

Message of Monique Barbut
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for
World Day to Combat Desertification
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Protect Earth. Restore Land. Engage People.

[Nearly half of the global population was living below the poverty line in 1980. By 2012 that number was down to about 13%.](#) This means more of us today have the freedom to choose how we live: what we eat or drink, how we spend our time and, even, how we earn our incomes. But ours might be the last generation with such a sizeable global population enjoying these freedoms. Why?

The freedoms we enjoy are made possible by the wide array of land resources we draw on to develop, such as fertile soils, fresh water or the plant and animal life in grasslands and forests. But this freedom to choose has come at a very high price: the degradation of more than 2 billion hectares of all the productive land available to humankind. Today, for every three hectares of land that was productive to start with, one hectare is virtually unusable.

Our inclination to degrade new land instead of fixing and re-using the land that is already degraded means future generations cannot benefit from the same resources. What's more, the greenhouse gases we emit through our choices are changing the weather patterns so dramatically, they are hastening the destruction of the remaining land resources. Droughts, flashfloods, rainy and hot seasons that are unpredictable, more intense, frequent and widespread are stripping the land bare of its resources faster than ever before.

The rights we claim to enjoy these land resources come with a heavy moral obligation to manage them well. More so, as we may be, literally, the last generation that can significantly slow down the accelerated loss of the land resources left. This generation – our generation – has the time, human, knowledge and financial means to reverse these trends, and restore a vast amount of the degraded lands. But we must work together.

Will we rise to the occasion?

Last year, 193 countries pledged to strive to become land degradation neutral by 2030. It means that you and I made the commitment to maintain the amount of productive land available within our borders during the next 15 years and beyond, or better still, to increase it. If one hectare of land is degraded, we would strive to restore back to health an equal amount of some degraded land.

Ninety countries have already signed up to the challenge and are setting their national targets. This is admirable. But it is not enough when at least 169 countries are affected by land degradation or drought, and all countries are indirectly impacted by them. Actions to avoid, halt and reverse land degradation must begin now with everyone fully engaged. The prospect of a land degradation neutral world grows dimmer if we procrastinate. But it shines brighter each time a person or country joins the campaign to restore degraded land or the battle against the degradation of new land.

Land degradation neutrality should be a top policy goal for every nation that values freedom and choice. Conserving land and restoring that which is degraded back to health is not a benefit that only flows to the billions of people who eke out a living directly from the land. It is a vote to safeguard our own freedoms of choice, and those of our children. It is also a moral standard against which we may well be judged by history.
