

COFO 2012

“Forests: a green pathway for human development”

Keynote speech of UNCCD ES at opening ceremony

Looking beyond the forest horizon for an effective sustainable forest management

(10-15min)

Date: Monday, 24 September 2012, 9:30-10:30

Venue: Plenary Hall Building A, 3rd floor, FAO Headquarters, Rome

Honorable Ministers, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

All protocols observed.

Good morning!

I am truly delighted to have been invited to deliver a keynote statement at this 3rd World Forest Week and the 21st session of the Committee on Forestry. I would like to express my gratitude to Dr Jose Graziano da Silva, Director General of FAO and Dr. Eduardo Rojas-Briales, Director of FAO's Forestry Department for the invitation.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

It is human development, or at least the quest for it, which caused the conversion of billions of hectares of forests into man-made deserts. It prompted, in the middle of the 19th century, the French novelist Chateaubriand to state that "*forests precede civilizations, deserts follow them*". In other words, human beings are the only desert making species.

To reverse the tide and change such an inherent habit, we must think and operate outside of the “forest” box. We must look beyond the rainforest horizon and embrace holistic approaches to the entire landscape. That is my call. That is my message for you today, if we

want to make sustainable forest management a green pathway for human development.

First, why must we look beyond the rainforest?

Rainforests are attractive places to be. They have the highest concentrations of biological diversity. They provide some of the rarest and most valuable tree products. They are natural wonders to behold. There are many powerful reasons for our collective fascination. But the “sexiness” of the rainforests has also done humanity a disservice. Our obsession with rainforests has been at the expense of other kinds of forest. These “other forests” are seriously undervalued and remain a blind spot for policy makers; to the extent that REDD and REDD+ have been designed, quite solely, for rainforests.

Let me elaborate.

As you know, 40% of the Earth is open or closed forest. Of this 42% is dry forest, 33% is moist forest but only 25% is wet forest. Yet the public is largely, if not wholly, unaware that dry forests are more extensive than rainforests. Is it any wonder then that dry forests receive such little attention in conservation efforts?

There are two further reasons why we should look beyond the rainforest.

In 2010, FAO’s *Global Forest Resources Assessment* stated, and I quote: “*The protective functions of forests are more important in the arid zones than elsewhere.*” Why? The value of dry forests to humanity is greatest in this ecosystem. Dry forests provide food, medicine, energy and shelter for rural populations. In essence because the majority of the 2.5 billion people living today in the drylands are poor, forests are a major social-safety net. Forest products are an important source of income for the poor in this ecosystem. But dryland forests are an underrated resource.

All over the world, governments provide incentives for start-up businesses.

In China, the government and business are thinking outside the box by providing help and incentives to rural farmers for forest and land

restoration. Over a 16-year period, decentralization and land ownership reforms, where those who manage the land own it for 30 to 50 years, have been supported by accountability mechanisms and a systematic, scientific approach to assessment and monitoring. Along with technical support to improve farming practices, subsidies have been given as an incentive to restore degraded land. Over time, these initiatives have evolved to become important forms of employment.

For example, by assisting farmers to erect tree shelter-belts in the drylands, the rural poor are now able to farm in areas where commercial food production was not viable.

These innovative policies address many challenges at once. They are at least part of the reason China has lifted so many people out of poverty and hunger. In the process, the government is restoring some 170,000 hectares of desertified land every year, through forestation and afforestation programmes, alleviating pressure on the nation's forests.

But dry forests restoration is about more than beating poverty. In Brazil and in China and in some other countries, adaptive and far-sighted policies are attracting private sector investments for sustainable forest and land restoration in the drylands. Two weeks ago, I visited Inner Mongolia, Xingiang and Maowosu provinces in China where business entrepreneurs with real foresight are now using innovation and new business models to build thriving restoration businesses.

Imagine what could have happened in the Sahel region if there had been such dedicated support to smallholder farmers. Farmers who, with their meager resources and through what has been labelled as farmer-managed natural regeneration, have now reforested over 5 million hectares of land!

We should stop making dry forests deserts of investment.

In fact, dry forests are crucial for human survival. They hold the key to our global food security because they are the backbone of the dryland ecosystems that support 44% of our global food production systems and 50% of its livestock.

As we, quite rightly, claim in the UNCCD "Forests keep Drylands working"! - providing vital water, stabilizing the soil and building resilience to drought.

So excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

Let us overcome our misconceptions and misperceptions about drylands and dry forests. Let us look beyond the rainforests.

But we should also look beyond the overall forest horizon if we want to make sustainable forest management a green pathway for human development.

Why?

Because 70 to 80% of forest degradation has been caused by cropland expansion. If we continue with business as usual, we will need to secure access to another 175 - 220 million hectares of land by 2030 to meet the world's growing demand for food and feed - let alone water and energy needs!

As cropland expansion is the leading cause of forest depletion, the forestry community must be at the forefront of the campaign to restore not just forests but also degraded land in all ecosystems. In the absence of effective alternatives, in order to meet the competing claims for more productive lands, the depletion of forests is bound to continue.

Indeed, more than 2 billion hectares of land are suitable for forest and landscape restoration. Out of this, 75% is best suited to mosaic restoration, where forests and trees can be combined with other land uses, including agroforestry, especially in drylands. The Bonn challenge is a very commendable endeavor with a coalition of the willing committed to restore 150 million hectares of lost forests and degraded lands by 2020.

But you may have noticed on the map titled "World of opportunity for forest and landscape restoration" that the country of Niger is not included, despite the fact that more than 5 million ha have already been restored there. So let us be aware of the lens we are using when we talk about potential for restoration.

We need to work together to restore the degraded forests. But if we cannot stop the degradation of land and halt deforestation for further agricultural development, this work will be in vain. This is why the outcomes of Rio + 20 on land degradation and land restoration should capture the imagination of every forester and signal a paradigm shift.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

I invite you to reflect again on paragraphs 205 to 209 of the declaration of the summit: "The future we want".

The declaration is a call for a paradigm shift which will prompt the alignment of land use policies with accountability mechanisms, the efficient use of available resources and the mobilization of additional resources for nation-wide landscape approaches. By calling for a land-degradation neutral world, leaders at Rio+20 demonstrated their readiness to support activities that will curb further land and forest degradation. But this will remain a pipe dream unless it can be translated into action. They also agreed to monitor, globally, land degradation and restore degraded land, with a focus on drylands.

So let me suggest four areas where we should join forces to advance this common agenda.

Way Forward

If we are traveling together, we need to ensure the global community defines our destination. What do we mean by land-degradation neutrality: what is our goal and what are the related targets? By what date should we aim to be land-degradation neutral? The Bonn Challenge is a clear example of what needs to be done – ambitious but feasible.

We also need robust institutions, especially in monitoring, to support the scaling up and scaling out of solutions that have worked.

An economic assessment of the true value of sustainable land and forest management, particularly in the drylands, is also needed. It could be one of the best tools to dispel the myths that have made the drylands peripheral to development.

The importance of a solid scientific base to drive this policy agenda forward cannot be overstated. Foresters must be an integral part of the community providing solutions and pathways to change.

In conclusion, let me say this: future demands for food, energy and water will be a major challenge for the forestry community. Unless you are willing to think beyond traditional forestry, you may win a few battles but you will lose the war. However, if you join forces with like-minded groups, to support the restoration of degraded land as a way to meet humanity's growing demands for productive lands, half of your battle is already won.

It gives me so much hope that you have invited me here – as an advocate of the drylands and its people – to deliver this keynote address.

If you forget everything else I have said today, please remember this: a land-degradation neutral world is a key pillar of the future we want. It will help secure the future of our forests. To achieve this, we all need to think outside of our respective boxes.

Thank you for your kind attention.