

Twelfth Session of the  
Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification,  
Ankara, Turkey 20 October 2015

**Statement by**  
**H.E. Gunnar Bragi Sveinsson,**  
**Minister for Foreign Affairs of Iceland**

Mr. Chair,

Let me begin by extending my sincere appreciation to the Government of Turkey, for generously hosting COP12 here in Ankara. I also wish to express my condolences to the Government and the people of Turkey in the wake of the horrific terrorist attacks here in Ankara ten days ago.

My appreciation also goes to Madam Monique Barbut, Executive Director of the UNCCD, for her continued commitment and excellent co-operation with my country.

Distinguished guests,

It gives me great honour to address you today on the issue of *translating land degradation neutrality into action*. For over a century we have fought, in systematic ways, land degradation in Iceland. At the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Iceland was Europe's poorest country and by mid 1960s it was still classified by the UNDP as a developing country.

Our approach in fighting land degradation, has been evolving for a long time. Advancing sand that buried and destroyed valuable farmland in the south led to the forming of legislation in 1907, with the purpose of halting soil erosion. This marked the beginning of organized soil conservation work in Iceland and the establishment of the Icelandic Soil Conservation Service, which may be the oldest operating soil conservation agency in the world. At the same time, Icelandic Forest Service was established with the initial aim of saving the last remaining stands of birch woodlands.

Today, we are an affluent society with high levels of income and standards. Furthermore, we can say that we have reached a point where soil erosion and land degradation have decreased significantly and that land restoration, and the ability of the land to heal itself, have surpassed land degradation. And if our assessment is correct, for the first time since Iceland was settled some 1100 years ago.

Similarly, in our efforts to mitigate climate change, Iceland has taken some bold and significant steps in using clean energy resources for our economic activities. 100% of all electricity and heating is produced from hydro and geothermal power resources and 85% of all stationary power energy use is from clean and renewable sources. The next step is to phase out fossil fuel use in other sectors, notably transport and fisheries. I am certain that Iceland can become a fossil free economy within 30-40 years by stepping up efforts that are already underway in achieving this vision.

In this context I can inform you that Iceland has announced its targets for a new Climate Agreement to be reached during COP21 in Paris and aims to be part of a collective delivery of the European Union and Norway to reach a target of 40% reduction of greenhouse gas emissions by 2030.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Less than one month ago, we, the global community unanimously endorsed Agenda 2030 with a set of 17 universal Sustainable Development Goals. Iceland recognizes the urgency of achieving all the goals. But, let's not forget that they are all inter-related and in the context of the convention to combat desertification, it is recognized that without major achievements on Goal 15 we will not be able to end hunger and poverty.

Fighting land degradation by rehabilitating and restoring land for more than 100 years has taught us many valuable lessons. During that time we have managed to construct a reasonably strong institutional base for the different undertakings and, thereby, created a strong pool of experts that we would very much want to see more engaged in combating desertification on international level.

Against this background, land restoration and rehabilitation has been part of our development cooperation for some time. Since 2007, we have been running special land restoration training programme as part of the United Nations University. We then further increased our efforts internationally by making land restoration one of our main focus areas in the negotiation processes for the Rio+20, the SDGs and the Agenda 2030.

To raise the issue higher on the agenda in New York, while members were negotiating the SDGs, Iceland together with Namibia and the office of

UNCCD in New York, established a Group of Friends on Desertification, Land Degradation and Drought. This group of 23 countries has been active for more than two years raising awareness of this issue.

After the focus on the Open Working Group on SDGs, the friends group focused on the Addis Ababa Action plan by calling for mobilization of resources. In Addis, members of the group organized a special High Level Symposium on land degradation neutrality as a key to the sustainable development agenda. Main results of that symposium were the need to; enforce capacity building and creating new local projects in the most effected areas.

We are proud of the achievements of the friends group. Two years after its establishment, we have land degradation neutrality as a target in the Agenda 2030 and a strong call for the mobilization of resources in the Addis Ababa Action Plan. Looking ahead we must raise the issue in COP21 in Paris and, first of all, call for that adaptation be addressed with the same priority as mitigation. For that I would like to call for a sense of even more urgency among UNCCD member states.

It is urgent to build a coalition of stakeholders and policymakers that can change both the way we see sustainability and our current land use. We need to create forms of strategies that address sustainable land management; land restoration and the kind of ecosystems a potential land can foster.

Distinguished guests,

We were asked in preparing for today's event to give thoughts to the question posed by the Secretariat on; *how can countries transform their land management governance in order to achieve Land Degradation Neutrality?*

To this I would say that the key is to implement management strategies that embrace the land and soil as our key to secure the welfare of the human population – a welfare that can be sustained for generations to come.

To devise the appropriate management strategies we will need to include all stakeholders from the beginning. Our solutions must be based on best current knowledge, but also innovations that help us think outside the box. For lasting solutions we must address not only the biophysical condition of the land, but also the cultural, economical, legal, political, social, and technical conditions. This will need careful planning at national and local levels and will have to

include capacity building and dialogue between practitioners, scientists and policy makers.

Sustainable management of natural resources is the leitmotif in Iceland's foreign and domestic policy – it is how we have survived and prospered – it is, what we believe, the only way our world will survive and prosper.

Mr. Chair

Finally, in all our work we have to acknowledge that different countries are fighting different scenarios. For example, conditions in Iceland do not fall under *arid, semi-arid or dry-sub-humid areas*. Nevertheless, we are experiencing land degradation and soil erosion, fighting the same battles as other countries do, irrespective of the scope of the convention. Let us work together and put everything aside that can delay our journey to a more safer and sustainable world.

Thank you.