



UNCCD News

A bi-monthly update on the work of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD)

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In this issue



From the Executive Secretary

Sovereign states are snapping up foreign farmland to grow crops for the exclusive consumption of their own citizens. Motives include water shortages and soil degradation in their own country, unreliable food imports or dwindling arable land. They should restore and treasure their own land, not abandon it. **This page**

Special report



The Great "Land Grab"

By 2050 the world will have at least another 3 billion mouths to feed. Where will the food come from? Private and public actors alike are rushing to secure fertile arable land in Africa, Asia, Latin America, North America and Europe. But will the benefits be shared? With the land rush under growing scrutiny, the jury is still out. **Page 2**

Interview



Soil's significance in Cuba

Orlando Rey Santos, a senior government official, climate negotiator and trained lawyer, explains Cuba's land-use legacy. The UNCCD, he says, "has been a catalyzing factor in the development of Cuban thinking about the management and administration of forests, soils, water and the various associated natural resources." **Page 8**

Policy



A regional strategy for SLM?

Mesoamerica, comprising southern Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, Belize, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama, is gearing up a new, cooperative regional approach to agricultural production and forests, two key elements of sustainable land management (SLM). UNCCD executives recently took a first-hand look. **Page 10**

See the fully linked version of this issue of *UNCCD News* online at <http://newsbox.unccd.int/2.3>

FROM THE EXECUTIVE SECRETARY

The land we value most should be our own

This issue is largely given over to "land-grabbing". The term is provocative (see editor's note below), but large-scale international land acquisitions are increasingly contentious and worth a close look. They shed an intriguing new light on land-use, soil health, food security and development today.

Among the big players at present are states who feel pushed to acquire foreign farmland to grow crops for shipping back home, either because the soil in their own country is degraded and dry or simply insufficient to meet projected national food needs. Although aware of the social, political, economic and environmental pressures that they face, I call on governments to do all within their powers to preserve their own land, not abandon it. Depleting and then seeking to replace their farming capacity with land acquired elsewhere is likely to become an endless quest.

I also want to urge governments, investors and land managers not only to increase their investments in sustainable land management but also to contemplate increasing their investments in land rehabilitation and reclamation. This is a viable response to the surge in competing claims on land and water and could thus yield multiple benefits, especially within the framework of the UNCCD's National Action Programmes (NAPs), which have been undertaken by 106 of the 193 Parties and organizations that are signatories to our Convention.

Much remains to be learned about the new wave of large-scale land acquisitions and its eventual impact on poverty alleviation and development. One would be wrong to condemn it at this stage.

Continued on next page >



Land acquisition must create a win-win situation in which all involved enjoy long-term benefits.

Note from the editor

The term "land-grabbing" traditionally refers to the arbitrary seizure of land either by military force or through dishonest or illegal means. Strictly speaking, it is thus a misnomer in this context. However, the term is now commonly used in media reports and even official statements about the surging investments in farmland around the world. Thus, UNCCD News employs the terms "land-grab" and "land-grabbing" for reasons of brevity only, and by doing so does not wish to cast aspersions or pass judgment in any way on the intentions, actions, probity or reputation of any individual, organization or government.

In fact, if investing in agriculture and rural development is finally hot again, so much the better. But let us now make sure that whenever land is acquired, whether abroad or at home, there is a fair process for the people who already work on it or live from it. Land acquisition must create a win-win situation in which all involved enjoy long-term benefits. I urge greater effort by governments, investors, aid agencies, civil society organizations and affected people to develop rules and regulations for both national and foreign entities doing land deals.

Transactions must be transparent and respect existing land rights, including traditional and unwritten ones. They must uphold the right to food of local populations, the protection of indigenous people and the sustainability of communities and the environment – and much of that responsibility falls upon the host governments who enter contracts with foreign investors.

Of course, it makes good sense for some countries to import food rather than grow it themselves. But let us all first look to what we have. The land we value most should be our own. No government will want to stand accused of scorched earth practices at home and beggar-thy-neighbour policies abroad.



Luc Gnacadja
Executive Secretary

SPECIAL REPORT

THE GREAT LAND GRAB

A rush for food security and profits

Degraded soil and scarce water at home plus jumpy prices for imported food are driving a host of countries to claim foreign land from which to feed their populations. Some call this a neo-colonialist “land-grab” that will doom smallholder farmers. Others tentatively predict a new dawn of agricultural investment, increased production and rural jobs. As debate heats up, the search is on for agreement on a global code of conduct – and ways to steer some benefits to farmers in the poorest countries.

Want to avoid the next food price crisis? Tired of unreliable rice and corn exporters? Why not buy up fertile land abroad and ship your own fresh, dependable supplies of foodstuffs and biofuels back home? That solution seems to make sense for more and more cash-rich, food-importing countries. Foreign land acquisitions and long-term lease-holdings, starting on a modest scale over a decade ago, have recently turned into a rush.

Stark drivers Government concerns about national food security are one main driver. Speculative profits are another. With eyes fixed on low-cost, fertile land in Asian, African and Latin American countries as well as Canada and Central Europe, private investment funds are relishing the prospect. The US commodities guru Jim Rogers told Fortune magazine in June 2009: “I’m convinced that farmland is going to be one of the best investments of our time.”

If humanity, as predicted, tops 9 billion people by 2050, some estimates say that must be matched by a 70% boost in world food production. But what to grow it on? 12 million hectares of arable land – roughly the size of Greece or Nepal, enough to harvest 20 million tonnes of grain and feed six million people per annum – are lost to desertification each year. Already, over 900 million people are undernourished and 65 countries are facing food shortages, according to the 2010 annual report of the World Food Programme.

Stark factors like these help explain much of the phenomenon. The World Bank estimates that, since 2006, about 50 million hectares (120 million acres) in Africa, Latin America and Asia – an area equivalent to almost half the cropland of China – have either been signed away or remain under negotiation. The World Bank conservatively puts the value of these deals at US\$50 billion, others at twice that amount.

Lack of reliable figures is a major handicap facing analysts, but existing estimates are startling. “Some countries have been confronted with informal requests amounting to more than half their cultivable land area”, said a joint report by the FAO, the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) and the World Bank Group last January.

Less land per capita, more value for capital

As the world population goes up, available land per person is going down

Worldwide arable land, per capita

1960

1.1 acres (0.44 hectares)

2000

0.6 acres (0.24 ha.)

2030 (est.)

0.5 acres (0.2 ha.)

Average land prices, per hectare, 2009

Sub-Saharan Africa
USD800 to 1,000

Poland
USD6,000

Argentina & Brazil
USD5,000 – 6,000

USA
USD7,000

United Kingdom
USD18,000

Germany
USD22,000

Farmland price increases, 2006-2007

Brazil 16%

Poland 31%

Midwestern USA 15%

Food fact 1

From 1999 to 2008, global food consumption exceeded food production for every year except one

“Agricultural produce is increasingly in short supply worldwide, with fertile land becoming an ever scarcer commodity.”

Dr Christian Mersmann
Managing Director, Global Mechanism of the UNCCD



A rush for land in countries rich and poor

Good land is a finite resource. Demands on it for more food, biofuels and housing are set to grow along with the world's expanding population. That spells resource scarcity, meaning rising prices for buyers. Owners get booming asset value and leasing agencies secure strong revenues. This market mechanism underlies the investment rush for land – and the welcome extended to investors by many cash-strapped governments.

The buyers include big-name investment firms like Morgan Stanley, Deutsche Bank and Goldman Sachs as well as private and state-owned investment groups from the Arab Gulf states, Libya, Egypt and Jordan. China and India, their populations burgeoning, are major players from Asia, along with Malaysia, Republic of Korea and Japan.

Countries selling or leasing farmland are primarily low-income states with arable land, good rainfall or reliable rivers. In Africa, they include Sudan, Mozambique, Mali, Madagascar and Ethiopia, plus smaller entities like Cameroon and Benin. Investors are also courting Cambodia and the Philippines, among other fertile, water-rich nations in Asia.

But “land grabs” for food, biofuels and profit have spread to rich countries, as well. Swedish, British and Russian investors have bought up more than 800 thousand hectares of fertile but neglected land in Ukraine, for example, to feed rising world demand for meat and dairy products, fodder, grain and oilseeds – and enjoy handsome capital appreciation.

Canada's farmers: No to “serfdom” In richer countries, the heavy debt load of many independent farmers and the tightening grip of large corporations on seeds and fertilizer have worn down many independent, non-industrial farms. Now, some see the land rush as another blow to their future. In June this year, Canada's National Union of Farmers (NFU) warned of “the rapidly accelerating transfer of foodland ownership from family farmers and local citizens to foreign interests, investors, and corporations.”

NFU President Terry Boehm's words will resonate in many other countries: “There have been two primary models of land ownership and food production over the centuries”, he said. “In one, land is held broadly, owned by farmers and other local citizens. In another, a relatively small number of elites own the land and those who work it and grow the food are sharecroppers and serfs. Canada has, until recently, embraced the first model. But a corporate and investor farmland buy-up means that we may be in the opening stages of a rapid move to the latter model. Unless we act, our land may soon be owned by modern-day lords and barons, with disastrous consequences for all Canadians.”

Food fact 2

In early 2009, global food stocks reached their lowest level since 1948. Though recovering since, they remain at a 20-year low

.....

Poor transparency, uncertain metrics

.....
With little regulation, many buyers and sellers are sealing land deals in private or not reporting them in detail.

.....
 Sample figures:

Typical lease periods, all known “land-grab” transactions
 30-99 years

Brazil

Total land area registered by foreign investors, 2008:

4 million hectares (9.3m acres)
 Foreign investment in land (purchases and leasing), 2002 to 2008:

USD2.43 billion

Ethiopia, Ghana, Sudan, Madagascar, Mali and Sudan
 2004-2009

Area of farmland bought or leased:
2,492,684 hectares (6.2 million acres)

Value of investments signed:
 ca. **USD920 million**

.....
 Total private equity capital raised,
 1st quarter 2009

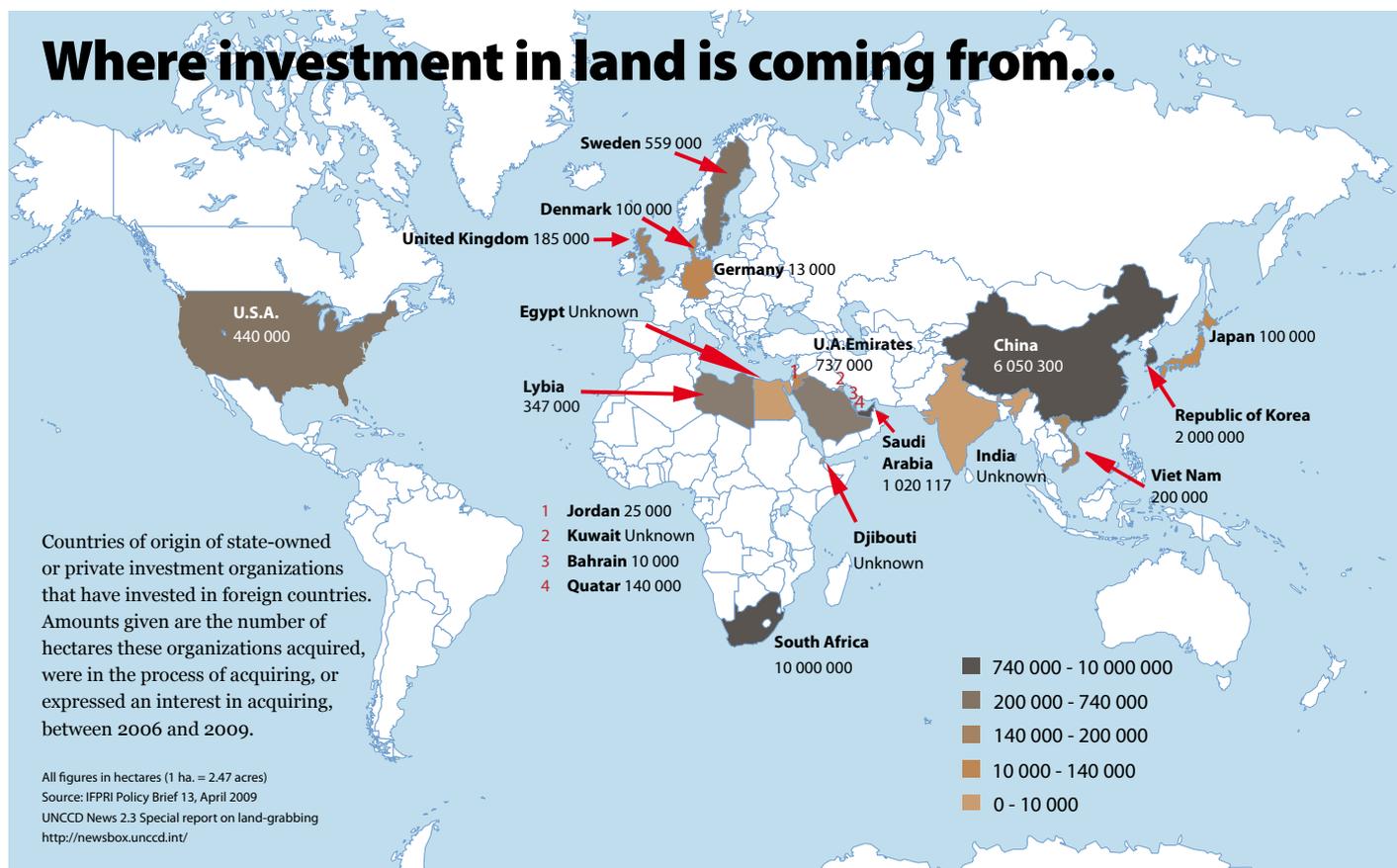
For farmland acquisitions or leasing,
 worldwide:

USD2.5 billion

Sources

Ministry of Agrarian Development, Brazil; Institute for Food Policy Research (IFPRI); AgCapita Partners LP; Emergent Asset Management Ltd.; Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO); Institute for Environment and Development (IIED); International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD)

Where investment in land is coming from...



Various players, different motives Buyer-countries in the land rush operate either directly or through state-owned sovereign wealth funds and public-private partnerships. Spooked by the unrest in several developing countries triggered by the food price spikes of 2007 and 2008, they point to gains in food security, more predictable budgets and social stability. The governments of seller countries, for their part, cite welcome revenue for the state, new technologies and investment, promised roads and schools, jobs for rural populations and more food production for local use as well as export.

Agriculture and trade combined make up one of the world's most pressing and most complicated agendas. Proper assessment of the potential benefits of the land rush must be case-by-case, depending on a host of global realities and unique national situations.

Poor economies are vulnerable in varying degrees to the distorting impact of rich-country farm subsidies, trade tariffs and the deadlocked Doha Round. They are often no match for the market clout of major multinational food buyers and manufacturers of seeds, fertilizer and farm equipment. At home, governments face empty coffers, the demands of the World Bank and other donors and, in cases such as the Philippines, a vociferous national debate over the proper definition and respective merits of food sovereignty and food security.

By welcoming foreign investors, some host governments might just be opting for simplicity, leasing or selling farmland to lock in predictable revenues rather than struggling to grow and sell their own cash crops for disappointing prices on volatile world markets.

Mounting opposition But NGOs and civil society activists are fighting the trend. Many call the wave of farmland acquisitions a self-serving, neo-colonialist land-grab by corporate agribusiness. Without much tighter regulation, they say, the boom in land deals will erode both national economic sovereignty and food sovereignty alike in the host countries, trample traditional land rights and further impoverish smallholder farmers.

Already, popular resistance is holding up recently-announced government plans in Uganda, Mozambique and the Philippines to lease food-growing land to Egypt and China. And in late June, the government of Brazil announced it would tighten restrictions on foreign ownership of farmlands. In what looked like a warning to investors, Agrarian Development Minister Guilherme Cassel told a business reporter: "We do not need foreigners to produce food in Brazil. Because of food security, Brazilian lands must remain in Brazilian hands."

There are environmental worries, too. Growing food crops in huge plantations has usually implied large-scale monoculture production with copious amounts of fertiliser and pesticides. Though initial

"The utilisation of Sudan's natural resources of sun, soil and water is not more than 20-25 percent at the moment."

Sudanese Minister of Agriculture
Abdel Haleem Mutafi

With agriculture now “sexy”, who benefits?

Until recently, farming in Africa was “very unsexy”, says Prof. Peter Hartmann, Director General of the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA) in Ibadan, Nigeria. Dogged by a string of unsuccessful projects, foreign assistance to agriculture and rural livelihoods in developing countries dropped precipitously in the 1990s. For example, World Bank lending to this sector fell from a high of USD3.5 billion in 1995 to USD800 million by 2002.

At first glance, the apparent investor turnaround since then is striking. Has the sector really blossomed from development orphan into investment superstar? In some cases, the answer is ‘yes’. But gains across the broad development front will be uneven. Clearly, impoverished nations with desertified land and scarce water in Asia, Latin America and Africa are likely to find less favour with investors than the “low-hanging fruit” presented by the sprawling, fertile regions of countries like Sudan, Zambia and Ethiopia.

Investor optimism needs a nuanced reading, too. The prospect of sparkling profits has receded – for now. Studies indicate the 2008-2009 food crisis has passed: the June 2010 FAO Food Outlook showed the market responded to the price spike with a surge in plantings and production. That has fed through to “sharp declines in international prices of major food staples this year”, it said, predicting that global inventories of everything from sugar to wheat are likely to stay strong through 2011.

Some BRICs seek breadbaskets Nevertheless, remorseless underlying trends in consumption, commodity prices and climate have convinced many that today’s easing will not last. Drought is afflicting traditional “breadbasket” producers like Australia, northern China and Argentina, and the changes could be lasting. The cost of fertilizer remains dependent on dwindling oil reserves. The middle-class appetite for meat in BRIC countries* is growing fast, since 1990 doubling in China to 40 kilos per head annually. More generally, demand for food is inelastic: the world’s burgeoning population can’t choose not to eat.

Says Joachim von Braun, Director General of the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI): “Land is scarce and will become scarcer as the world has to double food output to satisfy increased demand by 2050. With limited land and water resources, this will automatically lead to increased valuations of productive land. And it goes hand in hand with water. Water scarcity will probably increase even more.”



interests, too negligent of smallholders’ interests – and toothless because they will probably not be legally binding.

For example, the World Bank, the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and the UN Conference for Trade and Development (UNCTAD) are promoting a set of seven investment principles. The seven principles for responsible agricultural investment seek to reduce the risks of social backlash, respect the rights of existing users of land, water and other resources, protect and improve livelihoods at the household and community level and do no harm to the environment, but they are decried by GRAIN and other activist groups as just a ploy to “make land-grabbing socially acceptable”.

This April, La Vía Campesina, FIAN International, the Land Research Action Network and GRAIN issued a joint statement co-sponsored by over 120 other social organizations and movements that called for the joint World Bank/FAO/IFAD/UNCTAD initiative to be stopped. The real solution to feeding the world, the statement said, lies in supporting community-based family farming for local and regional markets, not industrial farming for global agribusiness.

The World Bank’s seven principles “will not accomplish their ostensible objectives”, the statement continued. “They are rather a move to try to legitimize land grabbing. Facilitating the long-term corporate (foreign and domestic) takeover of rural people’s farmlands is completely unacceptable no matter which guidelines are followed.”

A call for more clarity What precedents for global guidelines are there? Dr. Lindsay Stringer, Senior Lecturer at the School of Earth and Environment at the University of Leeds, UK, points out that multinational mining companies, for example, have long been managing large-scale land acquisitions in developing countries under a variety of codes of business conduct. But she also highlights a more urgent issue: the farmland investment rush remains little-understood.

“We don’t know enough about the extent of land-grabbing nor do we have enough information on the conditions under which it’s happening”, she told UNCCD News. “How is this process taking place? How are local communities being consulted? Who’s grabbing what from whom? Who’s benefiting, and how? We need much more research to develop an understanding of what’s really going on.” Dr Stringer is thus sceptical about the benefits of an international code for farmland acquisition – at least for now.

Research is not absent, however. Dr Stefan Schmitz, Head of Division for Rural Development and Global Food Security at the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development in Germany (BMZ), points to detailed case studies of land acquisition in Cambodia, the Lao Peoples Democratic Republic, Madagascar and Mali, published recently by GTZ, the technical development cooperation organisation of the German government.

Combined with continued work on the FAO’s Voluntary Guidelines on Responsible Governance of Land and other Natural Resources and the efforts of the EU Working Group on Land Issues, Dr Schmitz believes, such activities provide opportunities for consensus and action. “We’d make substantial progress”, he told UNCCD News, “if we could work through international initiatives like these to help build a common understanding of the extent, the actors and the impact of large-scale leasing or acquisition of land in developing countries. With Germany’s experience of international development cooperation, we could then help make sure that investments in land are both transparent and socially beneficial”.

A role for NAPs And once common understanding is achieved, what might happen next? Rather than creating a new and separate “land-grabbing” code, Dr Lindsay Stringer argues, principles and guidelines could be built into existing legislative frameworks. “Governments could seriously consider incorporating relevant land-grabbing issues into the UNCCD National Action Programmes (NAPS)”, Dr Stringer says, “because land-grabbing calls for strategies at country level that prevent social exclusion, soil degradation and forced migration. For example, traditional users of the land who are suddenly forced by new owners to move may simply increase pressure on neighbouring land and water resources, and just worsen degradation and insecurity there. NAPs could be reviewed to incorporate land-grabbing and could help reduce all these impacts.”

Whatever effective regulation is developed, many believe that it must focus hard on pressing issues of equity and fairness. The UN Special Rapporteur Olivier de Schutter’s March 2010 report said that the rise of dominant transnational corporations in the globalized food sector had pushed smallholders into a deeply unequal bargaining position. “In these circumstances, sourcing and pricing policies of commodity buyers have a huge and sometimes negative impact on the right to food”, he wrote. “This situation partly explains why smallholders in developing countries are the single most important group of those suffering hunger in the world today.”

Help for small farmers Among Mr De Schutter’s recommendations: States should guard against excessive concentration in the food chain and abuses of dominant positions acquired by corporations or individuals. They should provide grievance mechanisms that ensure freedom from reprisal. And governments should also support the creation of strong farmers’ cooperatives to help small producers explore contract farming, obtain higher prices for their produce and meet the increasingly complex norms and requirements of buyers and other public actors on regional and global food markets.

Smallholders themselves are getting organized. Last April a coalition of Asian, African and Latin American farmers associations joined up in a campaign “to amplify the voices of affected peoples who have been largely excluded from the discussions so far, and to widen the debate on how the international community should respond.” Aiming for a “global dialogue meeting” with business, governments and donors in December 2010, the group is made up of the Asia Farmers Association (AFA), the Confederación de Organizaciones de Productores Familiares del MERCOSUR (COPROFAM) and the Réseau des organisations paysannes et des producteurs agricoles de l’Afrique de l’Ouest (ROPPA), along with ActionAid International and the International Land Coalition (ILC).

“The result of our own failures” Global awareness of “land-grabbing” would suggest that they will have a growing audience. But the legacy of decades of short-sighted policies, in both developed and developing countries, will take time to dispel. UN Special Rapporteur’s Olivier De Schutter’s report concludes: “The debate on large-scale land acquisitions or leases ... should not distract us from acknowledging that, to a large extent, the rush towards farmland in developing countries is the result of our own failures.



Many people were unable to feed themselves in 2009 not because they could not find food, but rather because they could no longer afford it.

World Food Programme
2010 Annual Report

“We have failed in the past to adequately invest in agriculture and rural development in developing countries, particularly sub-Saharan Africa”, Mr De Schutter goes on. “We have failed to promote means of agricultural production which do not deplete the soils and exhaust groundwater reserves. And we are failing today to establish well-functioning and more reliable global markets for agricultural commodities. It would be unjustifiable to seek to better regulate agreements on large-scale land acquisitions or leases, without addressing also, as a matter of urgency, these circumstances which make such agreements look like a desirable option.”

Grab more reading on this subject

See links at the online edition: <http://newsbox.unccd.int/2.3/>

INTERVIEW

“When you talk soil in Cuba, you’re talking national security”

Orlando Rey Santos has been Director of Environment at the Ministry of Science, Technology and Environment in Havana since 1999. Straight-talking and experienced, he has served as member of Cuban delegations to the UN Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD), the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). During a break in climate negotiations in Bonn ahead of the Cancun summit in December 2010, Mr Rey Santos spoke with Andrea Pérez Lorente.

On the Cuban approach to land degradation

First of all, there’s real political will to confront the problem. You can see it in our legal framework and our strategies. And there’s more than just words, there’s action, because we’re investing heavily in the conservation and rehabilitation of the soil, even if the resources we deploy are still not sufficient. When you talk soil in Cuba, you’re talking national security, you’re talking food security. Cuba is spending an enormously disproportionate amount of money – something like 1.5 billion US dollars a year – on food imports. That’s a terrible drain on our own development. So for us, when we talk about our land, apart from the environment, it’s about food security and our very survival. Regaining adequate food production levels, which we once had but then lost partly for administrative and management reasons but mainly because of the degradation of our land, is a vital question for Cuba.

On Cuba’s National Action Programme (NAP)

One of its challenges is that we are confronting the legacy of hundreds of years of deforestation, starting with the arrival on our shores of Christopher Columbus. Next came the indiscriminate felling of trees for the Spanish fleet and then more wholesale deforestation for the monoculture of sugar cane. Up to this very day, we’re still grappling with a stubborn tradition of intensive agriculture that employs heavy machinery and inadequate techniques of manual labour. These have favoured erosion and led to a situation where about 77% of Cuban soil is degraded to some extent. And, of course, a major additional obstacle now is the present condition of the Cuban economy and the scarce resources it can muster.

On the current economic situation

Soil degradation is a basic problem in Cuba’s environmental strategy. Don’t forget that we’re in a very special posture after more than a half-century of political differences with the USA. Its economic and social embargo makes it very difficult for us to acquire goods and obtain funding and technology. We are deprived of access to many of the principal global banks and financial institutions. And we’re being hit by the global economic crisis. We’re thus obliged to fall back on Cuba’s own internal resources. Perhaps that’s not such a bad thing: it’s forced us to be creative and to revisit traditional practices.

On implementing land use strategy

When the socialist camp collapsed, about 30% of Cuba’s foreign trade disappeared along with it. That was the moment to start thinking about agriculture in a different way. Since that time, Cuba has been in a process of recovery and has been applying a whole series of traditional techniques for soil management. These include bio-pesticides and bio-fertilizers, a return to animal traction and

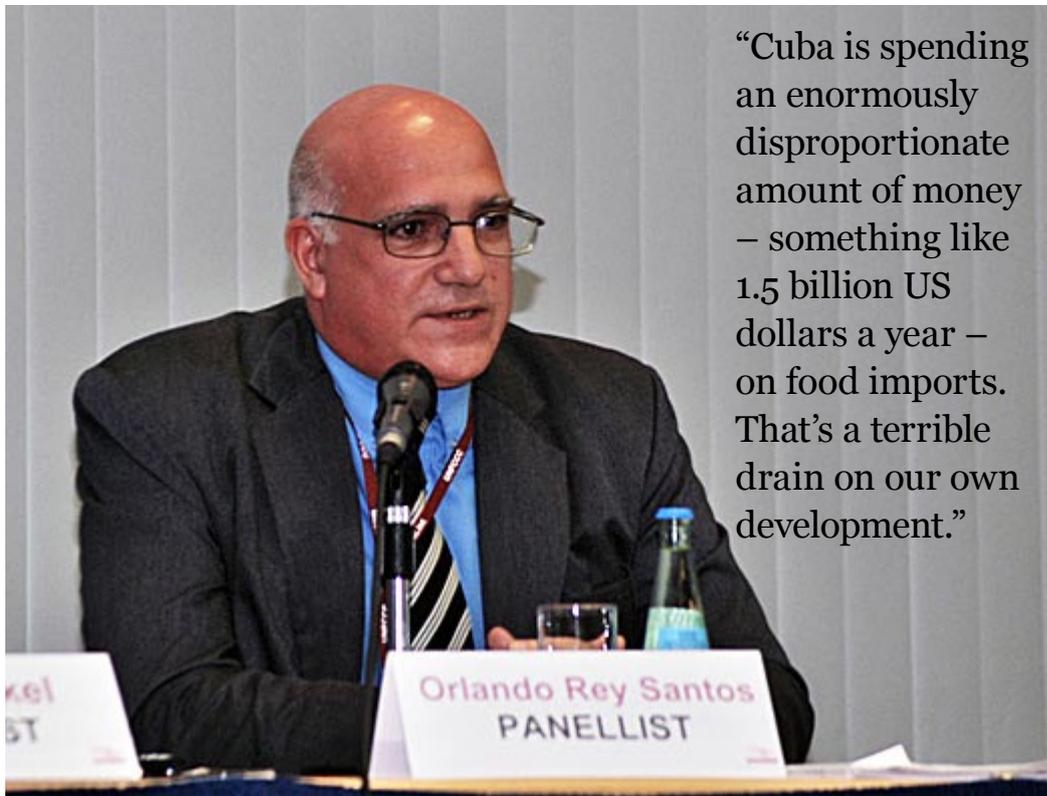
“We are confronting the legacy of hundreds of years of deforestation, starting with the arrival on our shores of Christopher Columbus.”

improved rotation of crops. New isn't necessarily better, as the saying goes. A good number of these practices had long been use in Cuba's countryside.

On how Cuba's food security policy is put into effect

The first to realize is that Cuba is a country with a very strong social-protection system. With respect to land, farmers are organized so as to be more independent and better able to sell and market their production. The sole aim is to strengthen Cuban agriculture and draw benefits from the soil. Don't forget Cuba was a country dominated by the sugar cane monoculture. Once the prices of sugar started to fall on world markets, a good part of these properties were put to the cultivation of other products. This is how we've started a process of agricultural diversification in our search for food self-sufficiency.

Other changes we're making concern the pricing system. It's obvious to us that food prices in the world will continue to increase for a multitude of reasons, including the growing numbers of people buying foodstuffs. Note the manner in which developing countries are increasing their purchasing power as they enter markets and are now importing products that, in some cases, they once exported. Note also the way in which farmers themselves are accessing sales and retail outlets, often with far less state support or intervention than there was before. However, the most significant change that's happening now in Cuba stems from the decentralization of land tenure.



“Cuba is spending an enormously disproportionate amount of money – something like 1.5 billion US dollars a year – on food imports. That’s a terrible drain on our own development.”

On land reforms

The Cuban state controls agricultural production, marketing and land tenure. After the triumph of the revolution, about 90% of the land was socialized and incorporated into large state companies and cooperatives. Today, for many different reasons, more than 15% of farmland that was in state ownership has reverted to individual holdings, not as private property but for the sole use and benefit of the tenant. In other words, the state continues to own the land, but the individual Cuban citizen acquires the right to use and benefit from the land for a given period of time.

The utilization of Cuba's 6.6 million hectares of arable land used to be very low, partly due to our own poor management of it. Barely 55% of this land was properly exploited. Now, the new tenancy laws have halted the rural exodus of the recent past. The new tenants have to sign a contract containing binding commitments for the preservation of the soil. The intention is also to decentralize territorial management so as to permit towns and provinces to retain some of the resulting economic benefits. Whereas before these benefits used to go to the central authorities, now there's more scope for economic stimulation at local level.

On the role of the UNCCD

The Convention helps us to better discern realities that we would not have seen so clearly without it. It provides a conceptual and strategic framework, along with a greater analytical capacity and a better understanding of the phenomenon at global level. This has certainly helped us intensify our campaign in Cuba. The Convention has been a catalyzing factor in the development of Cuban thinking about the management and administration of forests, soils, water and the various associated natural resources. In addition, the particular usefulness of the UNCCD is that it occupies its own niche, desertification, which is not contained in the other, more general multilateral environmental conventions.

“Environmental law should guide human behaviour onto the path of greater sustainability and also guarantee a person's right to a healthy environment.”

On the role of environmental law

Speaking as a lawyer, my view is that traditional law tends just to tell you what you can and can't do, whereas environmental law can play a much more formative role. Environmental law should guide human behaviour onto the path of greater sustainability and also guarantee a person's right to a healthy environment. That's how environmental law is regarded in Cuba, at any rate. Environmental legislation is very new, conceived for a new sort of human being.

We humans are weighed down at present with bad behavioural habits in the way we interact with nature, how we consume, how we produce things. We're living in an unsustainable manner and the soil is showing the consequences of that. We must stage a revolution within ourselves if we want to get to the future together.

PRACTICE

New regional strategy for MesoAmerica

“Environmental sustainability must be embraced as a regional priority to ensure Mesoamerica’s security, growth and development.” So said Guatemalan Vice-President Rafael Espada during a recent encounter with top UNCCD officials to discuss ways to reinvigorate Mesoamerica’s dwindling natural resource base.



“More than 15% of farmland that was in state ownership has reverted to individual holdings, not as private property but for the sole use and benefit of the tenant.”

Guatemala’s Vice-President Rafael Espada is flanked by UNCCD Executive Secretary Luc Gnacadja and Christian Mersmann, Managing Director of the Global Mechanism of the UNCCD (right). The Global Mechanism provides advisory services to the country Parties to the UNCCD to scale up finance for sustainable land management (SLM).

Mesoamerica comprises southern Mexico and the countries of Central America: Guatemala, Honduras, Belize, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama.

Coming in the wake of Guatemala’s worst drought in over 30 years, a new regional approach offers promise for agricultural production and forests, two major determining factors for development, wealth creation and poverty reduction. There is no doubt that crunch time is drawing near for Guatemala, which is rated one of the top ten countries most at risk from climate change, worldwide.

Guatemalan Minister for the Environment Luis Ferrate stressed that, given future climate scenarios, sustainable land management (SLM) is a ticket to enhanced resilience and to achieving food sovereignty and sustained economic growth. As such, it should rocket up the political agenda.

Guatemala is leading Mesoamerica’s march towards this goal and seeking the investments needed to transform the region’s productivity and future development. There is a spirit of solidarity and regional integration. UNCCD Executive Secretary Luc Gnacadja, attending a gathering of Mesoamerican ministers and high-level government officials together with Christian Mersmann, the Managing Director of the Global Mechanism of the UNCCD, spotlighted country efforts in the region to integrate land use strategies with broader regional planning to ensure it receives greater attention and increased financial resources. A case in point is the region’s Agro-Environmental Health Strategy (ERAS), one of

the few instances in the world where these three sectors are combined to deliver mutually reinforcing development outcomes.

Citing a reforestation initiative in Guatemala, Mr Gnacadja said that promoting such public-private partnerships in the regional effort to fight land degradation was bound to generate good results for communities and the local economy.

Need for “a compelling economic case” The private sector is playing an increasingly prominent role in financing sustainable actions. With climate change and drought looming large in future scenarios for the region, private companies are understandably keen to safeguard their investments.

International cooperation between governments alone is not enough to meet the required investments in land, particularly when set against current economic and environmental conditions. Meeting with the UNCCD leadership, Guatemalan parliamentarians were emphatic that a compelling economic case must be put forward to investors to justify investment in sustainable development. Governments must also dedicate greater resources from their own domestic budgets to tackle the issue, they said.

“Investments in land, first and foremost, make economic sense, not just environmental sense,” Mr Mersmann agreed. “Land is a vital piece of the macroeconomic puzzle, leading to growth, new markets and enhanced productivity.”

“Implementing the UNCCD is about enhancing productivity, food sovereignty and resilience in all developing nations”, Mr Gnacadja said. “Mesoamerica’s assertive action on land is promoting the truth of that, region-wide.”

About the UNCCD

Developed as a result of the Rio Summit, the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) is a unique instrument that has brought attention to the land degradation affecting some of the most vulnerable people and ecosystems in the world. The UNCCD benefits from the largest membership of the three Rio Conventions and is increasingly recognized as an instrument that can make an important contribution to the achievement of sustainable development and poverty reduction.

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