

Informal Summary of ECOSOC preparatory meeting for the
Thematic Debate 2008 High-level Segment
“*Land and Vulnerable People in a World of Change*”
17 April 2008, UN Headquarters, New York

Introduction

Currently, the world faces a crisis stemming from rising food prices, which has led to increased hunger and riots in many parts of the world. ECOSOC addressed this issue at a special meeting on 20 May 2008.

According to a World Bank estimate, food prices have risen by 83 percent over the past three years. In order to properly address the current global food crisis, as well as put in place an enabling environment for a longer-term solution that will promote rural development, it is necessary to refocus current development efforts on agriculture and related natural resource management. Refocusing on agriculture also entails refocusing on land – its use, its quality, its ownership, and access to it.

Equitable access to land and land use are vital issues, especially in the light of current challenges such as land degradation, deforestation, desertification and climate change. The issue of land access and tenure is also fundamental to development, human rights and security. Conflicts in many parts of the globe are, after all, linked to the issue of land rights.

The panel, which was chaired by the President of ECOSOC and addressed by Mr. Sha Zukang, Under-Secretary-General for Economic Affairs, included:

Ms. Isabel Lavadenz-Paccieri, Vice-President, Programme Coordinator, Sustainable Development Network, World Bank, provided an overview of the impact of recent global trends on land, vulnerability and poor people;

Ms. Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, Chairperson of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, highlighted the affects of climate change and biofuel production on the lives and livelihoods of indigenous peoples;

Mr. Andy White, Coordinator, Rights and Resources Initiative, Washington D.C., focussed on forests and the social dimension of climate change; and,

Mr. Papa Mawade Wade, Centre de Suivi, Senegal, discussed the impact of climate change, increased biofuels production etc on land degradation and desertification.

The debate focused on current global trends and their impact on the livelihoods of poor rural people, in particular those without secure land access or tenure and those struggling to survive on degraded and dry lands. The following key issues were addressed:

Impact of climate change on land

The impacts that climate change was having, and will increasingly have, on land, in terms of land tenure, but also as a natural resource and productive asset were presented. Global vulnerabilities and consequences of climate change were discussed and the situation of land tenure fragility was highlighted. An example of a particularly drastic impact of climate change on land is Bangladesh, where the sea level is expected to rise by 1.5m on low lying lands until 2100, which will affect 15 per cent of the population. Drylands, where over a billion people live, are particularly vulnerable to the adverse impact of climate change.

Climate threats intensify existing challenges related to land, such as the insecurity of land tenure, the degradation of land as a natural resource and inadequate or outdated land institutions. Additional pressures are resulting from increasing demand and changing land use including globalized demand for raw materials – such as food, environmental services, expanding biofuel production, and encroaching urbanization. Enhancing investment in land and reversing land degradation would also serve to enhance the resilience of those developing countries particularly adversely impacted by climate change.

In part in response to climate change, a number of countries have begun to cultivate crops for biofuel production. There is growing evidence that this shift in production from food to fuel can lead to an increase in deforestation and to new land disputes. Mitigation measures focusing on reducing greenhouse gas emissions from deforestation and forest degradation require careful planning and resources.

The challenges of climate change require a greater emphasis on land, particularly reversing land degradation, the adaptation of farming systems as well as greater access to technologies and a greater balance between conservation and production. Adaptation measures involving land include a wide range of production and conservation techniques. Improved adaptation, going forward, requires additional agricultural research and development and climate-proofing infrastructure. The estimated costs for such measures range from US\$ 1.5 billion for agricultural research and development to US\$ 31.5 billion for new, climate proof infrastructure. It was also stressed that good adaptation measures are cost effective. The development of mitigation-adaptation synergies, expanded access to new forms of financing, and increased productivity are areas requiring further effort, but that may prove beneficial to poor farmers. It was stressed that a comprehensive approach was required to the trilogy of energy security, climate change and food security, as they all have to do with land tenure, land rights and land management.

Impact of climate change on indigenous peoples

It was noted that the adverse impacts of climate change have already been felt by indigenous peoples, as their territories are among those most affected. Indigenous people have adapted for thousands of years to changes in their environment, but the magnitude of the climate change challenge was compromising that adaptive capacity.

Indigenous peoples are particularly affected by the increasing production of biofuels, which has resulted in new “land-grabs” in a number of countries. Also, the depletion of natural resources such as oil, gas and coal can lead to increased extraction from indigenous people’s territories. Climate change may pose a profound threat to indigenous people’s culture and sovereignty in instances where inhabitants of small island states may have to flee to other countries as a result of rising sea levels.

The upholding of the principles and provisions of the UN’s Declaration on the Rights of the Indigenous Peoples can assist indigenous peoples to adapt to and withstand the effects of climate change. Reference was also made to the UN Development Group guidelines on indigenous issues. In addition, indigenous peoples’ provision of ecosystem services should be recognized and rewarded. More transparency in decisions on mitigation measures is also necessary. For example, free, prior, and informed consent should be obtained before land can be appropriated for climate change uses. The full and effective participation of indigenous communities is crucial to the elaboration of State-developed mitigation measures to ensure that such schemes do not negatively affect vulnerable communities. In this connection, indigenous communities should also be more included in the IPCC process.

Vulnerable people and land rights

It was also stressed that there is a direct connection between livelihoods and entitlements as well as between rural economic development and land rights. To this end, the Commission on Legal Empowerment of the Poor studied the link between poverty and property rights, business rights, labor rights as well as access to justice and the rule of law. The Commission’s central argument is that the institutions which underpin these four areas are the fundamental determinants of vulnerability. The most important of these institutions is an equitable and inclusive legal system.

It was estimated that four billion people remain excluded from the rule of law to enforce their property rights. Without a legal identity and the right to organize, vulnerable people, in particular those living in rural areas, will find it difficult to benefit from climate change mitigation. To counter the negative impacts of climate change on livelihoods, incentives for good land management should be accessible to the poor and both renewed efforts on natural resource management and new security strategies are necessary. Important prerequisites are clearer and enforceable land use and property rights.

Impact of desertification on agricultural development

Land degradation, especially desertification in sub-Saharan Africa, should be of significant concern to the international community. The systems of production in agriculture depend on the quality of natural resources. The problem of managing the environment therefore lies at the core of combating poverty, and maintaining natural resources should lie at heart of development. However, natural resources are deteriorating due to desertification linked to climate change, but also political practices such as inappropriate land use and poor governance.

The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification is intended to improve the long-term productivity of inhabited drylands. It has been recognized as an important tool to combat poverty and as an important platform for adaptation to the adverse impact climate change. Its recently adopted Ten year Strategic Plan enshrines four objectives are: improved living standards, improved ecosystems, global benefits, and better resource mobilization through national and international partnerships. This convention highlights that the fight against desertification is also a fight against climate change, biodiversity loss and poverty at the same time. Thus, all projects that address land degradation also assist in terms of climate change and preserving biodiversity, as well reduce poverty.

The current rise in food prices and land degradation require that local markets become more competitive than international ones in order to allow for food self-sufficiency. There is a need for a shift in focus from food security to food sovereignty.

Impact of deforestation on land and people's vulnerabilities

The phenomenon of deforestation is a significant challenge, considering that 30% of the earth's land surface is covered by forests. In some cases, forests are poorly managed and, for this reason, there is a clear need for a more ecological approach that would reduce deforestation where it exists and for avoiding further marginalization of rural and forest peoples.

One of the long-standing challenges of the world's inhabitants of forests is the lack of human and civil rights. For instance, 15 million people still lack citizenship recognition and, in a situation where governments claim 75 per cent of the world's forests, there is often a conflict with traditional property rights as understood by the inhabitants of forests. Women are often disproportionately disadvantaged in the context of struggle over land human, civil and property rights.

Forest areas are affected by extensive, chronic poverty, which is intensified by violent conflicts. As many as 29 countries are affected by conflict, which cover 20 per cent of all forests.

The inhabitants of forests are now facing a new challenge, which is the convergence of food, fuel and fiber prices in the international market. This new trend is leading to an increased interest in the commercial exploitation of forested areas which can have negative consequences for the sustainable development and poverty eradication in forested areas.

In order to ensure improvements in the living conditions of forest people and to safeguard their environment it is indispensable to establish new market opportunities, especially for poor people, to encourage entrepreneurship, mainly small-scale enterprise, to use empowering technologies to enable organization, land rights and of pro-poor enterprises, and to support local organizations.

Interactive Dialogue

Member states stressed the need to consider (i) the protection and promotion of land rights as an inter-generational responsibility; and (ii) the importance of **political will** to give economic empowerment to the poor, enabling them to optimize land productivity.

Several member states also emphasized the necessity of a **holistic and realistic approach on land protection**. The consensus was that sustainable land management should be given appropriate attention. Other aspects related to the issue of land management were discussed, for example, sand storms and water depletion, which threaten livelihoods in desert areas.

It was mentioned that the failure of conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity could lead to a direct loss of food and cultural diversity, which contributes to the expansion of poverty especially in rural areas. It was argued that **inappropriate land management** could be counted as **one of the reasons for the current food crisis**. One participant affirmed that the increase in food prices has an impact on people living in remote and rural areas.

It was recognized that **there is a necessity to introduce adequate measures to ensure an optimal use of land** and natural resources to increase food production. However, land tenure can have many different forms in different countries and **there is no one-size fits all approach**. Each and every country has to drive its own land efforts. In this context, actions need to be taken particularly at the local level, and improved participation of civil society and the private sector should be encouraged. There was a consensus that land strategies to counter land degradation, desertification, livelihood vulnerabilities need to be reviewed.

Member states also emphasized the need to develop mechanisms of cooperation to manage land-related issues globally. It was suggested that there could be a coordination mechanism for **land within the United Nations similar to what exists for HIV/AIDS and water**.