

STATEMENT BY MR. DILIP SINHA, ADDITIONAL SECRETARY, AT THE HIGH LEVEL MEETING ON ADDRESSING DESERTIFICATION, LAND DEGRADATION AND DROUGHT IN THE CONTEXT OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND POVERTY ERADICATION AT THE 66<sup>TH</sup> SESSION OF THE UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY ON SEPTEMBER 20, 2011

**Mr. Chairman,  
Excellencies and distinguished delegates,**

Allow me at the outset to deeply appreciate your leadership in conducting this High Level Meeting. The discussion in this Meeting on “Desertification, land degradation and drought mitigation in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication” is indeed topical, given the significance it holds for developing countries.

Desertification and degradation are critical environmental issues. In India, where over 60% of the land area is dry or arid, this issue has serious implications for the livelihood and food security of millions of our people. Desertification, Land degradation, drought and poverty are mutually reinforcing – high livelihood dependency of people on natural resources, often leads to progressive resource degradation, but this degradation impoverishes the people even further. This constitutes a vicious cycle linking deteriorating natural resources to deteriorating livelihoods as people need to encroach further on fragile soils, sparse vegetation and limited water resources to meet their basic needs for food, shelter and livelihood.

**Mr. Chairman,**

Land degradation is both a cause and consequence of poverty. To fight both the problems synergistically, the policies of Government of India aim at a convergence between sustainable land management and poverty alleviation programmes. These innovative approaches are aimed to restore ecological balance by harnessing, conserving and developing degraded natural resources such as soil, vegetative cover and water while providing sustainable livelihoods.

India’s Mahatma Gandhi Rural Employment programme, which is perhaps the world’s largest cash-for-work programme, addresses the twin objectives of poverty reduction and ecosystem restoration. This scheme fosters conditions for inclusive growth including basic wage security, strengthening rural economy, capacity building of stakeholders, sustainable development of agro and natural resource based rural economy and poverty eradication.

In addition, Government of India's Integrated Watershed Management Programme takes a livelihood-based approach towards land management. Under this programme so far, over 46,000 watershed projects have been sanctioned, covering an area of over 24 million hectares generating 580 million person-days of employment.

India's National Afforestation Programme aims at restoring forests through plantation and natural regeneration for ecological security while meeting the fuel-wood, fodder and other needs of the rural communities. The project has resulted in the afforestation of 1.69 million hectares of land area so far.

In addition to these programmes, focused efforts are being made for highly degraded areas. *Bundelkhand* region, which is a highly degraded semi-arid region in Central India with a high incidence of poverty, has been provided with a special package. The package is being implemented under a multi-sectoral approach with primary focus on water resources and livelihood improvement.

India's strong technical and institutional capacity in remote sensing and GIS data for natural resources management is also being utilized for a systematic inventory of the natural resource availability in the country.

Furthermore, India's National Action Plan on Climate Change is a holistic programme for addressing various elements of environmental conservation and comprises of 8 Missions addressing land, energy, water, biodiversity and agriculture and is an important element of our efforts to fight desertification, land degradation and drought. The Mission on Sustainable Agriculture specifically focuses on dryland agriculture and risk management. The National Mission for a Green India focuses on environmental amelioration through climate mitigation, food security, water security, biodiversity conservation and livelihood security of forest dependent communities.

**Mr. Chairman,**

Internationally, India is actively engaged in programmes of cooperation and support to other developing countries, particularly in Africa which face challenges of desertification and land degradation. Under the India-Africa Forum Summit, our total allocation for agricultural support to African countries amounts to US\$ 38.7 million. This includes over 300 new scholarships in agricultural sciences; customized training in water conservation and utilization, seed production, livestock management, farm mechanization and post-harvest processing; setting up of a new India-Africa University for Life and Earth Sciences; and the establishment of regional soil and water testing laboratories and farm centres in Africa to name a few.

**Mr. Chairman,**

Sustainable development in dry and arid lands is much more than just an environmental concern for developing countries; it is intrinsically linked to poverty eradication. As this issue straddles environmental conservation and livelihood and food security of people inhabiting these areas, it is necessary that our approach to curbing desertification and land degradation be holistic and people-centric, one that balances the requirements of science and sustainability of ecosystems with people's aspirations for better living conditions and poverty eradication.

Thank you.

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