Desertification, in the words of UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, is one of the world’s most alarming processes of environmental degradation.

The risks of desertification are substantial and clear. It contributes to food insecurity, famine and poverty, and can give rise to social, economic and political tensions that can cause conflicts, further poverty and land degradation thus having far reaching implications for the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals, in particular those relating to poverty eradication.

It is important to recognize, however, that drylands are also home to some of the most magnificent ecosystems of this world: the deserts. These unique natural habitats with their incredibly diverse fauna have been home to some of the world’s oldest civilizations. They stand like open-air museums, bearing witness to bygone eras. The Year will therefore also celebrate the fragile beauty and unique heritage of the world’s deserts, which deserve protection.

The United Nations General Assembly declared the year 2006, the International Year of Deserts and Desertification, to raise public awareness of the issue and protect the biological diversity of deserts as well as the traditional knowledge of those communities affected by desertification. It also provides an impetus to strengthen the viability and importance of the drylands issue on the international environmental agenda, while providing a timely reminder to the international community of the immense challenges that still lie ahead.

The International Year of Deserts and Desertification, 2006 coincides with the tenth anniversary of the entry into force of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification. To this day, the Convention counts 191 parties, making it one of the most representative instruments for poverty eradication in dryland rural areas.

To achieve a common strategy for the celebration of the IYDD, an inter-agency committee has been set up, bringing together the principal institutional partners of the United Nations active in the Desertification Convention implementation process, including the United Nations Environment Programme, the United Nations Development Programme, the International Fund for Agricultural Development, and other relevant United Nations bodies. All countries and civil society organizations are encouraged to undertake special initiatives to mark the Year and to get involved in any way possible.

Successful measures for combating desertification:

- Restore and fertilize the land;
- Combat the effects of the wind by constructing barriers and stabilizing sand dunes with local plant species;
- Reafforestation;
- Develop sustainable agricultural practices;
- Traditional lifestyles as practised in many arid zones offer examples of harmonious living with the environment.

Four honorary spokespersons already actively support the Year: Ms. Wangari Maathai, Peace Nobel laureate 2004, H.E. Cherif Rahmani, Minister of Environment of Algeria, Bulgarian international football star and Bulgarian film director Hristo Stoichkov and Ruytaro Hashimoto, former Japanese Prime Minister. They will lend their voice and support throughout the IYDD.

For most drylands dwellers, life is hard and the future often precarious. They live on the ecological, economic and social margins. It is essential that we do not neglect them or the fragile habitats on which they depend,” says Kofi Annan.

Drylands cover more than 40 per cent of the earth’s surface.

There are nearly 2 billion drylands dwellers.

It affects one third of the earth’s surface and over a billion people.

More than 110 countries, particularly in Africa, Asia and Latin America, have drylands that are potentially threatened by desertification.

24 billion tons of fertile soil disappear annually.

Each year, desertification and drought cause an estimated $42 billion in lost agricultural production.

Two thirds of the African continent is desert or drylands.
Floods followed by drought and water shortages present enormous challenges for farmers in Cape Verde. On the island of Santiago in the catchment area of the Ribeira river, ADC together with farmers and relevant institutions has developed a programme to stabilise the water supply. Erosion and flood control, afforestation and artificial groundwater enrichment support agriculture and hence the income of the population. Special training programmes provide the necessary know-how for the sustainable use of natural resources in the river valley.

In the Gondar region of north-west Ethiopia thousands of farmers and their families profit from a cattle breeding programme including improved feeding and veterinary measures. The marketing of products creates additional income. Adapted herd management and environmentally sound feed cultivation prevent soil erosion.

To retain soil fertility through natural fertilisation, ADC encourages the use of wood for heating and cooking as an alternative to dried cattle dung.

Safeguarding the natural resources in developing countries

There is an increase in slum dwellings in the cities, and political tensions and social conflicts arise. The countries affected require long-term environmental, social and economic strategies to combat desertification. The Austrian Development Cooperation (ADC) is supporting them in their efforts.

In its partner countries, ADC promotes rural development programmes that encourage the sustainable management of the natural resources and contribute to the livelihood security of the peasant population. A special emphasis is put on women’s issues due to their crucial role in development processes. Environmental research plays an important role as well, through the investigation of desertification processes and the development of effective methods to predict droughts and desertification.

The Louga region in north-west Senegal suffers from an acute shortage of water and exhausted soil. To improve the livelihood conditions of small scale farmers and cattle breeders, ADC in collaboration with local organizations supports environmentally sustainable agricultural land management. Erosion control and agroforestry preserve and improve soil fertility. A local development fund and a savings and credit bank provide assistance for small investments in seeds, tools or training.

Desertification is destroying valuable agricultural and grazing land. Degraded soil and water shortages put the existence of people living in arid areas at risk. Many people are forced to migrate. Traditional social systems and family structures are breaking down.

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