



The 6th Ministerial Conference "Environment for Europe"

Belgrade, Serbia 10-12 October 2007

Statement

by Mr. Grégoire de Kalbermatten, Deputy Executive Secretary¹

Excellencies, Distinguished participants, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour for me to join you here in Belgrade and I would like at the outset to thank the Serbian government, in particular H.E. Mr. Sasa Dragin, Minister of Environmental Protection of the Republic of Serbia for inviting the Secretariat of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) to attend this High level Conference as well the organizers, in particular the UNECE secretariat.

As you may know the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) emphasizes the urgency of combating land degradation and desertification. As at 30 September 2007, 192 countries, including the European Community are Parties to the Convention and all European countries (apart from two - Estonia and Serbia) are Parties to the UNCCD.

About 30 European and Central Asian countries, which are participating in the present Conference, are declared affected by desertification, land degradation and drought under the UNCCD. The same relates to the USA and Canada.

Thirteen affected countries from the ECE region have prepared National action programmes. On a regular basis, affected country Parties prepare national reports on the implementation of the UNCCD. These reports might be of interest for the UNECE in the context of assessment and monitoring.

Land degradation and the widespread loss of fertile topsoil in terms of quality and quantity is not a sudden event, but a gradual process, a creeping as well as a silent disaster. The effect of soil degradation is often not conspicuous, but nevertheless potentially very damaging, considering on one hand the soil's

¹ The present document is a scanned copy of a statement received on 12 October 2007 during the Sixth Ministerial Conference "Environment for Europe" (Belgrade, 10-12 October 2007). The document has not been formally processed by the UNECE.

slow formation rate of 100 - 400 years/cm of topsoil and on the other side the irreplaceable value of soil in respect of maintaining ecosystem services and securing sustainable livelihood.

When we are bringing in the equation climatic trends with its impact on increased aridity, water erosion, forest fires and drought, we are talking here about a major emerging factor of environmental scarcity with wide socio-economic implications in both Europe and Central Asia.

More than a half of Central Asia is highly susceptible to land degradation and already highly affected. Taking into account that the majority of the Central Asian population live in rural areas, the impact of land degradation takes a heavy toll on their ability to survive. The condition of the population around the Aral Sea reminds us all of the relationship of ecological and public health. Let us not elaborate here on the real risks of political, economic and social instability through forced migration of population caused by environmental threats. In Europe about 115 million hectares of soil are affected by water erosion and 42 million hectares from wind erosion, with the resulting the loss of topsoil. The OSCE and the UNCCD secretariats cooperate in strengthening capacities for drought management in the region.

Due to the serious, negative impacts of land degradation on the quality of the environment, its effects on world food security and human welfare, I believe that land degradation under worsening scenarios of climate change will remain an important global issue for the 21st century, especially in Europe where the socio-economic consequences of the lost of top soil would be very serious. In the light of the above-mentioned it is clearly regrettable that the problem of land degradation has not received the attention that it deserves at the European level.

But this might be also because there are NO EXISTING platform to address it for the whole Europe. The European Commission is now addressing it for the European Union countries through the European soil strategy. UNCCD, as an international legally binding instrument, does include regional implementation annexes for affected countries, but the secretariat has no resources to address the needs of Europe through an interregional platform. Indeed, under UNCCD, the UNECE region is unfortunately not covered as a unique annex. Northern Mediterranean part of Europe is covered by Annex IV, Central and Eastern Europe by Annex V and Central Asia by part of Annex III. Northern and Western Europe are not covered by any UNCCD annex.

The Environment for Europe process is recognized as an outstanding forum to address environmental concerns in the European region especially in South Eastern Europe and Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia. This process can be activated as a significant platform for the elaboration of a required long-term pan-European policy framework for the promotion of environmentally sound land and soil management and for synchronizing efforts in terms of environmental protection among the UNECE region. The progress made so far by the Environment for Europe process prepares this essential potential.

With regard to the future of the Environment for Europe process and its prospective thematic priorities the UNECE recommended to focus in future on a limited number of priorities, with a concentration of efforts on those areas that are not entirely addressed by existing instruments, processes and programmes.

In this context it would be recommended that one of the future priorities of the ECE process should be to give to the issue of land degradation and soil protection a comprehensive European platform to receive the attention that it deserves. There is, as of today, no normative framework that covers soil protection in all Europe.

There are wide ranges of knowledge gaps that make it difficult to elaborate a proper and target orientated soil protection framework at a pan European level. Due to that, measures for soil monitoring and assessment, public awareness on soil loss and land degradation, soil related decision-making, management and education are rather fragmented.

The widely scattered programmes dealing with the issues of soil health and land degradation at European level must better contribute to harmonizing a variety of methods, definitions and statistics on availability of organic matter and rate and extent of land degradation.

In conclusion, we need to bring to clearer light how far the ground /the fertile top soil, could indeed be considered one of mankind's global s public goods as it sustains all efforts to conserve the vegetal cover, the species biodiversity and the possibility to mitigate and/or adapt to climate change. We need to

bring to the fore our focus on vulnerable populations and ecosystems affected by desertification in our efforts to alleviate poverty.

I do believe that EFE, while becoming a promoter of a pan European platform on soil protection in Europe, could recognize the potential of this Convention in this respect. Upgrading land degradation as an important priority will represent a worthwhile contribution for maintaining the resilience of the European and Central Asian environment.

Thank you for your attention.