

17 June 2015, today is the World Day to Combat Desertification.

Desertification: A silent process with a loud effect

As I sat at home to put pen to paper for this piece, I was still pondering on how to start this over vexed topic when I was asked by my children what I was writing. As I tried to explain what desertification means, it became very obvious to me that for quicker comprehension there was a need to link the effect to the causes. It was important to focus their attention on deserts and the features of a desert to make them understand what desertification is.



Dr. Ahmed ELMEKASS, AU-SAFGRAD Coordinator

A SILENT PROCESS WITH A LOUD EFFECT

Desertification the process of land degradation and a type of land degradation where the land cover becomes increasingly arid, typically losing its bodies of water as well as vegetation and wildlife¹. It is caused by the removal of vegetation cover due to natural and man made effects; alone or in combination such as drought, climatic shifts, tillage for agriculture, overgrazing and deforestation.² A look at these causes reveals that human activities (agriculture, deforestation and overgrazing) are the most invasive causes of desertification. Desertification is a significant global ecological and environmental problem that

reduces the ability of land to support life, affecting wild species (loss of biodiversity), domestic animals, agricultural crops and people³. Despite these seemingly silent causes, desertification has a very loud and profound effects. It has played significant roles in human history; contributing to the collapse of several large empires, such as Carthage, Greece, and the Roman Empire, as well as causing displacement and relocation of local populations⁴. It is also the cause of most conflicts arising from natural resources use with attendant loss of lives and properties and large scale emigration. Great social and economic losses have been linked to desertification. Desertification often occurs over many generations, on a very large scale and so it is difficult for individuals to notice the onset and take action to combat it⁵. In a very subtle way, desertification is doing great havoc to human livelihood and welfare that if adequate and concerted actions are not taken to combat the spread it reduces the ability of states to meet development goals and poses great danger to human existence.

THE NEED OF CHANGING MENTALITY

The most effective way to combat desertification is a change in peoples' mentality and a general commitment to reverse the spread.

At the Earth summit in Rio, 1992, desertification, along with climate change and the loss of biodiversity, were identified as the greatest challenges to sustainable development. The United Nations Convention to combat desertification (UNCCD) was established in 1994 as the sole legally binding international agreement linking environment and development to sustainable land management⁶.



Desertification has a very loud and profound effects

AFRICAN UNION-SAFGRAD CONTRIBUTION

At the continental level, the African Heads of State and Government (HOSG) in 2014, during the 22nd ordinary summit renewed their

commitments to combating desertification. The HOSG pledge their commitments to implement the UNCCD protocol to address issues of land degradation, desertification, biodiversity loss and effects of drought so as to promote sustainable development on the Continent. The HOSG requested Africa Union Commission (AUC) to support Regional Economic Communities (RECs) and Member States in collaboration with Partners to review the Regional Action Programme to combat desertification in Africa and to align it to the UNCCD Ten Year Strategy with the view to supporting poverty reduction and environmental sustainability on the Continent. To achieve this, AUC was requested to rationalize and strengthen its specialized units --the Semi-Arid Food Grains Research and Development (SAFGRAD) and the Climate Change and Desertification Unit (CCDU)- as effective platform for guidance, experience sharing and coordination among the existing African Centres of Excellence on Desertification.

AU-SAFGRAD as a specialized, technical office of AUC, with mandate of building livelihood resilience of small holders in the arid zone of Africa (people that are most vulnerable to the effects of desertification), has over the years focused its activities on combating desertification in the continent. The office played a key role in facilitating the release of several drought adapted food grains cultivars which are cultivated by farmers in the semi-arid regions of Africa. AU-SAFGRAD has set a functional

network that brings together all the actors on the same table. Furthermore, capacity building and training of research scientists on issues of desertification has been a major activity of AU-SAFGRAD over the years (3) It also has contributed to building the knowledge base on desertification in the Semi-Arid Agriculture through production/dissemination of articles and periodicals.

TO AVOID THE DRYNESS OF MIND

In conclusion, it must be borne in mind that combating desertification is a collective responsibility. As stated above, though the causes are cumulative and often unobserved, the effects are loud and devastating. All hands must be on deck to stop this great scourge that seeks to consume entire population and the continent. Our actions and inactions will decide our fate and destiny. Policy and decision makers at all levels, scientist, farmers, herders, development planners, women, youths and children must all be involved. They must be able to appreciate and link their actions and activities, in their micro environment, to the long term consequence in the global environment. Policies that encourages conservation and sustainable use of natural resources must be implemented and aggressively enforced at all levels. If we do not start as individuals, families and groups to seriously and positively contribute and be strong partners in development of our countries, if we

are still waiting for external experts to plan for us, if we put everything in the side of decision makers without our real contribution and waiting mistakes to blame them, in that time I can say we have drought in our mentality which has to be treated and to start to be positive member in our villages or our cities and contributing to the development process by combating desertification.

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