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Report of the conference

Desertification and climate change

Opening the conference **Marie-Anne Isler-Beguin, MEP**, highlighted the fact that 2006 was the International Year of Deserts and Desertification but little was done to promote the issues. Therefore, she welcomed participants to this conference noting that desertification was the poor relation internationally compared with climate change and biodiversity. Within the EU, she added, desertification will become a serious issue but knowing what to do will be difficult. People must be made aware. Politically discussions must held with the ACP countries and more action taken within the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD).

Rebecca Harms, MEP, citing the example in Germany of a polar bear cub called Knut, which has become a symbol for issues surrounding climate change, that desertification hadn't such a profile. In relation to climate change Ms Harms is sceptical of any real meaningful response being achieved given that targets seem to be pushed further and further into the distance.

Panel Discussion: Desertification in Europe

Chair: **Mr Sepp Kusstatscher, MEP**

Dr. Luca Montanarella, Joint Research Centre, Italy, pointed out a public misconception that desertification is linked to the presence of deserts. It is in fact the result of human induced land degradation which can be accelerated under sever drought conditions, and can occur under very diverse climatic conditions. Research in Europe is showing increasing soil moisture deficits and increased soil erosion. This is particularly pronounced in Southern Spain and Italy. Another important factor is the role of soils in the global carbon balance. The organic carbon content of soil is an indicator of the 'health' of a soil. Soils with low organic carbon content are at a higher risk of desertification. Combating desertification requires both national and local plans to implement measure to reduce land degradation.

Mrs Claudia Olazabal, DG ENVI, presented an overview of the European Commission's Thematic Strategy on Soil, its aim ultimately to protect soils from further degradation. Identification of risk areas is a key component followed with the necessary action. The Commission will publish later this summer a Communication on Water Scarcity and Droughts and a Green Paper on Adaptation to Climate Change. Concluding Mrs Olazabal stated that soil is a victim of climate change, but also soil can produce climate change if poorly managed (release of organic carbon from the soil).

Mr Javier Sanchez Anso, representing the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) and a farmer from Northern Spain highlighted some local issues from an area affected by drought. In his address he stated that the issue needs to be tackled in economic, social and environmentally sustainable ways. In isolation nothing can really be achieved. Desertification impacts not just on human activities but also on

the ecosystems, and is a threat to 30% of the land area of Spain. Mr Sanchez Anso also questioned the Common Agricultural Policy and international trade policy, suggesting they contributed to inappropriate practices and resulting land degradation.

Panel Discussion: Desertification in the Inter-Tropical Zones

Chair: **Marie-Anne Isler-Beguin, MEP**

Mr Manour N'Diaye, Secretariat of the UNCCD, outlined the UNCCD's role to contribute to poverty eradication and the promotion of sustainable development. For the most part desertification is found in areas of greatest poverty, where people are generally forced to over exploit marginal lands in order to survive. The UNCCD seeks to create a dynamic, coordinated process that links the environmental dimension of desertification with a broader socio-economic framework that supports self-sustaining livelihoods. National action plans are devised as an instrument to fight desertification but sufficient funding is crucial and must be made available. Furthermore, combating desertification and adapting to climate change are mutually reinforcing. The EU has an important long-term role to maximise the impact of assistance, and that individual countries should take a lead role, for example, Germany in Mali and Namibia, France in Cape Verde and Chad etc.

Mr Mohaned Lemine Ould El Hacen, Nauakchott University, Mauretania, highlighted the problems faced by one region, Mauretania and the Sahel. This is an area which is vulnerable, has a shortage of rainfall, a fragile ecosystem and the added pressures of growing densities of humans and cattle. In nomadic days these pressures weren't as pronounced but with the introduction of settlements and urbanisation, land degradation has increased. This in turn has led to an increase in dune formations, which are difficult to combat. The planting of tree was though to be a solution but in fact has only exacerbated the problem in other areas as they change wind patterns carrying the sand to other, often non-affected, areas. Therefore, it is important that actions carried out must be effective and long-term. Short-term projects that meet the needs of donor countries, often for publicity at home, are of little use.

Mr Patrice Burger, Director CARI, France, representing civil society, noted that the process of land degradation leads to a deterioration of the services of the ecosystem, which is the basic of life. As the land deteriorates, vegetation is lost; water hasn't the opportunity to soak into the soil and instead runs taking nutrients with it, causes erosion and damages streams and rivers with additional sediment. It is a global problem with 41% of the Earth's landmass and 38% of the population in dry areas. Approximately 250 million are directly affected. The FAO has said that land management has an impact but there are also other factors so it is difficult to define where the process begins or ends. The cost of desertification is increased immigration and cultural loss, and economic losses of between 1 and 10% of agricultural GDP. Furthermore, with climate change predicting a temperature increase, a further 30 to 40% of additional land could be affected. NGOs, he said, can have a positive influence, especially at the local level, providing added value to projects, but they need the capacity to do it. Public policy must be synchronised to deal with the complex problem of desertification but whether this can be achieved politically remains unanswered.

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