

The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) and its Political Dimension

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This paper was prepared for the fifth Parliamentary Round Table in the context of the implementation of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD). The meeting organized jointly by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) (www.ipu.org) and the UNCCD secretariat (www.unccd.int) with the assistance of the Government of Cuba, will take place in Havana from 3 to 4 September 2003, in parallel with the sixth session of the Conference of the Parties to the UNCCD which is scheduled to take place from 25 August to 5 September 2003.

Bonn, 26 May 2003

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CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS	3
DESERTIFICATION - A GLOBAL PROBLEM	4
DESERTIFICATION - A MATTER OF HIGH POLITICAL RELEVANCE	5
‘DESERTIFICATION’ REMAINS POORLY UNDERSTOOD	6
THE COMBAT AGAINST LAND EROSION DESERVES OVERALL STRONG COMMITMENT FROM MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT	7
THE JOHANNESBURG SUMMIT HAS GIVEN NEW IMPETUS TO THE UNCCD	10

ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

ACP	Africa Caribbean Pacific
AU	African Union
CAS	Country Assistance Strategy
CBD	Convention on Biological Diversity
CBO	community-based organization
COP	Conference of the Parties
CRIC	Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the UNCCD
CSP	Country Strategy Paper
CST	Committee on Science and Technology of the UNCCD
DAC	(OECD) Development Assistance Committee
EC	European Commission
EU	European Union
GEF	Global Environment Facility
GM	Global Mechanism
IBRD	International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (World Bank)
IDA	International Development Association
IFAD	International Fund for Agricultural Development
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IPU	Inter-Parliamentary Union
MDG	Millennium Development Goal
MEA	multilateral environmental agreement
MP	member of parliament
NAP	national action programme
NCB	National Coordinating Body
NEPAD	New Partnership for Africa's Development
NGO	non-governmental organization
NSSD	National Strategy on Sustainable Development
ODA	Official Development Assistance
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PNoUNCCD	Parliamentary Network on the UNCCD
PRS	Poverty Reduction Strategy
PRSP	Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper
RAP	regional action programme
SAP	structural adjustment programme
SRAP	subregional action programme
UNCED	United Nations Conference on Environment and Development
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNCCD	United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification
UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme
UNFCCC	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change
WSSD	World Summit on Sustainable Development

DESERTIFICATION - A GLOBAL PROBLEM

Members of parliament (MPs) know that the global problem of desertification deals with the threat to soils. Soils are one of the natural bases for human life and social development. The world food problem cannot be solved without maintaining the four main soil functions, namely habitats for people, animals and plants, production, culture, and regulation. Soil has received and still receives, wrongly, too little attention. A soil protection policy needs greater significance and must be put on the political agenda.

Our planet's capacity to sustain us is being eroded. The problems are well known - degrading soil and agricultural land, shrinking vegetation cover and forests, diminishing supplies of clean water, dwindling fisheries and the threat of growing social and ecological vulnerability. These threats are global; their impacts, however, are most severe in the developing world - especially among people living in poverty.

Desertification is a truly worldwide phenomenon and affects about 40 per cent of the Earth's land mass including parts of Europe. Seventy per cent of all dry areas suffer from desertification, accounting for 36 million km²; the least developed countries are the hardest hit by desertification. Over one billion people in over 100 countries are directly affected by desertification or are at risk.

During the third Parliamentary Round Table on Desertification, Bonn 2000, MPs were deeply concerned² about the gravity of the situation in different regions of the world. In Africa, a continent where deserts or arid zones constitute two thirds of the total land area and where 73 per cent of the arid land is already seriously or moderately degraded, in Asia where approximately 71 per cent of the continent's arid lands are severely degraded, in Latin America and the Caribbean, where nearly three quarters of the arid land, representing almost one fourth of the region, are moderately or severely degraded, the Mediterranean, where almost two thirds of the arid land are severely degraded, and the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, where from 40 to 80 per cent of the arid land is severely degraded.

Is this environmental deterioration inevitable in order for poverty to be reduced and eventually eradicated? In spite of the complex relationship between environmental protection and economic growth, many argue not.³ If the erosion of natural resources is not successfully arrested and reversed, the world will not be able to meet the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), particularly the goal of halving extreme poverty and hunger by 2015.

Tackling environmental degradation is an integral part of effective and lasting poverty reduction. Efforts to overcome poverty and the pursuance of environmental policies can advance together.⁴ The priority is to cooperate for sustainable human development in the communities who live in absolute poverty or suffer from extreme hunger. Equally important is the need to integrate

² The MP's declaration can be found in IPU, Report of the Committee for Sustainable Development, CL/168/13(d)-R.1, 14 March 2001.

³ See the report *Linking Poverty Reduction and Environmental Management: Policy Challenges and Opportunities*, edited by the United Kingdom Department for International Development, the Directorate General for Development of the European Commission, the United Nations Development Programme and the World Bank, Washington, July 2002 (prepared as a contribution to the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development; also available at http://www.dfid.gov.uk/Pubs/files/epd_linking_poverty.pdf).

⁴ Cf. Report of the Panel of Eminent Personalities, *The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification: A Useful Tool for Sustainable Development and Poverty Alleviation*, edited by the UNCCD secretariat, Bonn 2002 (<http://www.unccd.int/meetings/global/agadez2002/report-eng.pdf>).

the principles and policies of the multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs) into global economic policies and decision-making, in particular to ensure that trade and environmental policies are mutually supportive.

DESERTIFICATION - A MATTER OF HIGH POLITICAL RELEVANCE

Desertification means⁵ degradation of land and vegetation, soil erosion and the loss of topsoil and fertile land in arid, semi-arid and dry sub-humid areas, caused primarily by human activities and climatic variations.⁶ Drought can trigger or aggravate desertification.

Desertification is of high political relevance:

- It is a problem of global dimension and affects the large majority of countries of all continents,
- The continuous losses in productivity of the first sector, which still constitutes a main source of revenue for the economies of the majority of developing countries, give cause for great concern,
- It is about a global environmental good and the survival of humankind,
- In the UNCCD⁷ we have at our disposal a legally binding, multi-dimensional tool for protecting ecosystems and achieving sustainable human development,
- Timely implementation of the UNCCD can have a significant positive impact in rural poverty and famine reduction, environmental protection, migration and prevention of conflicts.

The term “desertification” (which is somewhat misleading) is not applied to hyper-arid zones (deserts). It is used rather to refer to a process resulting from anthropocentric and natural factors, such as land over-exploitation, overgrazing, mechanized farming, bad irrigation practices, illegal and excessive logging, bush and forest fires and deforestation due to population increase; along with these human activities, a range of climatic factors are believed to influence the process of land degradation (year-round aridity, high variability in rainfall, recurrent drought and so on). Due to these multiples causes, combating desertification involves a wide range of measures and

⁵ Use of terms - cf. United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification, Art.1, available at <http://www.unccd.int>: “desertification means land degradation in arid, semi-arid and dry sub-humid areas resulting from various factors, including climatic variations and human activities.” (Art. 1(a)).

Jagdish C. Katyal and Paul L.G. Vlek, in *Desertification - Concept, Causes and Amelioration*, ZEF-Discussion Papers in Development Policy, No. 33, Bonn, October 2000, p. 16, propose the following definition: “Desertification is a condition of human-induced land degradation that occurs in arid, semi-arid and dry sub-humid regions (...) and leads to a persistent decline in economic productivity (>15% of the potential) of useful biota related to land use or a production system. Climatic variations intensify the decline in productivity, restorative management moderates it.”

⁶ Such as land over-exploitation, poor management of grazing areas and livestock, mechanized farming, bad irrigation practices, mismanagement of input and neglect of land improvement, inappropriate land use systems and policies, illegal and excessive logging, bush and forest fires, deforestation due to population increase; along with these anthropocentric factors, a range of natural factors are believed to influence the process of land degradation (year-round aridity, high variability in rainfall, recurrent drought and so on).

⁷ The UNCCD was adopted in June 1994 (online at <http://www.unccd.int/convention/menu.php>). The UNCCD entered into force on 26 December 1996, 90 days after the fiftieth instrument of ratification or accession was deposited. Currently 185 States and the European Community are Parties to the Convention (as at April 2003).

contributes to combating poverty, to structural reforms and to sustainable development. Every year an area greater than Belgium or Rwanda are taken from mother Earth by desertification.

The UNCCD identifies approaches and concrete measures to combat desertification. It is thus the first international agreement mandatorily to define a common understanding of the desertification problem, as well as the principles, objectives and key focuses of coordinated action. It will be implemented through action programmes. These programmes are the core of the Convention. At the national level, they will address the underlying causes of desertification and drought and identify measures to prevent and reverse it. National action programmes (NAPs) will be complemented by subregional and regional action programmes (SRAPs and RAPs), particularly when transboundary resources such as lakes and rivers are involved. Action programmes are detailed in the five regional implementation annexes to the Convention - Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, the Northern Mediterranean, and Central and Eastern Europe.

‘DESERTIFICATION’ REMAINS POORLY UNDERSTOOD

In many countries, in particular in the industrialized world, the UNCCD is barely known. Seven years into the life of the UNCCD, combating desertification and mitigating the effects of drought still suffer from insufficient attention.⁸

Desertification is wrongly associated with the deserts which already exist; it involves too broad a set of issues. In general, desertification and land degradation are not sudden, spectacular events but gradual processes.

Whereas it is widely taken for granted that humankind has to protect the ozone layer and biodiversity, the relevance of saving land from degradation and erosion is not adequately recognized. However, topsoil is also a global environmental good, and one of the prerequisites for our common survival.⁹ Desertification and climate change are related issues; combating desertification and adapting to climate change are mutually reinforcing.

Desertification diminishes soil productivity, reduces food production and robs the land of its vegetative cover - these phenomena are of critical importance for people all over the world - and even negatively impacts other areas not directly affected by its symptoms, for example by causing floods, soil salinization, deterioration of water quality, and silting of rivers, streams and reservoirs. It causes or aggravates famine, malnutrition, poverty and migratory movements, and may lead to crises, conflicts and instability. Major macroeconomic losses are also incurred.

Worldwide, lost income in areas directly affected by desertification is estimated at about US\$ 42 billion. Soils are an environmental and economic asset; preventing further land degradation and desertification is more cost effective than remedying their environmental, social and economic consequences and political costs.

⁸ Cf. UNCCD Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention (CRIC). Report of the Committee on its first session, held in Rome from 11 to 22 November 2002, ICCD/CRIC(1)/10, 17 January 2003, p. 20; also <http://www.unccd.int/cop/officialdocs/cric1/pdf/10eng.pdf>.

⁹ Cf. the declaration, adopted at the fourth Round Table of Members of Parliament, Geneva, October 2001 (in parallel with the fifth Conference of the Parties to the UNCCD), which asked for recognition “of the land that feeds us, and particularly what is known as its topsoil layer, as a common human patrimony requiring imperative, urgent, concerted and worldwide protection”. Cf. IPU, Report of the Committee for Sustainable Development, CL/170/13(d)-R.1, 20 March 2002.

Desertification is most acute in Africa, where the combination of extreme poverty and severity of land degradation is creating a dramatic situation. Nearly half of Africa's population - more than 300 million people - is threatened by desertification. The countries severely affected by desertification in Africa are amongst those ranked as least developed countries.

The UNCCD is a key step in the implementation of Rio Agenda 21; it was created to reverse the poverty-land degradation cycle and to support the development needs of dryland communities in a sustainable way. As a legally binding instrument, the UNCCD represents a political and operational consensus on measures for rehabilitating and reclaiming degraded land and preventing further degradation.

THE COMBAT AGAINST LAND EROSION DESERVES OVERALL STRONG COMMITMENT FROM MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT

The UNCCD contributes to global economic and human security; it is a strategic tool and action framework for combating hunger and for achieving sustainable human development and sustainable land use, as well as for helping to realize the MDGs and the objectives of the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) Plan of Implementation. The UNCCD Conferences of the Parties (COP) have been accompanied by Parliamentary Round Tables since 1998.¹⁰ However, UNCCD implementation is so important that parliamentarians of all levels must be ready to realize a stronger commitment in promoting sustainable human development. Why?

1. The UNCCD combines environmental protection, land improvement and the fight against soil erosion with poverty eradication through its sustainable development focus, thus contributing to realization of the MDGs.¹¹
2. The UNCCD offers advantages as an instrument which can prevent food insecurity through the sustainable development of rural areas and which can thus lessen the need for emergency relief.
3. The UNCCD can reduce displacement of people and resulting pressure on urban communities from the rural poor, and can prevent forced migrations to other countries.
4. The UNCCD can help avoid socio-economic disruptions and political instability.
5. The UNCCD is a tool to prevent conflict over scarce resources; the critical factor in preventing resource-based conflicts is the ability of local people in resource-poor areas to intensify agricultural production, to manage their pastoral areas better, to agree joint programmes for the sustainable management of transboundary natural resources or to diversify their livelihoods without degrading the environment.

¹⁰ Cf. U. Holtz, *The previous four Round Tables of Members of Parliament on the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification - Achievements and Challenges*, Bonn, May 2003.

¹¹ In particular the following MDGs: to ensure environmental sustainability, to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger, to promote gender equality and empower women. The goals are based on the United Nations Millennium Declaration (September 2000), and the United Nations General Assembly has approved them as part of the Secretary-General's road map towards implementing the Declaration.

6. The UNCCD offers a community-based, bottom-up participatory approach designed to support local communities, thus enhancing democratic processes and gender equality; furthermore, it provides a framework for a partnership and participatory approach to sustainable development: the NAPs.
7. The UNCCD calls for decentralized decision-making structures as an important prerequisite for sustainable resource management; it may thus turn into a driving force behind decentralization.
8. The UNCCD is a multi-layered legally-binding cooperation instrument and establishes a framework for the development of NAPs, SRAPs and RAPs and international cooperation which are mutually reinforcing instruments. It also offers the opportunity to establish synergies or linkages with other major environmental and socio-economic treaties including the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD)¹² as well as with regional agreements such as the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) or the ACP-EU Partnership Agreement of Cotonou.
9. The UNCCD is an effective instrument for coordinating financial resources from multiple sources, including those of foundations, non-governmental organizations and private sector entities, with the aim of maximizing benefits for the dryland communities. The Convention operates through partnership agreements between donors, affected countries and dryland communities.
10. Combating desertification can contribute to influencing the various dimensions of the holistic "development" approach: the environmental, economic, social and political dimensions.

One has to admit that land degradation and desertification, poverty and famine, social and political disturbances, wars, migration and the displacement of populations has led on many occasions to further serious degradation of the natural environment; they are interconnected in many cases.¹³

Combating desertification is also one of the action fields for global governance. Global governance means governing those relationships that transcend national frontiers and solving problems of global concern by implicating a multitude of State and non-State actors on global, regional, subregional, national and local levels. The actors, in particular governments and parliamentarians, should ensure that the various dimensions of the UNCCD continue to be given equal weighting.

When it comes to international negotiations, agreements, strategies and action plans, the UNCCD process must be taken into account by, *inter alia*, improving trade conditions between rich

¹² Some question the wisdom of taking a convention approach to a problem such as desertification, arguing that desertification is not a global environmental problem of the same nature as biological diversity or climate change (cf. Camilla Toulmin *IIED, Lessons from the Theatre: Should this be the Final Curtain Call for the Convention to Combat Desertification?*, London 2001; <http://www.iied.org>). However, such doubts were stifled when the UNCCD was elaborated and adopted by the international community. The UNCCD as a Rio convention is now a matter of fact.

¹³ Cf. the Declaration, adopted at the second Round Table of Members of Parliament, Recife, November 1999 (in parallel with the third Conference of the Parties to the UNCCD), in: IPU, Report of the Committee for Sustainable Development, CL/166/16(d)-R.1, 3 March 2000.

and poor countries, providing better access to markets for dryland products, minimizing the negative impacts of globalization on land, and supporting measures for an international enabling environment for sustainable development.

Good governance, meaning a political and institutional environment which upholds human rights, democratic principles and the rule of law, and the responsible, transparent and accountable management of political power and public resources by the State and its organs, is a key prerequisite for sustainable development and poverty eradication.

The new ACP-EU Partnership Agreement clearly identifies sustainable management of the environment and natural resources as an essential element of good governance.¹⁴ Global good and environmental governance reinforce each other.

Together with environmental and developmental constituencies, parliamentarians must promote public awareness of the need to combat desertification as a vital step in seeking peaceful solutions to persistent hunger, rural poverty and resource conflicts. Under the umbrella of the IPU, a Parliamentary Network on the UNCCD (PNoUNCCD), a network of information, interaction and influence, should be established.¹⁵

The Convention is a powerful instrument for sustainable natural resource management in arid regions and for ensuring long-term, mandatory external support for these efforts. By using an integrated approach to link effective measures to combat desertification with activities to improve the economic, social and political situation, it helps affected countries, particularly in Africa, to work towards sustainable human development.

The syndromes of land degradation and soil disease are numerous; this is why therapies vary so considerably.

Mitigating the effects of drought and soil erosion must be wide ranging, covering areas such as the adaptation of appropriate agricultural production systems, soil-conserving and water-saving technologies and the management of decentralized food storage systems.

The prevention of land degradation, and the rehabilitation and sustainable management of degraded land, must rely upon a large number of relevant parameters specific to each location.¹⁶ All these efforts have anyway to be integrated into overall poverty reduction and environmental protection strategies.

The UNCCD deserves more political and financial support; as with the climate and biodiversity conventions, combating desertification means addressing a global problem of vital importance for all of us. Those countries affected by land degradation, soil erosion and the loss of

¹⁴ ACP-EU Partnership Agreement, signed in Cotonou on 23 June 2000, Art. 9. See also Art. 32: "Co-operation on environmental protection and sustainable utilization and management of natural resources shall aim at: (a) mainstreaming environmental sustainability into all aspects of development cooperation and support programmes and projects implemented by the various actors; (b) building and/or strengthening the scientific and technical human and institutional capacity for environmental management for all environmental stakeholders and (c) supporting specific measures and schemes aimed at addressing critical sustainable management issues ... such as: ... (v) desertification, drought and deforestation."

¹⁵ Cf. U. Holtz, *The previous four Round Tables of Members of Parliament on the UN Convention to Combat Desertification - Achievements and Challenges*, Bonn, May 2003.

¹⁶ Cf. UNCCD CRIC. Report of the Committee on its first session, held in Rome from 11 to 22 November 2002, ICCD/CRIC(1)/10, 17 January 2003, p. 30; also <http://www.unccd.int/cop/officialdocs/cric1/pdf/10eng.pdf>.

topsoil have to strengthen rural development and to integrate measures to combat desertification into their land, water, energy and overall development policies and programmes.

Box: Twelve soil diseases

The German Advisory Council on Global Change has put together what it considers to be the twelve most important anthropogenic “soil diseases”. The names chosen for these syndromes are deliberately symbolic, each one having been taken from a selected crisis area or a striking phenomenon accompanying the syndrome. However, the label always stands for a particular syndrome which occurs or can occur in different regions of the world. The twelve syndromes, which are in a certain sense “geodermatological diagnoses” of the “skin” of our planet Earth, are:

1. Changes in the traditional use of land: the *Huang He Syndrome*
2. Soil degradation through mechanized farming: the *Dust Bowl Syndrome*
3. Excessive use of marginal land: the *Sahel Syndrome*
4. Conversion and/or over-exploitation of forests and other ecosystems: the *Sarawak Syndrome*
5. Misplanning of large-scale agricultural projects: the *Aral Sea Syndrome*
6. Remote transport of nutrients and pollutants: the *Acid Rain Syndrome*
7. Local contamination, accumulation of waste and inherited pollution: the *Bitterfeld Syndrome*
8. Uncontrolled urbanization: the *São Paulo Syndrome*
9. Overdevelopment and expansion of infrastructure: the *Los Angeles Syndrome*
10. Mining and prospecting: the *Katanga Syndrome*
11. Soil and land degradation through tourism: the *Alps Syndrome*
12. Land and soil degradation as a result of war and military action: the *Scorched Earth Syndrome*

On the basis of the syndrome analysis, specific countermeasures can be identified and recommendations for actions formulated.

Source: German Advisory Council on Global Change, *Summary for Policymakers. World in Transition: The Threat to Soil*, reprint, Berlin 2001. See also: http://www.wbgu.de/wbgu_jg1994_kurz_engl.html.

THE JOHANNESBURG SUMMIT HAS GIVEN NEW IMPETUS TO THE UNCCD

In September 2002, the WSSD gave new impetus and hope to the UNCCD. The WSSD proved to be a great success for the UNCCD, since its Plan of Implementation acknowledged the Convention as one of the tools for poverty eradication; it also stressed the need to mobilize adequate and predictable financial resources for implementation of the UNCCD.¹⁷

The UNCCD, often regarded as the “poor sister” of the other multilateral environmental agreements, was given more weight and put on an equal footing with the other global MEAs. Global soil protection obtained a similar importance on the international agenda to that achieved for protection of biodiversity or the ozone layer.

The Plan of Implementation¹⁸ recognizes that eradicating poverty is the greatest global challenge facing the world today and is an indispensable requirement for sustainable development, particularly for developing countries, and also that the measures necessary include actions to combat desertification, to mitigate the effects of drought and floods and to provide adequate and predictable financial resources to implement the UNCCD as one of the tools for poverty eradication.

In a strong political signal, the WSSD called on the Second Assembly of the Global Environment Facility (GEF) to take action on the recommendations of the GEF Council concerning

¹⁷ Cf. Hama Arba Diallo, Executive Secretary of the UNCCD, in his opening statement at the first session of the UNCCD CRIC, held in Rome from 11 to 22 November 2002.

¹⁸ Online at http://www.johannesburgsummit.org/html/documents/summit_docs/2309_planfinal.htm.

the designation of land degradation, desertification and deforestation as a focal area of the GEF as a means of obtaining GEF support for the successful implementation of the UNCCD. Agreement was reached on the replenishment of the GEF, by a total of US\$ 3 billion (\$2.92 billion announced pre-WSSD and US\$ 80 million added by the EU during the WSSD).

It was consequently a real breakthrough to ask the GEF to consider being a financial mechanism of the Convention. (The GEF Assembly took these requested actions one month later in Beijing, in October 2002.)

In the WSSD Political Declaration,¹⁹ the government representatives reaffirmed the commitment to sustainable development, and pledged to build a humane, equitable and caring global society, united by a common determination to save our planet, promote human development and achieve universal prosperity and peace. They assumed collective responsibility for advancing and strengthening the interdependent and mutually reinforcing pillars of sustainable development – economic development, social development and environmental protection – at local, national, regional and global levels while remaining committed to the indivisibility of human dignity for all and to democratic systems, while at the same time demanding democratic global governance with more effective and accountable international and multilateral institutions.

Just nice words? More than that. All these objectives constitute the essential elements of the development paradigm of sustainable, human development. The Declaration is a very important reference document when it comes to the WSSD vision.

Members of parliament can rely on the Rio Agenda 21 as well as on the WSSD Declaration and Plan of Implementation. These documents and commitments are blueprints for parliamentarians working for a more prosperous equitable, and sustainable human world.²⁰

The UNCCD is entering into a broader implementation phase; it will contribute to implementation of the commitments to eradicate poverty spelled out in the United Nations Millennium Declaration and the Plan of Implementation of the WSSD, and those entered into at the World Food Summits in Rome in 1996 and 2002. Members of parliament should do everything possible to avoid losing momentum at this critical phase of UNCCD implementation.

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¹⁹ At http://www.johannesburgsummit.org/html/documents/summit_docs/1009wssd_pol_declaration.doc.

²⁰ Cf. *Toward Sustainability: Implementing Agenda 21*, Parliamentary Declaration on the occasion of the WSSD, adopted by acclamation on the occasion of the Parliamentary Meeting organized jointly by the IPU and the Parliament of South Africa (Johannesburg, 29-30 August 2002). By this Declaration the members of parliament, *inter alia*, pledged to formally review in their respective parliaments the Plan of Implementation of the WSSD, and to speedily implement, through legislation, including budgetary measures, the provisions of the Plan; online at <http://www.ipu.org/splz-e/Jbrg02/final.pdf>.