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Parliamentarians Urge Greater Efforts on Land Degradation



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BONN/BUENOS AIRES (IDN) - Besides the tasks of maintaining peace and avoiding wars between and within countries, our planet is faced with two challenges in this century: the fight against poverty and against climate change through sustainable development paths -- challenges which are sharpened by the current economic crisis and cannot be tackled without addressing food security and desertification issues.

This was one of the important outcomes of a Round Table for Parliamentarians in Buenos Aires in parallel with the ninth Conference of the Parties to the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD).

Some 40 parliamentarians representing about 20 parliaments from Africa, Asia, Europe and Latin America participated in the Round Table Sept. 24-25 at the invitation of the secretariat of the UNCCD with support of the Parliament's Chamber of Deputies of Argentina and the Inter-Parliamentary Union. They reaffirmed their commitment to do the utmost in strengthening the political will, which is essential for the successful implementation of the UNCCD and for the achievement of sustainable human development at local, national, regional and global levels.

After intensive debates and fruitful information sharing the parliamentarians adopted the "Declaration of Buenos Aires" entitled: 'The role of Members of Parliament in the efforts to combat desertification: parliamentary contributions to achieving food security and addressing climate change in the drylands under the current economic crisis'.

The declaration states that there is no human security without food security. Parliamentary activities related to food security in the drylands start from three baselines:

- (a) affected States have the primary role in combating food insecurity;
- (b) the participation of affected populations and local communities, particularly women and youth, must be ensured; and
- (c) developed States must actively support, individually or jointly, suitable efforts of affected developing countries.

FOOD SECURITY

The enactment of enabling legislation is a key tool for combating desertification, the protection of human rights including the right to food, and environmental governance at the national level. Parliaments should look for the establishment or strengthening of food security systems, including storage and marketing facilities.

Parliaments have a responsibility to work for a food security enabling environment. Policies that improve the security of land use rights are a prerequisite for sustainable land management (SLM). There is high need to maintain the productivity of arable land and top soil fertility.

The UNCCD is forward-looking in that it promotes the enhancement of local ownership and the empowerment of farmers in SLM. Governments or regional and local communities backed or driven by parliamentarians should put issues relevant to SLM on their agendas and approve corresponding ordinances, laws and rules of use. Parliaments and parliamentarians should mainstream SLM into long-term policies and national development strategies.

Because of its relevance to food security, poverty reduction and political stability, as well as to sustainable development and the environment, agriculture needs a re-evaluation in the political arena; parliamentarians in developed and developing countries have to play their roles. At least 10 % of the national budgets should be allocated to agriculture.

Development assistance must be effective, strengthening rather than undermining country efforts to improve governance in agriculture.

Agricultural protection in donor countries and subsidized agricultural exports often undermine the assistance available to agriculture and efforts in developing countries, creating a governance challenge for donor countries and for policy coherence.

Parliaments should strive to ensure that food, agricultural trade and overall trade policies are conducive to fostering food security for all through a fair market-oriented non-speculative world trade system embedded in a sustainable, socially balanced and fair globalization.

Global problems such as the recent economic turbulences require coordinated, global solutions. Financial institutions must be accountable, transparent, and subject to strong oversight. The most vulnerable people and countries must not be forgotten.

Parliaments have a particular responsibility to ensure transparency and accountability in the economic and financial reform process; they have a duty to question ministers and hold them to the strictest possible account for implementing what has been agreed at international meetings.

CLIMATE CHANGE

Desertification and climate change must be addressed in a synergetic fashion, as part of an integrated approach to achieving sustainable development for all. Combating desertification needs to be recognized as an entry point to address poverty reduction and ecosystem protection. The interlinkages between land/soil and climate change are significant and should be better reflected in policymaking processes, including parliamentary activities.

Institutions have a crucial role to play everywhere. Climate change actions, development planning and disaster risk reduction must come together. This requires that they are led from the highest political and organizational level. Participatory democracy, functioning institutions and transparency are needed at all levels for effective adaptation and mitigation.

Land and soil can make a difference in the fight against climate change. Sustainable land management has significant potential to mitigate climate change -- not only by afforestation and reducing deforestation.

Soil carbon sequestration, through restoring organic soils and improving degraded lands, conservation agriculture and grassland as well as water management can contribute significantly to reducing emissions.

One concrete way forward could be to expand the coverage of the Clean Development Mechanism to agricultural land use, to include projects focusing on carbon sequestration in soil. SLM offers a cost-efficient contribution to climate protection and is essential to achieving the MDGs and global food security.

The UN is invited to consider seriously setting up an international instrument, in accordance with international law, such as an international judiciary body specially for handling environmental pollution cases and their consequences.

The MPs recommend to promote ways avoiding royalties and other levies for the transfer of clean technologies.

Desertification and land degradation issues deserve global policy attention and the needs of

drylands must be fully integrated into the Copenhagen Protocol, expected to emerge from the UN climate change conference this December.

The initiative for a Global Green New Deal in Copenhagen should be supported on the condition that SLM becomes an integral part of it and of future climate protection strategies. A Special International Environment Fund should be created for this purpose.

POLITICAL WILL

The Parliamentarians are convinced that the relationships between desertification, SLM and food security, and between soil and climate change are important. They have transboundary impacts and should be better reflected in policymaking processes. In Buenos Aires they committed themselves to helping win over Parliaments and parliamentarians to become ambassadors for this relationship and agents of change. Parliaments and parliamentarians should work to ensure good developmental governance.

In their opinion: The UNCCD deserves more success for the sake of the people living under desertification stress and greater visibility -- by sharpening UNCCD's profile and institutions, making desertification a cornerstone in the general architecture of global environmental governance, making a priority on the agenda of decision-makers, giving more weight to desertification, land degradation and water policies in government and parliaments, involving more actively the stakeholders at all levels, improving land management and regional cooperation, enhancing institutional and people's capacities, raising much greater awareness, and pursuing an advocacy and mediating role in other international processes of relevance to UNCCD concerns, and -- last but not least -- by providing to affected country parties which adopted national action plans the necessary financial means.

The parliaments of the developed countries must work for the increase of official development assistance, particularly in those countries which did not reach the 0.7 per cent target so far; until 2015 this target should be reached.

The Parliamentary Network of the UNCCD, created in 2003, must be better used by parliament and parliamentarians. Its Steering Committee should give better inputs and monitor the work of parliamentarians under the UNCCD.

Luc Gnacadja, Executive Secretary of the UNCCD, welcomed the Declaration of Buenos Aires and congratulated the parliamentarians for the excellent conclusion of the Round Table hoping and trusting that the MPs and the newly elected Steering Committee will fully engage in materializing the various recommendations and self-commitments.

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