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## ***Desertification: Experts Prescribe Global Policy Overhaul to Avoid Looming Mass Migrations***

Desertification, exacerbated by climate change, represents “the greatest environmental challenge of our times” and governments must overhaul policy approaches to the issue or face mass migrations of people driven from degraded homelands within a single generation, warns a new analysis from the United Nations University.

In the analysis for presentation June 28 at UN Headquarters, New York, UNU experts say the loss of soil productivity and the degradation of life-support services provided by nature pose imminent threats to international stability. They outline a multi-point prescription for policy reform at every level of government.

“It is imperative that effective policies and sustainable agricultural practices be put in place to reverse the decline of drylands,” says Prof. Hans van Ginkel, UN Under Secretary-General and Rector of UNU.

Land use policy reform is urgently needed to halt overgrazing, over-exploitation, trampling and unsustainable irrigation practices, as are policies to create livelihood alternatives for dryland populations, he says.

Based on input of 200 experts from 25 countries convened in Algiers late last year, the analysis urges governments to adopt a broader, overarching view and a more coordinated, integrated and interlinked approach to dealing with desertification, climate change, poverty reduction and other public concerns.

It highlights dozens of problems and inconsistencies in policy-making today at every level, saying decisions are often taken in isolated sectoral silos, the end results of which, on balance, can be counterproductive.

“Some forces of globalization, while striving to reduce economic inequality and eliminate poverty are contributing to worsening desertification. Perverse agricultural subsidies are one such example,” says Prof. van Ginkel.

One-third of all people on Earth – about 2 billion in number – are potential victims of desertification’s creeping effect. And, left unchecked, the number of people at risk of displacement due to severe desertification is an estimated 50 million over the next 10 years – a sweep of migrants worldwide equal in number to the entire population of South Africa or South Korea.

“Addressing desertification is a critical and essential part of adaptation to climate change and mitigation of global biodiversity losses,” says Prof. van Ginkel. “UNU has led the argument over the last decade that such inter-linkages in policy formulations must be taken.”

“Reforming policies to combat desertification also represent one of the world’s most expedient ways to sequester more atmospheric carbon and help address the climate change issue,” says Zafar Adeel, lead author of the analysis and Director of the UNU’s Canadian-based International Network on Water, Environment and Health.

Policy formulation for combating desertification “has been hindered by the lack of concrete data about rates and extent of desertification,” he adds. “We must, as the global international community interested in desertification, put monitoring and assessment at the top of our policy agenda.”

## **Desertification shows no sign of abatement: An “environmental crisis” with major impacts**

UNU says the main barrier to expanding isolated successes at combating desertification is “the lack of effective management policies.”

In some countries where policies are deemed conducive to addressing desertification, enactment and implementation falls short. Or, designed and implemented at a national level, policies fail to translate into local action. Worse, some policies provide perverse incentives, exacerbating competition and conflict over the use of land and natural resources.

Among many recommendations, the report urges governments and policy-makers to:

- Reject the notion that aridity and water scarcity are inevitable;
- Create financial incentives for pastoralists and other dryland users to preserve and enhance the ecosystem services their land provides to all;
- Accept the carbon sequestration as a measure for simultaneously combating desertification and climate change. While vegetative cover in most drylands is sparse, drylands represent more than 40% of global land area, providing immense opportunities for carbon sequestration;
- Foster alternative, sustainable livelihoods for dryland dwellers, including non-agricultural jobs in industry and tourism, for example;
- Yield ownership and decision making to communities: empower them to take charge of land on which they depend and end the pattern of individuals chasing environmentally-detrimental short-term gains;
- Promote greater transparency and accountability, the participation of multiple actors, information sharing, measurable results, and follow-up systems;
- Better educate local populations and policymakers, many of whom lack adequate awareness of the fragility of their natural resource base and, in some places, fail to understand fundamental concepts of "drylands" and "desertification;"
- Put science at the heart of policy making and beef up research on emerging issues such as thresholds or "tipping points" as they relate to migration and desertification;
- Improve coordination at all levels:
  - **Nationally:** harmonize policies dispersed across a range of government ministries and agencies; rationalize and link the wide assortment of development, poverty reduction and environmental policy frameworks, independently conceived and "each in their own orbit," to encourage synergies and integration;
  - **Regionally:** to help address transboundary issues such as integrated river basin management and environmental migration; and
  - **Internationally:** better relate global conventions, agreements and other initiatives one to another. The analysis says the separate constitutions, priorities and procedures involved in administering the mix of international agreements operating today prevent important synchronization needed to achieve broad social and environmental goals: food security and famine relief, conflict and migration prevention, better health and poverty reduction, desertification and climate change avoidance and biodiversity protection and enhancement.

The authors urge governments to better define and understand environmental migration – its economic and ecological consequences, and to create a global framework to legally recognize and assist environmental refugees.

“The expected climatic change scenarios as projected by the recently published report of the IPCC give an additional dark shade to an already gloomy picture. However it is difficult to properly quantify the

number of environmental migrants and the migration routes as long as the concept itself remains debated even from a scientific point of view,” the analysis says.

UNU advances a classification scheme based on three subgroups of migrants driven predominantly by environmental reasons:

- Environmentally motivated migrants
- Environmentally forced migrants
- Environmental refugees

Finally, the analysis says governments need to measure progress in human-development terms and develop a common set of environmental indicators and data collection methods to enhance consistency for tracking and comparison purposes.

*The full document, presented on 28 June at the UN Secretariat in New York, is available online at [www.inweh.unu.edu/inweh/drylands/IYDD\\_Policy\\_Brief.pdf](http://www.inweh.unu.edu/inweh/drylands/IYDD_Policy_Brief.pdf)*

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*UNU-INWEH began operations in 1997 to strengthen water management capacity, particularly of developing countries, and to provide on-the-ground project support. With core funding from the Government of Canada through CIDA, it is hosted by McMaster University, Hamilton, Canada.*