

**High-Level Dialogue on Desertification, Land Degradation & Drought
convened by the President of the General Assembly of the United Nations**

20th May 2021

Dear President of the General Assembly,
Excellencies, Heads of State and Government,
Distinguished Colleagues,

- It is an honor for me to speak on behalf of my country, Belgium, on the important challenges of desertification, land degradation and drought.
- UNDP's human development report said it all: today humankind is the biggest threat to its own survival. The science is clear. Global soils and lands degrade. 12 million hectares of land are lost each year. This is the equivalent of one football field of soil every five seconds. Every five seconds.
- Of course local populations are heavily impacted. Their food security is threatened. They see their economic prospects diminished. And in the end tensions between people rise as they vie for the same resources. This endangers our common goal to achieve Agenda 2030.
- But we can stop this. We must stop this. We have to improve the lives of the local population by sustainably managing farmland and pastures.
- Ladies and gentlemen, we are facing a pandemic. We are all focusing on caring for our people. But we must not forget to look out for our planet's health. Because in the end our health and that of our surroundings are linked. We need to end unsustainable exploitation and protect forests and other ecosystems. The world's soils store more carbon than the planet's biomass and atmosphere combined. We must therefore protect it.
- Ladies and gentlemen, the fight against desertification forms a key priority of our development cooperation. Together with Senegal, Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger we are developing an ambitious program to tackle desertification and land degradation in the Sahel. To strengthen the resilience of the local populations.
- It will amount to 50 million euro. It will contribute to the goals of the Great Green Wall.
- This program will be aligned with the national strategies of these countries and contribute to the achievement of their voluntary Land Degradation Neutrality Targets.
- Through our international cooperation, we continue to support the Strategic Framework and mandate of UNCCD. Our aim? To achieve net zero land degradation by 2030.
- Belgium also looks forward to the COPs for each of the three Rio Conventions on climate change, biodiversity and the fight against desertification that will be held in the next 12 months. They will require decisive action based on strong political leadership.
- Belgium furthermore reiterates its support to the Leaders' Pledge for Nature. We have to reverse biodiversity loss by 2030. This includes ending traditional silo thinking and addressing interrelated and interdependent environmental challenges in an integrated and coherent way.

- Last but not least, Belgium is fully committed to the success of the negotiations for the eight replenishment of the Global Environment Facility.
- I take the opportunity of this meeting to invite the international community to do more, better and faster to reverse the trends of desertification and land degradation worldwide.
- Thank you very much Mister Chair.

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