

# Lessons from the Theatre: Should this be the Final Curtain Call for the Convention to Combat Desertification?

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**The Convention to Combat Desertification (CCD) was agreed in 1994. It was intended to focus global attention on problems of drought, poverty and food insecurity, in Africa in particular. However, the CCD has failed to galvanise effective action to tackle the issues it addresses. Can the Convention process be revised to be more effective, or are its flaws inherent? The Global Environment Facility (GEF) General Assembly will come under heavy pressure to establish a fund for desertification projects, but the Johannesburg Summit may be able to initiate more substantial reform which could make a difference in tackling the underlying causes.**

On a warm June night in Paris in 1994, the Desertification Convention text was agreed. Now, nearly seven years on, has it been *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or a *Comedy of Errors*? Although poets caution us to judge not till the play be done, the drama in this case is lacking, and the lines are dull. Much of the audience has left their seats and gone to take part in a livelier show elsewhere. Is it time to pull the curtain down?

### A bit of background scenery

Back in the summer of '92, the Rio agreements on climate change and biodiversity were newly signed, and countries had committed themselves to draw up an International Convention to Combat Desertification. Pressure for such an agreement stemmed from African governments who had felt marginalised by the emphasis on climate change and biological diversity, both issues attracting the attention of rich countries, while their priority concerns of poverty, drought and food insecurity were not being addressed. So, an international convention to combat desertification was drafted, negotiated and

has now been ratified by 173 countries.

Why then this sense of disappointment today? What was wrong with this approach? If this was right for climate change and biodiversity, then why not for desertification? We need to look back at what has happened since Paris that summer ...

The CCD entered into force in late 1996, with the first Conference of the Parties (COP) held in September 1997. The CCD Secretariat has been established in Bonn, and a Global Mechanism set up in Rome to help mobilise resources for implementation of the National Action Programmes to combat Desertification (NAPs). However, no special CCD fund has been established, unlike the climate change and biodiversity conventions, which can tap into the GEF, although there is now increasing pressure on the GEF to make funds available for desertification as well.

### The other shows in town ...

But while the CCD has been establishing its structures and procedures, the rest of the world has been moving onto other business. New shows have been opening that provide rival attractions while the flush of concern

### KEY CHALLENGES:

- Respond to the challenges faced by dryland nations and address the problems resulting from current global trade, aid and investment processes
- Support a critical review of the CCD to determine its impact and assess its future
- Consider whether new instruments or approaches could deliver more effective results
- Establish this debate as a central and constructive part of the Johannesburg Summit's focus on sustainable development in Africa

with green issues following Rio has ebbed away. Current global debate revolves around meeting the international development targets, particularly the commitment to halve the number of people living in poverty by the year 2015. Cancelling third world debt and fears prompted by globalisation have been rallying points for many groups in the developed world.

### So what went wrong?

The international convention model was not the right strategy for addressing drylands development. It has tied people into a series of COP performances which demonstrate no linkage with real problems on the ground. Already in summer '92, some questioned the wisdom of taking a convention approach to a problem such as 'desertification'. They argued that desertification was not a 'global environmental problem' of the same sort as biological diversity or climate change. But those doubts were stifled, since Western nations could not say 'no' to the CCD, without appearing to turn their backs on the most needy of the world's peoples.

'Desertification' remains a poorly understood concept which has not grabbed the imagination of the western public, in the same manner as third world debt. Desertification involves too broad a set of issues, with few clearly identifiable culprits, or tidy solutions. Estimates of areas involved range from one third of the world's surface area, to close on 50%, and people affected from 1 in 6 to 1 in 3. The terms of the debate keep on shifting bringing uncertainty and unease about the nature of the problems at stake.

Despite attempts to establish a global connection between desertification and climate change, no such clear mechanisms have been identified. Of all dryland regions, it is only the West African Sahel which has seen a marked change in rainfall patterns of recent decades, and no-one has yet been able to find good reasons why such a fall in rainfall might have come about. Equally, there is no evidence to show that dryland degradation leads to global climate change. A further reason for the CCD lacking dramatic interest has been the absence of the World Bank from the stage. Despite a few appearances and words of goodwill, the World Bank has been unwilling to engage with the plot, while setting up rival performances, such as the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers process, which has commanded a much more attentive audience, since the Bank holds the purse-strings. The lack of funding specifically linked to the convention has also led to its limited attractions for all audiences. An initiative without cash is doomed to play to an empty house.

Going for an environmental convention was the wrong choice because it has cut off linkages to agriculture and broader economic development issues. In many countries the CCD is barely known by anyone other than those

officials who participated in the negotiation process. Ministries of Environment have been preparing NAPs while other policy and legislative changes – such as decentralisation and land reform – of enormous relevance to the desertification agenda are taking place, yet with no link made between them.

### Turn off the lights, or renew funding?

When a theatre finds itself with falling attendance and weak performances, the board of management is faced with tough choices. It must decide whether to shut down, renew funding on certain conditions, encourage a merger with another body, or get the best parts of the performance transferred to other settings. So what are the options for the CCD? Some merging has already taken place with the Convention on Climate Change Secretariat to cut administrative costs. A Committee to Review Implementation of the Convention is due to be set up. Some countries hope to lobby the GEF General Assembly in 2002 to open a special window for desertification related projects. While these may keep the stage lights burning, it will hardly keep the audience in their seats.

The Johannesburg Summit provides a much needed forum to look again at the global development circus and how best to rationalise the shows on offer. The location of the Conference in sub-Saharan Africa and focus on poverty illustrate commitment to the needs of poor African countries. It has become clear that these must be addressed by looking not just at environment but at trade, aid, and global flows of capital, labour and intellectual property. Dryland nations have not found their interests served by walking into a green cul-de-sac.

Whatever its merits, it is time to acknowledge that the CCD approach has not served its audiences well, but spent too long wrangling over procedural debates and institutional processes. If the curtain falls on the CCD, dryland nations must find a new means of getting their voices heard in ongoing global debates, and in more imaginative ways. Here lies the challenge. Could a lighter structure network, lobby, and act as advocate for the particular constraints and needs of different dryland regions in a range of other arenas? Taking the theatrical imagery, can we still afford the dream of a midsummer's night, which has descended into pantomime. Perhaps a travelling road show would make more sense, a mobile and flexible performance which can move quickly between different venues, capture an audience, tell tales that make people sit up and listen, and lobby for dryland interests. ●