



**Desertification and Drought ... Global Reality**  
*On the Sidelines of The World Day to Combat Desertification  
and Drought – 17 June 2011*



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## **Desertification and Drought ... Global Reality.**

### **On the Sidelines of the World Day to Combat**

The issue of sustainable management of natural resources is no longer merely an expression of well-being of society, or a showcase of progress and prosperity; it has rather become a matter of survival, as it directly affects the various aspects of human life. The environmental dimension and the natural resource management have become objective important and decisive determinants in all policies and strategies of countries at the political or economic levels.

Desertification and drought also two faces for one serious problem, and constitute together big threats, problems and risks to countries of the world either directly or indirectly. Land degradation affects a significant portion of the arable territory of the globe, and directly impacts on the livelihoods of people and economic development of countries. It also causes significant economic losses and disruption in food markets, in light of the increasing numbers of the population, and results in widening the gap between production and consumption, and destabilizes the social and political stability.

Perhaps the suffering of northern China in this time from desertification and drought across agricultural lands, is evident as an example, where the Yellow River, or as so-called the Birth of Chinese civilization, is polluted to the extent that it is no longer able to provide the Chinese with drinking water. The rate of growth

of major cities depleted groundwater which was flowing for thousands of years, in addition to deforestation and overgrazing, which caused the risk of ingestion of dust storms to villages of north China.

### **Amazing facts**

Dry lands cover about one third of the world, and is home to about a third of the world's population, while land supplies the world with about 44% of its food, and 50% of its livestock. Statistics estimates soil degradation in the world by about 1% per year.

A few of us know that the world needs to increase its production of food by about 70% in 2050 to meet the needs of some 9 billion persons, according to the expectations of Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO); and a few also know that the rate of loss of arable land currently ranges between 30 to 35 times average rate prevailing over ages.

The world loses every year about 120 million km<sup>2</sup> of land as a result of the phenomena of desertification and drought, or about three times the size of Switzerland or land enough to plant about 20 million tons of grain; while under one third of the globe almost undergoes desertification in general. The impact of desertification on the African continent in particular, puts at risk the health and welfare of the 1.5 billion people. The total desertified areas in the world is about 46 million km<sup>2</sup> and the Arab world, share of desertified land is about 13 million km<sup>2</sup>, constituting 28% of the total desertified areas in the world.

Previously estimated losses resulting from problems related to soil were about \$ 42 billion annually as a result of low productivity, increase in food prices, and other indirect effects. Today we find that the loss of the world as a result of this imbalance is estimated

at \$ 1 trillion a year, more than half of gross domestic products GDPs of Arab countries combined.

## **Desertification and Drought ... a Comprehensive Concept**

Terms and definitions of the concept of desertification overlap in meaning and content; the United Nations defines it as the process of land degradation in arid and semi-arid and dry sub-humid areas, resulting from various factors, including climatic variations and human activities, causing loss of plant life and its biodiversity. This leads to loss of topsoil, and the loss of the ability of land to produce, and support animal and human life. Thus desertification means the transformation of large areas of fertile and highly productive areas of land to poor flora and fauna.

Desertification is not as we think just the spread of desert at the expense of nearby agricultural land and the shrinking of fertile green areas; but also includes the spread of concrete blocks, and the occurrence of degradation in soil, vegetation, water resources, inflicting a negative impact on animal and human health, depriving them of chances to live. Desertification is not inevitable, and is not altogether outside the human control, however; there are solutions to this problem, and it can be dealt with effectively by strengthening community participation and cooperation at all levels.

Drought is a natural climatic phenomenon that occurs frequently in most parts of the world. One of the first climate events recorded in history, and it occurs as a result of severe shortage of water resources in a certain area. In other words it occurs when an area suffers continuously from lower rainfall than normal for a certain period of time.

**Desertification results due to a combination of factors, especially human related ones.**

Causes of desertification are varied and complex, unlike what many may think that desertification is result of natural causes, and most importantly low level of rainfall, frequent droughts, continuous dust storms, and a link of global climate phenomena; but it is certain that desertification is the result of several factors, in which humans play a fundamental role. Humans tamper with soil, plants and groundwater through their unplanned and random activities, especially the urban sprawl, excessive consumption of soil, overgrazing, deforestation, poor exploitation of water resources, and other harmful practices.

More than 80% of the total area of drylands is found in only 3 continents, namely Africa, Asia and Australia. Dry lands in the African continent accounted for 37%, Asia 33% and Australia 14% of the total area of dry lands. The inhabitants of the continents of Asia and Africa suffer from of the highest rates of drought and desertification in the world; the area of desertified land in Africa is approaches 35% of the total area of the continent; and in Asia 45%. More than 250 million people live at risk of drought and desertification on both continents.

### **United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification and Drought**

The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification was declared in 1994, on the same date the General Assembly the United Nations proclaimed June 17 as the World Day to Combat Desertification and Drought. Since then, the countries participating in the Convention, and the agencies, international organizations and non-governmental organizations and interested parties, celebrate the day to recall that the problem of desertification can be dealt with, and that possible, solutions lie in joint action and concerted international efforts to eliminate this problem. The International Day of desertification and drought this year will be under the theme "Forests to maintain the vitality of the arid land".

The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification is the only framework which is internationally recognized and legally binding instrument that addresses the problem of land degradation in dry areas; and the Convention has the support of universal membership of more than 190 countries. It aims at promoting concrete actions, and supportive international regional and partnerships. The United Nations declared a strategy which extends to ten years (2008-2018) according to the Convention to Combat Desertification and Drought. Effective implementation of the Convention and strategy is becoming ever more urgent, given the continued deterioration of the environment and the increasing volatility of climate, which stems as a cause for concern, and involves the effects of serious social and economic consequences.

### **UAE efforts to combat desertification and drought**

Due to the location of the UAE within the dry desert belt, its exposure to the risk of desertification and drought is natural; however, the State puts the problem in the priorities of its national plans and strategies, which is evident in the adoption of the Council of Ministers, "Strategy and National Action Programs to Combat Desertification" in 2003. The Strategy and National Action Programs were prepared based on the requirements of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification, within the framework of plans and policies of the State in the field of sustainable development. In cooperation and coordination with the Committee on Environment and Development, the State has developed national programs of action that includes many projects and sub-activities.

The strategy aims at maintaining renewable natural resources of soil, water, vegetation and domesticated and wild livestock, by taking appropriate preventive and remedial measures, applying sustainable management systems, and preparedness for droughts to mitigate its effects, reduce the impact of erosion and halt the spread of shifting sands, as well as the further development of

national human resources and increase the efficiency of scientific, technical skills and raise environmental awareness.

A vivid example of desertification and drought, in the State and specifically in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi, was witnessed in Liwa and the Western Region sand encroachment on agricultural land and urban and economic development facilities, which is the same as what happened in Central and Eastern Regions, as an average intensity deterioration of vegetation and desertification took place in Al Ain area as a result of overgrazing and excessive consumption of groundwater which led to a drop in water levels, depletion of wells, high salinity and the deterioration and abandonment of a large number of farms in several locations in the northern region.

This conscious distinctive addressing of the desertification problem was not a recent response, but it reflects the early lucid vision of Late Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan (May God bless his soul), regarding the features of the environmental situation in UAE, and their urgent and future needs. That vision was the prime driving force for the integrated system and its diversified activities in the fight against desertification. The results of these efforts were reflected in the spread of green areas and gardens, and the establishment of natural protectorates, increasing numbers of palm trees, and planting vast tracts of desert with trees.

It is time to combine all national, regional and international efforts to confront this danger, till now this problem, has not attracted worldwide enough efforts and attention, though still remedy is possible and easy, and affected areas can be utilized.