



Beijing International Conference on Women and Desertification

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CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN IN THE DRYLANDS: A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

1. Introduction

1. During recent decades, increasing environmental deterioration and the shortcomings of development projects in enhancing disadvantaged livelihoods in developing countries has led the international community to acknowledge the importance of two interlinked issues: sustainable development and women's economic and social roles in society. When discussing sustainable development for countries in arid, semi-arid and dry sub-humid areas, the issue becomes closely related with that of land degradation and desertification due to the dependence of developing countries on agriculture and subsistence farming practices. Prevalent phenomena in the drylands, such as water shortage, famine, malnutrition, epidemics, poverty and migration, mostly affect women because they are traditionally responsible for the household and often grow, process, manage and market food, and collect fuel, fodder and water. Women in sub-Saharan Africa grow and sell 80 to 90 per cent of their food, in Asia 60 to 90 per cent, 46 per cent in the Caribbean and more than 30 per cent in Latin America (FAO, 1996). Loss of soil productivity, deforestation and water scarcity then affect not only food production but also women's other socially assigned tasks, by increasing the amount of time needed to gather fuelwood and fodder, to shepherd animals and to fetch water.

2. It is therefore important to focus on women when discussing approaches and implementing activities directly relating to combating desertification and land degradation. It is likewise important to take into consideration the wider socio-economic context of sustainable development policies and how they address gender equality and gender gaps. International conferences, such as the Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995) and the World Food Summit (Rome, 1996), have addressed this issue. The conferences provided an opportunity to stress that subsistence farmers are the most vulnerable to impoverishment and the most exposed to food insecurity because of their limited access to resources. The most seriously affected and deprived in this respect are women farmers, despite the paradoxical fact that they produce more than half of total food crops in developing countries (FAO).

3. This fact highlights the importance of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) as an international treaty that aims to tackle the adverse socio-economic as well as environmental effects that land degradation and desertification has on affected communities. It also clearly establishes linkages between the UNCCD and the overarching objective of sustainable development as well as the objectives of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) as they target poverty eradication. The UNCCD provides stimulus to the debate and promotes, through national, subregional and regional action programmes (NAPs, SRAPs and RAPs) the visibility of women's potential and contribution in the management of natural resources. The UNCCD expressly highlights the essential role of participatory approaches, that is, the "bottom-up" approach, in which women, among other key stakeholders, play a significant role in the

sustainable management of drylands (Prologue UNCCD). Despite the fact that the Convention text and its implementation annexes do not explicitly touch upon the gender dimension, its bottom-up approach is meant to foster access to natural resources by end users, including women. Additionally, in order to alleviate the particular problems experienced by women, UNCCD country Parties have committed themselves to promoting awareness and facilitating the participation of local populations in the decisions that affect them (Article 5, UNCCD).

4. This document is intended to provide an overview of women's socio-economic challenges and opportunities for natural resources management and for improving their situation in the drylands. The second part of the document highlights common characteristics of women in the drylands as well as the main differences at regional level. By outlining the challenges women face in the drylands, the third part of the document makes the argument for increasing support to gender equality through global and local actions. The fourth section identifies opportunities opened up by global processes and by local initiatives pointing at the possibility to establish conditions enabling people to face environmental challenges while improving women's position. The fifth and final section of this document, implications for action, is intended to serve as an entry point for discussion during the Beijing International Conference on Women and Desertification which will convene from 29 May to 1 June 2006, in Beijing, China.

5. Although not all people living in the drylands depend upon the land and not all of them are rural dwellers, this document rests on the acknowledgement that "[I]n combating land degradation, there is a need to recognize the importance of concentrating initially on the poorer segments of the farming populations within the critical areas". (ACTS, CISDL, UNDP, n.d.). Desertification is widespread and directly linked to poverty in countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America. Women engaged in subsistence agriculture and informal economic activities in the rural areas deserve attention in this paper, not only as the most vulnerable to the effects of drought and desertification, but above all as privileged agents of change.

2. The face of women in the drylands

6. Drylands cover approximately 40 per cent of the earth's land surface and are a direct source of livelihood for about one billion people. Ninety per cent of dryland populations live in developing countries and, on average, they lag far behind the rest of the world in human well-being and development indicators (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005). The connection between biodiversity and communities is closer for drylands than in almost any other ecosystem; natural resource management is the most important factor in livelihood security and the population learns to live in a delicate balance in a usually fragile environment (UNEP, 2004). Subject to extreme climate regimes with regard to crop production and livestock breeding, local dwellers face the threats of diminished food production, downstream flooding, reduced water quality, aggravated health problems due to malnutrition, lack of services, occasional dust storms and, ultimately, loss of livelihoods.

7. As the statistics shown in table 1 demonstrate, women are the main stakeholders and agents in agricultural activities and production. Not only do they produce most of the food through subsistence agriculture and low input farming, but they do so under pervasive unequal access to ownership, decision-making, wages, or benefits from development programmes. The low status of women in the drylands is reflected in the widespread poverty among them, their lack of political voice, the lack of essential services and their low access to property of their own.

8. Women in the drylands also share similar ongoing social and economic changes as an increasing number of their households rely less on agricultural activities for income and more on off-farm employment and on remittances from migrant workers. Mass migration to escape poverty is a major consequence of desertification. The phenomenon has grown in the past decade, with more people migrating permanently. Although in some areas this reduces human pressure on the land, in others the conservation and productivity of vulnerable areas is at stake due to lack of sufficient labour, thus increasing the workload for the women left behind, and causing the breakdown of whole families and the collapse of entire communities and their social networks.

Table 1. Distribution of female labour force according to agricultural and non-agricultural activities

Region or group of countries	Agricultural activities (%)			No agricultural activities (%)		
	1980	1990	1997	1980	1990	1997
Developed countries	14	9	7	86	91	93
Developing countries	74	68	63	26	32	37
African developing countries	82	76	72	18	24	28
- of which sub-Saharan Africa	83	79	75	17	21	25
Asian developing countries	77	72	67	23	28	33
Latin American and Caribbean developing countries	21	13	11	79	87	89
Oceanic developing countries	43	44	45	57	57	55
Low-income food-deficit countries	78	73	68	22	27	32
World	56	52	49	44	48	51

Source: FAOSTAT, 1999.

9. Although the relation between desertification and poverty is widely documented, as are women's more precarious conditions, the urgency and relevance of the problem is often neglected in international and national platforms as an issue already addressed and debated. The United Nations Human Development Index (HDI) report of 2005 reveals, however, that currently the populations of most of the countries severely affected by desertification still live in worse conditions of health, education and poverty than those in the majority of developing countries. Within these countries, women are the most disadvantaged when considering life expectancy, literacy, gross enrolment, and income between men and women as measured through the United Nations Gender-related Development Index (GDI). The GDI shows gender gaps against women in all countries, but what remains even more worrying is the doubly disadvantaged condition of women in developing countries severely affected by desertification.

10. Table 2 shows some human development indicators for selected countries suffering severe land degradation as compared with other countries in their regions. The indicators make clear that although some of these countries are above the world indicator average, social barriers persist against women. This is reflected in the GDI, but is more evident in wage discrimination. In all the countries listed, women earn only a fraction of male earned income, even less than the half they earn in Sudan, Nigeria, India, Pakistan, Brazil, Mexico, Peru and Chile.

11. The discussion above points to common trends in women's condition and position in the drylands, placing them as the main natural resource managers and producers under situations of great environmental vulnerability as well as social and economic disadvantage. But they also share common strong communal links and extended family ties, a deep knowledge of their surrounding environment and a wide extent of traditional knowledge. Women in the drylands administer their resources effectively and, depending on their income or food production, support the nutrition and well-being of their families.

Table 2. Human development and gender-related development indicators in countries more severely affected by land degradation

	Population (millions) 2003	Human Development Index 2003 (a)	Rank	Gender-related development index (GDI) 2003 (b)	Rank	Estimated female/male earned income ratio
World	6,313.8	0.741				
Developing countries	5,022.4	0.694				
AFRICA						
Sahel region	352.5	0.430				
Burkina Faso	12.4	0.317	175	0.311	138	0.73
Chad	9.1	0.341	173	0.322	137	0.59
Ethiopia	73.8	0.367	170	0.355	134	0.52
Ghana	21.2	0.520	138	0.517	104	0.75
Kenya	32.7	0.474	154	0.472	117	0.93
Mali	12.7	0.333	174	0.323	136	0.60
Mauritania	2.9	0.477	152	0.471	118	0.56
Nigeria	125.9	0.453	158	4.439	123	0.41
Sudan	34.9	0.512	141	0.495	110	0.32
Uganda	26.9	0.508	144	0.502	109	0.67
Sub-Saharan countries	674.2	0.515				
ASIA						
South Asia and China	2,803.4	0.628				
China	1,300.0	0.755	85	0.754	64	0.66
Nepal	26.1	0.526	136	0.511	106	0.51
India	1,070.8	0.602	127	0.586	98	0.38
Pakistan	151.8	0.527	135	0.508	107	0.34
LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN	540.7	0.797				
Brazil	181.4	0.792	63	0.786	52	0.43
Mexico	104.3	0.814	53	0.804	46	0.38
Peru	27.2	0.762	79	0.745	67	0.27
Chile	16.0	0.854	37	0.846	38	0.39

Extracted from the Human Development Report 2005. *International cooperation and crossroads: Aid, trade and security in an unequal world.* UNDP.

a) The HDI measures average achievements in a country in three basic dimensions of human development: (1) A long and healthy life, as measured by life expectancy at birth, (2) Knowledge, as measured by the adult literacy rate and the combined primary, secondary and tertiary gross enrolment ratio. (3) A decent standard of living, as measured by gross domestic product (GDP) per capita at purchasing power parity (PPP) in US\$.

(b) The GDI uses the same variables as the HDI. The difference is that the GDI adjusts the average achievement of each country in life expectancy, income and literacy and gross enrolment in accordance with the disparity in achievement between men and women.

Many women, many faces

12. Although there are common features in the livelihoods of women in drylands, it is evident that gender identities and roles vary from one setting to another. The life of an Aymara woman in the drylands of Peru is different from the life of a Masai woman in Kenya; the hardships and opportunities of a widow in a rural village in Mauritania are not the same as those of a white widow in Arizona. Age, ethnicity, race, social group and religion, together with other social conditionings, determine how environmental, social, political and economic factors influence women's lives in concrete and different ways. For example, poor women in the drylands of El Salvador and in all Central America have not faced famine as have the poor women in many African countries because of their geographical location. Their main survival strategy has been emigration to other more prosperous countries, and the expansion of cultivated areas.

13. A country's economic success and the ability of its Government to distribute the wealth generated is another factor which influences to a great extent the differences between women's livelihoods in the drylands. It is not agriculture, but value-added markets for manufactured goods, which increases developing countries' share of the world market. Therefore, Governments tend to neglect environmental concerns and the situation of people who depend directly on natural resources, and tend to promote policies which strongly favour large irrigated commercial farms. This tends to improve national economic indicators, but it may increase social inequality and worsen women's position at the lower levels of poverty, as has happened in many African and Latin American countries. On the other hand, in many Asian countries such as China, India and Vietnam, increased exports of agricultural and manufactured goods have translated into investments in various national sectors such as education and health, thereby multiplying the empowering effect on the population as a whole (UNDP, 2005).

14. Patterns of land use also determine important differences between women in the drylands. Some are still engaged in traditional forms of access to agricultural and pastoral areas, following sedentary or migratory practices; this is more noticeable in African countries. In other contexts, women depend directly on forest environmental services, or they are engaged in industrial or semi-industrial production, as in parts of Chile and Mexico. The ways in which women are engaged in forms of production influence their worldviews; for example, a migratory pastoralist may see her environment as a collective good and a source of livelihood and identity, while women engaged in more technological agriculture, forestry or animal production may see their environment simply as a means of earning their daily income.

15. Additionally, important cultural and religious differences impose different expectations on women. In strong patriarchal societies supported by conservative religious and cultural features, women's participation in their community and access to and management of resources may be seen as treats by the social establishment and men's authority. As a result, women in these countries have found ways to empower themselves, for example through women's associations and organizations and the involvement of the elderly and men in their decisions. Other women do not face these constraints to the same extent, but may face challenges derived from economic or social insecurities. Lack of data along with the enormous variety of cultural arrangements and gender roles make it difficult to compare women's situations in the drylands regionally. Additionally, these factors do not act as isolated causes but in combination with economic and global processes which together are embodied in dynamic and locally-expressed power relations between men and women.

3. Challenges for women in the drylands

16. Global as well as regional processes pose continuous challenges to women of the drylands, in ways that are still not fully acknowledged. Most rural populations still bear the impact of structural adjustment policies (SAPs) applied during the 1980s in many countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America. The large-scale farming and commercial crop production, which was promoted in detriment to the subsistence sector, involved the reallocation of land, labour and input to the large-scale methods. SAPs also promoted the reduction of public spending on social services such as education, health and rural infrastructure. These measures shifted social responsibilities from the State to the household, and particularly to rural women who constitute the majority of people involved in the subsistence agricultural sector and who are traditionally in charge of the health and education of the family.

17. Liberalization of markets and trade, reduction and elimination of agricultural and food subsidies, and the elimination of government control over markets and transport systems are still promoted in many countries without taking into account their documented impoverishing effects on small farmers and the urban poor. Dwellers in drylands face many difficulties in the market as their production is not flexible to price variations and is not generally processed to have added value. Additionally, lack of transport, timely information and market opportunities hamper their already precarious conditions. Women farmers are further constrained because development extension services and projects tend to be gender-blind, because they are generally less literate and have less contact with foreigners than men and are therefore less prepared for negotiation, and because activities taken for granted by men, such as business trips, are seen as more dangerous or unsuitable for them.

18. Heavy external debt also proves to affect women in drylands, who are part of the poorest populations in their regions. Unsustainable foreign debts have brought the poorest countries in Africa and Latin America to their knees for many decades and have forced them to spend more on servicing their debts than on their own development. Awareness of the constraining effects of this debt service on fighting poverty has resulted in specific actions to reduce it worldwide. The most remarkable is the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries initiative (HIPC), aimed, since the middle of the 1990s, at absolving many countries, mainly in sub-Saharan Africa, of part of their foreign debt. Nevertheless, voices pointing out the HIPC's limited and only temporary relief for debtor countries are increasingly calling for a 100 per cent debt cancellation..

19. Limited access to land is another common challenge for women in the drylands because of two combined factors: reduced land availability due to soil degradation, and legal and customary uses which limit women's rights over land services and ownership. In many regional contexts, population growth and the disruption of social forms of community organization have led to a dramatic shift from common property systems to individual land tenure and control over resources. Additionally, individual titling has been encouraged through several land reforms worldwide because it promotes dynamic land markets and credit allocation and may result in those farmers who possess a title investing more in their land and obtaining higher yields than farmers without titles. Nevertheless, land distribution, either through land reforms or customary uses, results on men holding the property rights. The distribution of land to male individuals as *de facto* heads of households ignores the consequences for women as co-responsible, or sometimes entirely responsible, for household maintenance, as well as ignoring gender asymmetries that place women in a more vulnerable position.

20. Individual titling can be additionally counterproductive for women in dryland areas where communities enjoy multiple overlapping user-rights to a variety of resources. When common rights over natural resources are ignored, women may lose the possibility of benefiting from resources such as communal cropland, pasture and forest. Advances are noticeable in land reform legislation in many countries, acknowledging the fundamental relevance of women's access to land either individually or collectively. But only civil society political activism and the commitment of governmental officers and authorities have translated this legislation into successful cases of land granted to women. Limitations lie not only in weak legislation and institutions to enforce the law, but also in cultural resistance to change traditional roles, as well as the balance of power between men and women and between the privileged segments of society and the poor.

21. Other formative factors of production and marketing, such as credit, technology, training and strategic information, remain similarly inaccessible or severely constrained for women. The expansion of formal and informal institutional credit in rural areas due to its fostering effect on people's economies still benefits women too little. Women face limitations in the formal credit sector as many banks require collateral, which is for the most part in the males' names. As for associations, cooperatives and development organizations, these usually require male participation as men are the landowners or the heads of households, removing from women the possibility to access their credit and training services. The allocation of credit from informal sources such as from trader money lenders in the rural areas very often involves intensive negotiations regarding future sales of agricultural production or others goods as quasi collateral. These negotiations take place almost invariably between men. In both the formal and the informal credit sectors, women in the drylands are less able to offer collateral, not only because they own little in their own names but also because their high-risk production may not be accepted as enough guarantee of repayment. Therefore, even when credit institutions or informal lenders offer timely and convenient credit conditions, and although women are good managers and efficient payers, transactions between them do not take place. Under these conditions, strong asymmetries in bargaining power make women more vulnerable to being overridden and to fraud.

22. Finally, migration is highlighted here as a common challenge for women in the drylands because it is one of the main consequences of land degradation. Migration can be seen as an adversity as well as an opportunity. Increasingly, women are migrating independently as the main providers for households in their home countries. Remittances from migrants can help people to escape from poverty given that the money is spent on food, housing, clothes, education and health (related probably to women's being the main recipients of remittances in the world) but there is also a share for investment, business and savings, particularly in Latin America. (Ramirez et al. 2005). This importance, however, is relative for the poorest countries of the world which do not produce many international migrants and therefore receive fewer remittances (ibid.).

Remittances also comprise only temporary relief that could have long-lasting negative effects on national economies as a consequence of brain-drain, a reduction in the available working force and less incentive to participate in the markets.

23. For many women, migration can be an empowering experience as they escape situations of oppression. In addition to money, migration provides women with new ideas, resources and information with the potential to improve their self-esteem and bargaining power. Women may also influence their societies of origin by disseminating new values with regard to rights and opportunities for women. On the other hand, some reports on effects on migrant women in their countries of destination point to the greater vulnerability of the poorest and less educated. Women are integrated into the lower echelons of the labour market and are subject to double discrimination, as women and as migrants. Discrimination can also take place in the region of origin, as many cultural and religious contexts sanction women's mobility. This has legal and economic implications which very often put at risk women's physical and emotional integrity.

24. Migration can also have mixed effects on women who remain behind. Male migration due to land degradation can lead to changes in gender roles, because by taking on more responsibilities women demand more equal access to land and fertility control and are, therefore, increasingly involved in decision-making, as experience in the drylands of China, Kenya, Mauritania and Niger show (FAO, 2003). On the other hand, in Northwest Brazil the situation of women during drought seasons is worsened by the fact that most of men migrate at that time searching for income generating activities. So, in addition to their increased workload carrying water and fuelwood for long distances and their household activities, they must assume men's tasks. These women are known as the "widows of the drought" (REDEH, Human Development Network, in Blanco and Velásquez, 2003). Similar experiences are reported across all regions where land degradation, poverty or conflict and social violence push men to migrate ahead of women. Migration as a consequence of land degradation tends to perpetuate deprivation, especially when it takes place in precarious conditions and in areas of low productivity. In such cases, it not only results in further pressure on fragile environments, thereby becoming itself a cause of land degradation, but it reproduces patterns of poverty and marginalization among the most vulnerable.

25. A substantial factor underlying women's disadvantaged position described above and challenging women in drylands worldwide is the persistence of social and cultural norms with a male superiority paradigm at the core. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, social myths and cultural stereotyping still come into play to restrict women's human rights and prevent them from being fully incorporated as citizens into the social and economic life of most nations. In many countries, proverbs and sayings dismiss women's capacity to plan, design or make decisions, and some even attribute to women negative effects over, for instance, newly-built houses or the next harvest. Parents in many countries still welcome a baby boy more than a girl because it is assumed that a girl will not bring prosperity to the house or that she will necessarily end up suffering. So parents give boys higher education and keep girls responsible for the increased workload inside and outside the house. In reinforcing these myths and stereotypes, society as a whole denies women access to ownership, training and information, political power and decision-making. As the Human Development Reports yearly demonstrate through the GDI, no country in the world treats women better than it does men.

Regional challenges for women in the drylands

26. Locally, people perceive global challenges in relation to undergoing social and political regional processes, and respond to them in concrete ways. Although men and women confront common challenges worldwide, there are also variations. People in Africa characteristically live in extensively drylands and are afflicted by frequent and severe droughts which have resulted in widespread poverty, migration and food insecurity. In parts of Asia, the high population density and growth rates pose exceptionally heavy pressure on natural resources for livelihoods, while in Latin America very marked and broad social inequalities such as the concentration of land in few hands increases pressure on marginal land. Other relevant challenges that are critical for women in the drylands are civil violence and conflict, HIV/AIDS and high fertility rates.

27. First, violent civil conflict and war affect for the most part regions of Africa, the Middle East and, up to some years ago, Central America. The majority of the estimated eight million refugees, displaced persons and post-conflict returnees in Africa in 1997 were women and children (Manuh, 1998). During the past four years the number of refugees and displaced people worldwide has steadily dropped, but in 2004 they still accounted for almost three million people in Africa, eight hundred thousand in Asia and the Pacific and six hundred thousand in Latin America and the Caribbean. Most people looking for asylum come from countries severely affected by war, but also by desertification and drought (UNHCR, 2005). War and civil conflict disrupt livelihood systems and the rational use of the natural resources on which all communities rely. For women, such conflict also implies increased violence as their bodies are seen as war targets and loot. War and violence worsen the social, economic and environmental conditions of women and children for many years after the conflict is over and it can take more than a generation to restore these conditions.

28. Secondly, many regions in the world are increasingly distressed by the AIDS epidemics that by the end of 2005 had stricken 40.3 million people worldwide. More than 64 per cent of affected people live in sub-Saharan Africa and 18 per cent in South and South-East Asia (AVERT, 2005). More than half the cases of HIV are females infected through heterosexual intercourse and through the placenta from an infected mother to the foetus. When they are not directly disabled by the infection, women bear the burden of caring for the sick. Lack of access to retroviral treatments and social prejudices against people infected add to the desperate situation of millions of men and women in these regions. Combined with poverty, this can only result in more pressure on the surrounding natural assets and little capacity to overcome environmental degradation.

29. Thirdly, in developing countries, high fertility also arises from high infant mortality, low levels of contraceptive use and the fact that children's work is critical to a household's survival. In many countries where women's economic and social welfare is determined by marriage and motherhood, children secure them shelter and access to their husband's assets. As a consequence, rural and poor regions still have high fertility and population growth rates. Sub-Saharan Africa, with a fertility rate of 5.5 children per woman, almost doubles the average rate of 2.9 in developing countries. This region, together with the Arab States, shows the highest estimated annual population growth rate between 2003 and 2015 of 2.7 per cent (UNDP, 2005). The implications of these figures for women in the drylands are increased pressure on natural resources, more time devoted to household activities, less time for education and training and fewer possibilities for earning incomes and, therefore, achieving autonomy and self-reliance. While the number of children per woman responds partly to social values and economic pressures that need to be respected, the straight relationship between poverty, high fertility rates and women's lack of autonomy and opportunities needs to be seriously addressed in all cultural and religious contexts.

30. The health of women and men in many countries is additionally jeopardized by a lack of potable water, sanitation and waste disposal. Women and girls in many countries confront additional health hazards from genital mutilation which can also result in infertility, incontinence and obstructed labour. About two million girls are subjected to the practice each year, with over 80 per cent of these in Sudan, Somalia, Djibouti, Ethiopia and Sierra Leone (Manuh, 1998).

4. Opportunities for women in the drylands

31. "Desertification is a complex and serious environmental and social phenomenon. However, drylands are not just prisons of poverty and deprivation. Communities have developed important strategies and a repository of knowledge and expertise that allows them to respond to and survive challenging conditions" (UNEP, 2004: 57).

32. International legislation constitutes a powerful incentive for changes in society and an opportunity for introducing balance in gender relations. During the past three decades, international environmental law, human rights law and soft-legal instruments have established provisions addressing women's links and rights to natural resources. The UNCCD specifically advocates women's effective participation in NAPs to combat desertification. Other legal instruments such as the Convention on Biological Diversity, the Rio Declaration and the Non-Legally Binding Authoritative Statement of Principles on Forests acknowledge the vital role of women's participation in environmental management and sustainable development. These instruments and

their implementation through national programmes, projects and initiatives comprise a major opportunity for women to demand attention to their needs, constraints and potentials to act locally and be involved in reversing land degradation and improving their livelihoods.

33. Likewise, during recent decades human rights approaches promoting economic, social and cultural rights and the activism of women worldwide has resulted in a series of international and national laws improving opportunities for women to access and control resources. The accent on human rights rather than on developmental issues, based on principles of human equality without discriminations, provides ground for a better understanding of women's position in society. This has allowed the establishment of laws and regulations based on equal treatment in land and agrarian reform, ownership, acquisition, management, administration, the enjoyment and allocation of property, and access to adequate living conditions, including food and water supplies.

34. Efforts towards the implementation of international conventions and agreements, combined with the strengthening of local governments derived from decentralization processes worldwide, has benefited dryland populations who are often geographically isolated. Local governments' mandates derive from national programmes and commitments to international treaties and conventions, hence translating norms and regulations into local actions. Additionally, decentralization processes have brought to rural men and women the opportunity to participate in local elections as electors and candidates, to keep their local rulers accountable and to exercise control over the implementation of local environmental and social projects. Secondary towns may in the future concentrate most of the people in drylands due to the increasing emigration of rural populations and the decline of the agricultural sector, constituting an opportunity for women to gain places in local government through democratic procedures. The potential of decentralization to empower women, particularly rural women who are less familiar with modern participatory procedures, is threatened by the frequent capture of power by local elites and the relegation of women due to gender conditioning. Nevertheless, many women, supported by other women, NGOs and political parties, have emerged from decentralization processes as local representatives and proactive leaders of their communities, districts or municipalities.

35. Globalization and technology also constitute, within limits, opportunities for women's advancement. They provide women in drylands with the possibility to foster their alliances by informing other women about, and being informed of, their challenges, achievements and demands. This has been possible for groups of land seekers from Malawi and Zimbabwe to the Movimento Sem Terra in Brazil, and from activists for restitution of property in South Africa to the actors involved in the transformation of land-use systems in the former Soviet Union and Aral Sea Basin (ACTS, CISDL, UNDP, n.d.). Although religious, economic and cultural differences mean that women's interests are diverse, they can use technology and information to draw attention to their common disadvantaged situation.

36. The opportunities offered by global markets to developing countries are severely limited, due to distortions imposed mostly for the benefit of their own advocates in developed countries. Although global markets have further marginalized the disadvantaged populations involved in small and medium agricultural and economic activities, there are a few examples of global trade working for the poor. Among these, the experience of women in Burkina Faso harvesting and processing the nuts of the shea tree for chocolate and cosmetic production while protecting these trees is remarkable. Women shea producers have enhanced their economic position through the selling of shea butter and through the technical skills and organizational capacities they have acquired. Through their organizations, which by now cover about half the country's provinces, women also attend literacy classes in the two most widely spoken indigenous languages (Harsch, 2001). This became possible through the support of UNIFEM West Africa regional office, several NGOs and private investors in Europe, as an illustration that linking women producers to global markets requires long-time commitments from various fronts.

37. Above all, drylands in themselves constitute the main source of opportunities. The unique advantages of the drylands' environmental situation may be utilized in new ways such as, for example, tourism based on plenty of available solar energy, attractive landscapes and large wilderness areas. Taking advantage of these opportunities, however, is possible only through people's action. Women in the drylands, as in other parts of the world, take initiatives to achieve better capacities to act. In almost all countries, women have organized themselves to campaign for the establishment of better conditions, pressuring for

changes in strategic fields such as political participation, constitutional rights, access to ownership, the fight against violence and the implementation of affirmative action programmes.

Opportunities provided by local initiatives

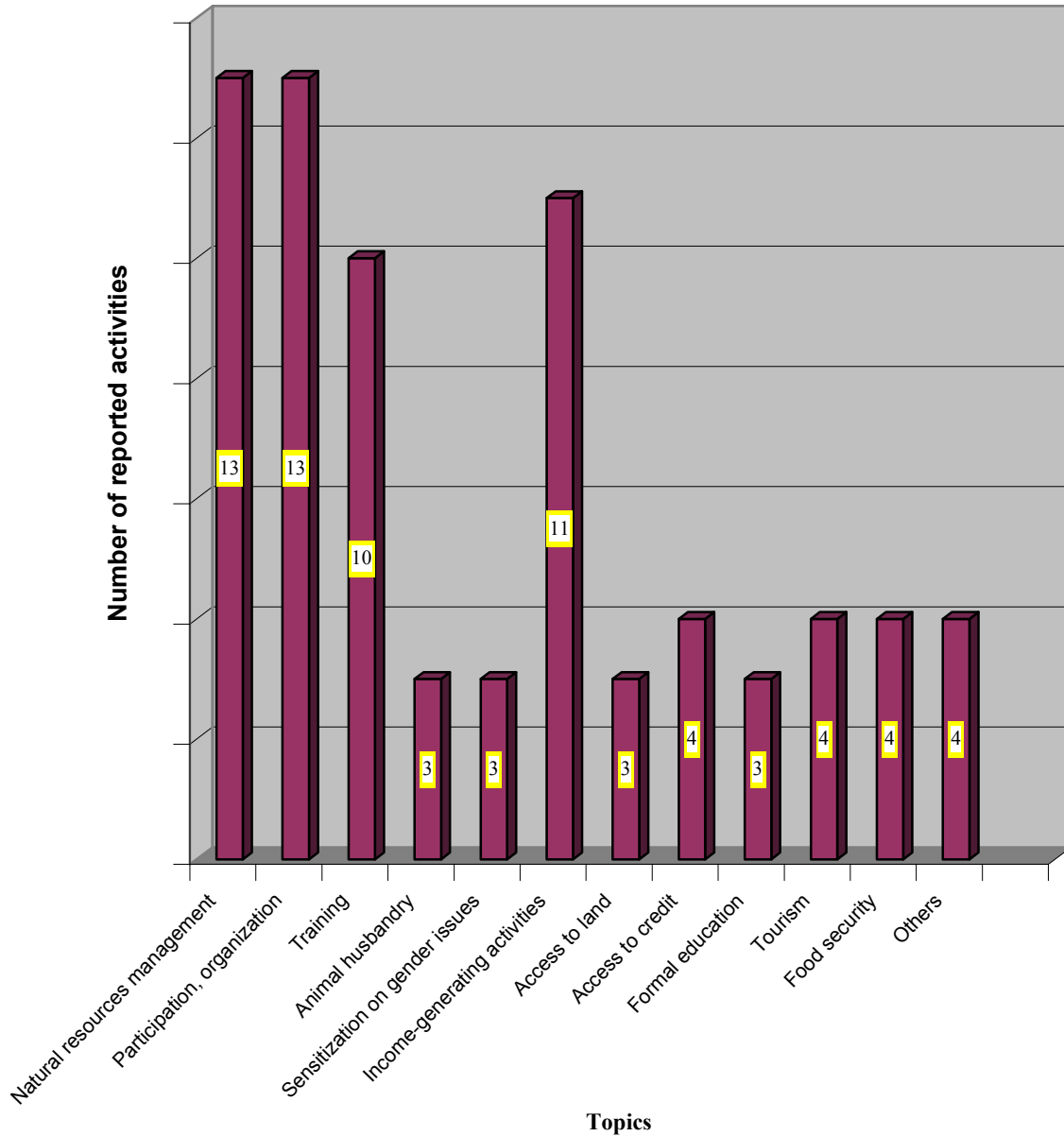
38. Several examples across regions affected by land degradation testify to women's proactive initiatives and actions to overcome adverse conditions and to improve their lives and those of their communities, with only limited resources. One of the most outstanding examples is the Green Belt Movement which, since 1977 and fostered by an extraordinary woman, Wangari Muta Maathai, has promoted the formation and involvement of women's groups in the planting of trees under a community empowerment and conservation approach. The Green Belt Movement has helped women to plant more than 30 million trees in Kenya and more in other countries: Tanzania, Uganda, Malawi, Lesotho, Ethiopia and Zimbabwe.

39. There are countless numbers of more modest but also sustainable and vital experiences for women around the world. For more than two decades, village women and men, local NGOs, local and national government entities and the international community have built synergies which have resulted in a great deal of experience in combating desertification and the effects of drought while empowering the women involved in these experiences.

40. An analysis of several documents on projects and local initiatives aimed at improving women's lives and combating desertification across Africa, Asia and Latin America during the past decade shows that much can be done when local communities, district governments and NGOs converge into participatory and committed action (see graph 1). But the ultimate responsibility does not rest solely on local efforts. An enabling environment shaped by clear legislation and strong institutions provided by Governments, and the flow of much-needed resources and technological support from the international community involvement, are a more suitable base for pursuing better life conditions. Above all, the examples summarized in graph 1 show that real impacts on communities are achievable through gender-centred analysis and positive actions to improve women's access to resources, income-earning activities, elimination of stereotypes and sensitization.

41. Most local initiatives combining positive actions towards women and best environmental practices are not fully systematized and remain mostly as isolated experiences. Nevertheless, through them it is possible to acknowledge the impact of opportunities provided for women in combating land degradation and contributing to the Millennium Development Goals, particularly to promote gender equality and empower women, eradicate extreme poverty and hunger, reduce child mortality, improve maternal health and ensure environmental sustainability.

Graph 1. Topics addressed in combating desertification and promoting women’s empowerment (examples from 23 initiatives worldwide)



Source: UNCCD, 2006; FAO, 2003; Blanco and Velásquez, 2003; Global mechanism-UNCCD, nd, SEMARNAT, UNCCD, UNDP Mexico and IUCN, 2005; ACSUR, nd; León and Rojas, 2003; Panhwar, Farzana, 1996.

5. Implications for action: Thinking globally and acting locally

42. With well-planned interventions and sustainable use of their resources, drylands have great ecological value and the capacity to maintain large human communities; and women as main managers of drylands natural resources are capable of creating and taking opportunities for improving their lives and those

of their communities. Women's constraints, such as heavy workload, lack of means of production and restricted influential networks and information, are reversible when adequate intervention and commitment are involved.

43. The main challenges and opportunities faced by women in the drylands, analysed in this document and covered more extensively in several in-depth studies, fall into a combination of five grounds for action: participation, markets, access to land and credit, technology, and information and awareness. This section highlights the relevance of taking steps in these fields and offers ideas for action.

Participation

44. Human development is about expanding people's choices in fields such as education, health and political participation. A true participatory approach contributes to human development by providing people with the means to directly participate in decisions that influence their own lives. Women lag behind in political participation; for example, only 14 per cent of members of parliaments worldwide are women (UNDP, 2002), and are often denied the right to raise their voice, vote or shape in any way the decisions that directly affect them.

45. Women's autonomy in general terms and particularly their capacity to manage their natural environment is a central sustainable development issue. In this context, a truly participatory system is highly conducive to more balanced gender relations. These environments facilitate synergies between international donors, NGOs and local activists towards, for example, gender-responsive budgeting, gender-sensitive analysis and implementation of policies, and increased women's participation in discussion of health, education and environmental issues.

46. Equal access to economic resources and, ultimately, equal exercise of citizen's rights cannot be addressed without considering social power relations. No substantial change can be achieved with respect to women's position without challenging the perpetuation of privileges based on gender and economic differences worldwide. For example, land reforms are not enough if vested interest continues to set back advancements in the implementation phase. Likewise, sound social and economic development cannot be achieved without revising and changing provisions on migration which discriminate against migrant women, such as requirements for pregnancy tests for female migrants, women's migration being subject to the permission of men or guardians, and the imposition of age limits for women and girls.

Market conditions

47. In spite of the successful integration of some nations into international trade and markets, most developing countries, and the more disadvantaged populations within them, remain marginalized from their benefits due to national and international conditions. Major amongst these unfair conditions are agricultural subsidies in developed countries, which cause US\$ 24 billions of losses in agricultural income for developing countries, "not counting the dynamic and spillover effects" (UNDP, 2005). The importance of focusing increasing efforts onto changing unfair trade practices is evident in that more than two thirds of all people surviving on less than one United States dollar a day live and work in rural areas either as smallholder farmers or as agricultural labourers; most of them are women.

48. Parallel efforts to increase women producers' share of national and international markets are urgently needed. The Human Development Report of 2005 on aid, trade and security states "Under the right conditions [greater trade] has potential for reducing poverty, narrowing inequality and overcoming economic injustice. For many of the world's poorest countries, and for millions of poor people, these conditions have yet to be created." Fairer wages, better working conditions and investment in education and health are necessary in order to promote women's full integration into economic life. Profit-driven entities in the national and international markets may also contribute by providing fair exchange conditions to local women farmers and by supporting their initiatives. But these are not sufficient conditions if means of production such as land, credit, transport, information and technology are not put within women's reach. Additionally, lack of strong institutions and corruption need to be addressed as they add to social and cultural factors which prevent women in many countries from capturing a fair share of national economic income.

49. Current trends in markets are deepening historical unequal patterns of development between richer and poorer countries, and not taking action undermines progress towards the achievement of the MDGs while also condemning following generations to lag behind in human progress and well-being. Success or failure in trade is cumulative because exports are a source of income but also a means of financing imports of the new technologies needed to generate growth, productivity and employment and to improve living standards and maintain competitiveness in world markets (UNDP, 2005). Hence, the more marginalized women remain barred from access to these markets, the more they will comprise the poorest of the poorer countries. Action is necessary but bearing in mind that working towards women's participation in the markets will only add to the pressures placed on them if these efforts are not accompanied by balanced policies of distribution and protection for those who are in disadvantaged positions due to lack of education or means of production.

Access to land and credit

50. Women's lack of access to land and credit denies them many possibilities such as investing in environmentally best practices, investing in irrigation systems, joining groups of producers and taking advantage of the markets. Although steps towards formal equal ownership rights over the land for women and men have been remarkable, the main means for women to access land remains universally through their fathers, brothers, husbands or sons. To effectively incorporate women's rights into land policy and tenure programmes, actions on many fronts are required. The main requirement remains to challenge the cultural resistance of men and women, from policy designers to lower-rank officers and communal leaders, to channelling legally-recognized rights to land titling. Additionally, land markets may require some degree of State intervention since market mechanisms have proved not to be effective in transferring land to the poor but, on the contrary, tend further to marginalize those too disadvantaged to engage in land market transactions. Actions may include producing data on land-use patterns, women's access to land and credit, title holders and other factors. Evaluation and systematisation of experience of joint titling for married couples, implications of mobile land use, communal land use, individual property for women and so on is still incomplete and not integrated into national policies. For example, sedentarization of pastoralists in sub-Saharan Africa contributed to the degradation of rangelands and the spreading of desertification due to excessive animal concentration, but some Governments still explicitly or implicitly see sedentarization as a desirable goal. Likewise, there is a lack of understanding of, and therefore, supportive policies for, common property regimes which are widely found in dryland areas. This ignores the social and ecological base on which many women find not only a means of production and therefore of food security, but a place to live and a basis for cultural identity and belonging.

51. Many tasks lie ahead for international, national and local stakeholders, such as the building of synergies between modern legal systems and customary law, the provision of favourable financial, technical, educational and political measures, and the design and application of real participatory processes. Above all, existing or future mechanisms must ensure that the benefits will reach and favour women.

52. Alongside the above, interventions ensuring women's access to credit are required. There are enough experiences of macro and micro credit with small farmers and disadvantaged people to learn from in all regions, from the Graamen Bank credit addressed to poor women in Bangladesh, to the Banco Sol loans based on solidarity ties in Bolivia. Credit and savings groups, rotating savings and credit associations and cooperatives are important sources of credit for rural women, but they still do not systematically reach the majority of them. Through international, national and private initiatives, formal large financial institutions may learn from the success of flexible mechanisms of credit and become more accessible to the rural poor, especially women.

Technology

53. Technology and technological advances are generally geared to support the neutral *homo economicus* placed in a political and social vacuum. This, combined with the increasing focus on cash crops, results in technology improvements which benefit men more than women. As experience in the drylands of

eight countries in Africa and Asia reveal, only measures targeted specifically at women ensure their real participation (FAO, 2003).

54. The promotion of technology aimed at reducing women's workload at home and in the field, as well as of policies to address research, extension, production and marketing with a gender perspective, is not new but is rare. Not surprisingly, most advances are made in the field of alternative technologies which provide responses to specific needs based on low inputs and low dependence on external materials, technologies and knowledge. Inculcating an understanding of gender roles and constructions by means of the application of traditional and modern knowledge in combating desertification and the effects of drought remain a common responsibility.

55. Additionally, to introduce technological advances into women's activities according to their needs and their own demands is a question of future survival. Currently, the gaps between developing and developed countries are growing due to technological innovations, mainly to added-value products in the market. Introducing such innovations into women's activities in developing countries does not mean the imposition of western technologies but the combination of traditional and modern knowledge in participatory processes for natural resource conservation, food production and marketing. Tools such as radio communications, the Internet and cellphones may well serve such an end as well as encouraging the diversification of women's incomes.

Information and awareness

56. Information is a key to raising awareness about women's constraints and possibilities and to deconstructing pervasive myths and misconceptions on drylands as well as on gender roles. Women's lack of awareness of, and information about, legal regulations and projects and organizations supportive of their strategic needs limits their opportunities to shape their own situation and keep governmental and non-governmental actors accountable.

57. Statistics and indicators play a major role in the identification of specific conditions faced by different populations and are key factors for the implementation and evaluation of concrete actions. The integrated set of physical, biological, social and economic indicators called upon by the UNCCD (article 16.c) need to be further developed and updated. Governments can take action by producing reliable information, for example socio-economic sex-disaggregated data on dryland management activities, and accordingly include such data in national policies and plans. Most of the countries affected by desertification, being mostly medium and low human-development countries, do not have sufficient data available regarding female representation at decision-making levels or female control over economic resources. Research and the gathering and dissemination of information are also necessary in order to enable the exchange of information and good practices together with stories of women's organization and involvement in combating land degradation.

58. The production of information on women's migration and their insertion into the social and economic lives of the receiving countries, and local impacts of remittances on female migrants and receivers deserve equal attention. Furthermore, it is important to explore common commitments jointly to build communication networks with the potential to foster advances in these and other sectors which are key to women's advancement in society.

6. Final remarks

59. The promotion of women's empowerment in drylands needs to put at the core of the analysis a gender and socio-economic dimension, since it is the power relations between women and men and between the privileged and the deprived which are the main determinants of women's disadvantaged position in society. The past three decades have provided an enormous amount of information, although mostly dispersed, based on failed, successful and mixed experiences. These experiences allow us better to evaluate the present and to foresee better actions for the future. One of the main lessons learned in recent decades is that alliances are vital for fostering women's development in drylands. When international and national organizations dealing with land degradation and those promoting women's rights create synergies and incorporate knowledge and advantages gained from each other, a real impact on women's lives is

possible. To promote women's advancement, international agencies and national Governments do not need to build complex new organizations or parallel institutions, but to transform their mechanisms of intervention through information, sensitization and concrete measures at all levels. Above all it is important to bear in mind that only an integrated approach, involving different stakeholders from multidisciplinary fields (local dwellers, academia, agriculturalists, decision-makers) and different dimensional spaces (international, regional, national and local) can accelerate changes in women's lives which are so urgently needed.

ACRONYMS

ACSUR	Asociación para la Cooperación con el Sur
ACTS	African Centre for Development Studies
CISDL	Centre for International Sustainable Development Law
FAO	United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization
GDI	Gender-related Development Index
HDI	Human Development Index
HIPC	Heavily Indebted Poor Countries
IDRC	International Development Research Centre
INSTRAW	International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women
IUCN	World Conservation Union
MDG	Millennium Development Goals
NAP	national action programme
NGO	non-governmental organization
RAP	regional action programme
REDEH	Rede de Desenvolvimento Humano
SAP	structural adjustment policy
SEMARNAT	Secretaria de Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales
SRAP	subregional action programme
UNCCD	United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme
UNHCR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNIFEM	United Nations Development Fund for Women
UNON	United Nations Office at Nairobi

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Annex

Thinking Globally

AND

Acting Locally

Ideas for action

