

Address by

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Mr. Chairperson, distinguished Delegates.

It is a great pleasure and honour for me to address this Fifth Session of the Conference of Parties to the Convention to Combat Desertification, barely a few months after my nomination as Director of the United Nations Interagency Secretariat of the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UN/ISDR). As a former UNCCD staff and having served under the leadership of Mr. Diallo, I intend to establish and develop a fruitful collaboration with the UNCCD and create synergies and complementary approaches for our work at the global, regional, sub-regional, national and local levels.

Today the United Nations, countries and organisations around the world are celebrating the International Day on Disaster Reduction focusing attention on preventing natural disasters and improving the way we deal with the consequences.

During the 1990s there was a ten per cent annual increase in the economic loss due to natural disasters. Looking towards the future, some recent projections indicate that without aggressive disaster reduction interventions, by the year 2065, the economic cost of the impact of disasters will account for a significant proportion of global GDP.

Recent findings of the second working group of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) indicate that changes in climate will adversely affect many regions, in particular countries in tropical and sub-tropical latitudes. These changes in temperature and related local rainfall variations affect on the one hand the environment, through accelerated desertification and degradation, and on the other hand socio-economic factors, such as water resources, human health, agriculture, fisheries. In addition, climate change is projected to affect sea levels, and importantly, climate extremes. Unfortunately, all these factors have a compound effect on the occurrence and impact of disasters; on the one hand, they affect the intensity and frequency of extreme hydrometeorological events and on the other hand, they increase the vulnerability of societies - the main factor responsible for the growing socio-economic costs related to disasters. At the same time, natural disasters can amplify man-made emergencies, as we are all too aware from unfolding events in Afghanistan

It is worth reminding ourselves that while natural hazards (floods, drought, wildfires, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, cyclones, etc), are as yet not entirely preventable, human action can play an important role in either increasing or

decreasing the vulnerability to the impact of these hazards. In this regard, demographic change, the process of urbanization and the existence of widespread poverty continue to force large numbers of people to live in disaster prone and geographically unstable environments, significantly increasing their vulnerability. On the other hand, human creativity in terms of application of new technology in the area of forecasting can improve early warning systems, which will in turn lead to a significant reduction in the impact of hazards. It was this recognition of the dangers posed by the occurrence of natural disasters, and the need for the international community to give increased attention to the problem, that led the UN General Assembly to launch the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction (IDNDR) during the period 1990-1999. The experience of the Decade promoted a major conceptual shift in disaster management, from disaster response to an emphasis on disaster reduction.

Mr. Chairperson,

At the end of the Decade The UNGA establish The UN/ISDR Secretariat to serve as the focal point within the United Nations system for the co-ordination of strategies and programmes for natural disaster reduction, and to ensure synergy between disaster reduction strategies and those in the socio-economic and humanitarian fields. The Secretariat is also strengthening its capacity to serve as an international clearinghouse for the dissemination and exchange of information and knowledge on disaster reduction.

In this respect, the Secretariat for the ISDR seeks to bring a multi-disciplinary and multi-sectoral perspective by complementing and assisting the work of the various organizations and agencies in their areas of competence. In this perspective, the Inter-agency Task Force recently established and endorsed a Framework for Action for the implementation of the Strategy. This document provides guidance to all entities engaged in disaster reduction for the elaboration of specific action plans.

The Inter-Agency Task Force on Disaster Reduction also established by the UNGA is the main forum for the development of policies and strategies in this field. The Task Force, which comprises representatives from UN agencies, regional institutions and the NGO community, has established 4 Working Groups, on:

- El Niño and other climatic variables, led by the World Meteorological Organization (WMO);
- Early Warning, led by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP);
- Risk and Vulnerability, led by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP); and
- Wild-land Fires, led by the Global Fire Monitoring Centre (Freiburg, Germany) on behalf of the World Conservation Union (IUCN).

The Inter-Agency Task Force includes a number of technical and scientific organizations such as WMO, UNDP, UNEP, UNESCO, FAO, World Bank, ICSU, IFRC, IUCN, OAS, OAU/AU among other. Experience shows that successful longer-term prevention strategies must be based on cross-sectoral and interdisciplinary co-operation and strong partnerships involving the scientific community, national and local governments, NGO's, the private sector, as well as the organisations and agencies of the UN system.

Throughout the IDNDR and during the first year of the establishment of the ISDR, science and technology have been explicitly recognised as one central component of the strategy aimed at promoting successful disaster reduction. Thanks to global observation systems, computer modelling and efficient telecommunication, we now have a better understanding of the oceanic-atmospheric interactions, as well as a clearer idea of the mechanisms behind climate variables, such as the ENSO phenomenon. The ISDR programme is based on the view that sound scientific understanding of the origin and evolution of a natural hazard, needs to be complemented by a disaster resilient population, that is aware of the risk and provided with sufficient early warning. This endeavour can be best achieved by bringing people and organizations from various relevant sectors together in a multi-disciplinary and inclusive professional relationship.

A number of previous speakers have called for a greater synergy between the work of the Convention and disaster reduction, in particular in the build up to the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD). I would also like to join Professor GOP Obasi, Secretary-General of WMO, who called for an increased collaboration between the UNCCD and the UN/ISDR, when addressing this Conference of the Parties, in particular with regards to early warning systems. In this context, the similarities of both UNCCD and UN/ISDR processes with regards to minimizing the impacts of natural disasters and particularly drought, were considered in the report of the ad hoc panel on early warnings systems to this COP5 session.

Areas which would require a closer collaboration and linkages between the UNCCD and UN/ISDR include:

- Early warning systems
- Regional programming
- National action plans
- Promotion of synergies and sustainable development
- Public awareness and public commitment

Our collaboration becomes even more relevant, when dealing with the African continent. The proportion of large rapid onset disasters is typically less high in Africa than in other regions of the world. Numerous slow onset disasters highlight the particularities of disaster reduction within the various African regions. The African society, economy, and environment is increasingly vulnerable to the impact of natural disasters. Desertification is an important vulnerability factor, amplified by chronic food insecurity, poverty, AIDS and other epidemics, environmental degradation, droughts, wars, social strife, displaced populations, as well as poor or nonexistent telecommunication networks, to name just a few.

Mr. Chairperson,

The challenges posed by natural hazards and related environmental and technological disasters, including the threats posed by drought and desertification, are critical for the development of a sustainable approach to development and thus for the survival of the planet in the 21st century. The UN/ISDR Secretariat is therefore committed to working with governments, national platforms, regional institutions and relevant international organizations in responding to these challenges in a creative and proactive manner by promoting a new awareness that disaster reduction is likely to bring significant long-term benefits.

I look forward to discussing with my former colleagues of the UNCCD Secretariat, at the earliest possible occasion, a specific work-plan for collaboration.

I wish you a very productive session.

Thank you.

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