

**Providing Scientific Advice to the UNCCD:  
Results of an e-forum presented during the UNCCD CRIC-9/CST-S2**

An electronic forum jointly organized by UNU-INWEH and DesertNet International between January-June, 2010 solicited over 170 responses from 52 countries on how to improve the use of science by sustainable land management policy-makers and the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD). The results of this forum were presented at a side event of the Second Special Session of the Committee on Science and Technology (CST-2) at its meeting in Bonn, Germany, on 17 February 2011.

The greatest number of responses were received from the Latin American and Caribbean region, although the analysis indicated that there were no significant patterns to the answers of the nine questions posed when examined either by geographic region or institutional affiliation. An overwhelming majority of respondents considered that science was not informing policy well on the issues of land degradation and that new avenues were required. Scientists opined that desertification remains a low priority by policy-makers, even for affected countries, unless the issue is linked to either climate change or food security. This suggests that public awareness aspects of the Convention require a shift in focus: less focus on protecting soils, and more focus on strengthening knowledge of the links between land, food security and livelihoods. The analysis also suggests that more research needs to be done on the balance that dryland inhabitants achieve in their livelihood strategies through, on the one hand, production activities that depend mainly on agriculture and, on the other hand, non-land dependent activities that add value, such as artisanal crafts, eco-tourism and renewable energy generation. In addition, given today's conditions it is evident that the issues of employment creation and dealing with the water crisis are receiving insufficient attention from the Convention.

A majority of respondents indicated that science could be more effective in the policy arena if an independent, interdisciplinary panel could be established to inform the UNCCD in similar ways to the existing Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and the proposed Intergovernmental Platform for Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES). This panel would need to be as free from political influence as possible, with the agenda of a panel being set by all interested parties including practitioners and civil society organizations. As stated by Professor Joachim von Braun of ZEF (Centre for Development Research), Bonn, Germany recently, science must be independent from political influence as non-independent scientific advice has zero credibility.

While the overwhelming desire of the scientists canvassed during the e-forum was in favour of the establishment of a new international body, current realities suggest that this process could start by linking to either the IPCC or IPBES or both, via Ad Hoc Technical Working Groups that could tackle a very specific aspect of land degradation and deliver sound outputs quickly. If successful, this incremental approach could gradually lead to the establishment of a separate body. Therefore, there is a feeling that there needs to be a 'proof of concept' phase. The recent initiative of BMZ and the UNCCD on the economics of land degradation (Measuring the Value of Land, UNCCD/GIZ/BMZ; <http://www.unccd.int/knowledge/docs/ATT4J7FE.pdf>) offers a positive example of how broad-based partnerships can be created to deliver concrete outputs that are time bound.

Action is urgently needed on this issue in order to maintain the newly awakened scientific communities' interest in supporting the UNCCD. The UNCCD cannot afford protracted discussions, as scientists may turn their attention to other avenues, including the IPCC and the fledgling IPBES, to focus their attention and outlets for delivering scientific evidence and advice on land and water-based issues.