animal life depend on primary nutrient recycling through soil biological processes. It is not an exaggeration to say that without soils we could not sustain much of life on earth’s continents, and where soil is lost it cannot easily be renewed on a human timeline. Approximately one third of the world’s soil is already moderately- to highly- degraded due to erosion, nutrient depletion, acidification, urbanization and chemical pollution. If we allow the current rate of soil degradation to continue, future generations will struggle to meet their needs.

Escalating population growth and increasing demand for food will put an even greater strain on land resources. Estimates suggest that we may need to clear 6 million hectares of new land every year, until 2050, to meet the growing demands for food, water, energy and fuel. Yet this pathway will lead to considerable biodiversity loss and increased greenhouse gas emissions. These pressures are compounded by the reality that we are presently degrading the land faster than it is recovering. In fact, we degrade 12 million hectares of land each year, and lose the opportunity to produce 20 million tons of grain annually. This not only impacts us negatively but undermines our goal of eradicating hunger and poverty for all.



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Therefore, how we manage the land, including achieving sustainable agriculture, becomes even more critical for food security and poverty eradication, especially in developing countries.

But there are solutions. The Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011 – 2020 and, in particular, Aichi Biodiversity Target 5 which aims to at least halve and bring as close to zero as possible the rate of loss of natural habitats, and Aichi Target 15 which aims to restore at least 15% of degraded ecosystems, seek to reverse the negative trend of land degradation. In addition, as part of the post-2015 development agenda, the proposed sustainable development goal on land aims to chart a more proactive path for our future by targeting three simultaneous actions: avoid degrading additional land, recover as much as we can of that which is already degraded, and, for every hectare of land we degrade, to rehabilitate a hectare of degraded land in the same ecosystem and the same timeframe. This is an important effort. Reversing the degradation of soils delivers a range of benefits including improved nutrient and water management, soil organic carbon content, natural pest and disease regulation and reduced soil erosion. Additionally, increasing the efficiency of the use of inputs (e.g. fertilizer, pesticides and herbicides), simultaneously increases food productivity, reduces off-farm impacts and increases resilience to climate change.

Achieving food security will also require that we achieve other relevant Aichi Biodiversity Targets. By 2020 we should seek to realise that: incentives and subsidies are reformed; plans are implemented for sustainable production and consumption; fisheries are harvested sustainably; areas under agriculture, aquaculture and forestry are managed sustainably; pollution, including excess nutrients, is reduced below detrimental levels; genetic diversity of cultivated and farmed species, and their wild relatives, is maintained; ecosystems providing essential services are conserved and restored; ecosystem resilience and the contribution of biodiversity to carbon stocks are enhanced, through conservation and restoration, including restoration of at least 15 per cent of degraded ecosystems, and that traditional knowledge, innovations and practices are respected and integrated.

During this International Year of Soils, continuing with a ‘business as usual’ approach in our present patterns of behaviour, consumption, production and economic incentives will not allow us to realize the vision of a world with ecosystems capable of meeting human needs into the future. As we mark the 2015 World Day to Combat Desertification let us strive to restore degraded soils, and adopt sustainable strategies that sustain ecosystem services by integrating the management of land, water and biodiversity. By doing this we can attain food security, help adapt to climate change and achieve the goals and targets of the Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011-2020.

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