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Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)

Expert Group Meeting on Sustainable Land Management
as a Best Practice to Enhance Rural Development
in the ESCWA Region
Beirut, 25-27 March 2009

INFORMATION NOTE**I. BACKGROUND**

The ESCWA region has limited fertile land that is subject to different levels of degradation. With few exceptions, it is also considered a land scarce region. Land resources are being increasingly degraded and over-exploited. The degradation of agricultural land in the region to a large extent is caused by human induced factors, but natural factors such as, low and erratic rainfall and droughts are also playing a part. Land resources in the region are becoming increasingly scarce, and the quality of such resources is decreasing, mostly as a result of poor management. Pressures on the resource base due to high population growth rates, rapid urbanization, and lack of suitable land use plans further aggravate the situation for agriculture in the region. Furthermore, unsustainable cultivation practices, over-cultivation of marginal lands, overexploitation of water and land resources, and insufficient support given to the integrated management of land and water resources are also adversely affecting the productivity of agriculture. The low levels of agricultural productivity and competitiveness, along with the degradation of natural resources in the region are further aggravated by the absence of proactive policies for encouraging the efficient and sustainable use of land resources.

The available land resources have to be better managed so that they could sustain the livelihoods of both the current and future generations. Only a few countries currently have land resources available for agricultural expansion, and in most cases the lands cultivated today are the same lands that must be protected for the future. In the past, it was possible to open new lands of good quality to cultivation. But this often resulted in over-exploitation of land. Today, however, we must move increasingly towards better management, conservation and steward-ship of land resources.

The degradation of natural resources (land, water, biological diversity) is endangering the livelihoods of the poor, particularly in rural areas, where there is more reliance on such resources. The loss of livelihoods and natural resources leads poor farmers to adopt non-sustainable survival strategies that further deteriorate their resources base. Increasing poverty, also limits the range of available options with regard to the sustainable management of these finite resources. There is a strong correlation between population growth, land degradation, food insecurity and poverty. As such, promoting the sustainable use and management of the region's limited natural resources in agriculture is a great challenge that requires immediate consideration.

Despite the efforts exerted to assess and combat land degradation and desertification at local, national and regional levels, the achievements are limited thus far, and the approaches are not integrative; as a result, land degradation and desertification continue to intensify in the region. Furthermore, land degradation and desertification transcend political borders and one needs to take into consideration the regional impact of such occurrences. Responding to the complex and interconnected challenges of sustainable development

also requires increased regional cooperation, and regional cooperation on tackling the impacts of land degradation is still weak.

There is a general consensus that it is far less expensive to prevent land degradation via the application of good management practices based on both cultural and scientific knowledge than to rehabilitate degraded land, and that where land is truly degraded, significant production and ecosystem service benefits can result from the rehabilitation of degraded lands. An integrated approach is needed in order to facilitate the monitoring of land degradation, the design of indicators and elaboration of responsive measures to prevent and reverse land degradation processes. This should be done cooperatively among member countries of the region.

The majority of rural people, mostly smallholders, are still engaged in agriculture or agriculture related activities. They are thus directly dependent on land resources for their livelihoods. Sustainable management of land resources represents one of the few opportunities they have to improve their livelihoods. Sustainable land management practices enables smallholders to gradually improve their production capacity and begin generating additional income. In turn, this stimulates local economies and produces a compounding effect, which progressively brings the cycle of rural poverty and resource degradation under control. Consequently, the question for national governments and the international community is not whether we should be promoting sustainable land management practices, but why haven't we been doing it up to now, or rather, how should we proceed from now on? There is no doubt that sustainable land management practices plays a central role in sustainable development and poverty alleviation.

Sustainable land management can be defined as the use of land resources such as soils, water, animals and plants for the production of goods - to meet changing human needs - while assuring the long-term productive potential of these resources, and the maintenance of their environmental functions.

Sustainable land management is the foundation of sustainable agriculture, and a strategic component of sustainable development and poverty alleviation. Sustainable land management seeks to harmonize the often conflicting objectives of intensified economic and social development, while maintaining and enhancing the ecological and global life support functions of land resources. Practicing sustainable land management is one of the few options for land users to generate income without destroying the quality of the land as a basis of agricultural production. Thus, there is a need to regularly monitor land resources in order to determine whether land management practices are moving in the direction of sustainability or not. Sustainable land management addresses both processes of resource degradation and underlying causes of unsustainability, and indicates possible solutions. This requires a better understanding of the main driving forces that operate at each level - farm, community, region, nation - and the inter-connections between them. Practical tools that will permit rapid, cost-effective identification of the intervention impacts on land management are also needed.

Evidence suggests that sustainable land management practices are more likely to be adopted where agriculture is important in rural livelihoods, where agricultural land is in short supply, and where explicit attention is given to property rights. Policies to facilitate the adoption of sustainable land management practices are also more likely to be successful if they provide tangible benefits to the individual household or community by emphasizing enhanced agricultural productivity, food security, and income, rather than by just controlling land degradation per se. A policy framework which provides for market access and attractive producer prices is essential to the adoption of sustainable land management practices. Besides offering policy incentives, normally operating at price and cost margins sufficient to redirect the private sector's utilization of resources in directions deemed socially desirable, the adoption of sustainable land management practices requires additional investments in research and technology generation, knowledge dissemination, and the integration of knowledge and policies at different levels.

ESCWA intends to promote the adoption of sustainable land management practices for fostering the conservation of natural resources for sustainable use in agriculture. As such, ESCWA will bring together

experts from within and outside the region so that they could debate and provide guidance on ways to sustain and improve the productivity of the land resources of the Region.

II. OBJECTIVE

The Expert Group Meeting is intended to provide opportunities for participants to review, assess and exchange experiences on viable options for promoting sustainable land management practices in reversing the trend of land degradation and improving agricultural productivity in furthering the agenda of sustainable rural development as well as reducing rural poverty.

III. PRELIMINARY AGENDA

The tentative Agenda of the Expert Group Meeting on Sustainable Land Management (SLM) will include:

- a. International and regional perspectives;
- b. National and institutional perspectives;
- c. Group work on specific issue related to sustainable land management practices and the way forward; and
- d. Reaching practical conclusions and drafting of region specific action-oriented recommendations with a focus on capacity building and regional policy initiative on sustainable land management practices along with suitable communication strategy.

IV. PARTICIPATION

The Meeting is expected to bring together national, regional and international experts specializing on the issue of sustainable land management. It will also be open to officials from the region, namely representatives from Departments of Agriculture, Land, Water and Environment, Research Centres, Universities and other stakeholders. All participants will be welcome to deliver a concise and focused paper/presentation on their experience or the experience of their country/institution on success stories and lessons learned related to sustainable land management practices.

Experts attending the meeting in their personal capacities and will not be considered as representatives of their Governments or Organizations.

V. DATE AND VENUE

The Meeting will be held from 25 to 27 March 2009 at the ESCWA Headquarters, United Nations House, Riad El-Solh square, Beirut, Lebanon.

VI. LANGUAGE

The meeting will be conducted in English and Arabic and simultaneous interpretation will be provided. Participants are expected to discuss, present and share their experiences and lessons learned concerning the subject matter in either of the two languages.

VII. CONTACT INFORMATION

All correspondence concerning the meeting should be addressed to:

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