

International Federation of Agricultural Producers

CSD 16

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**THEMATIC SESSION ON DROUGHT AND
DESERTIFICATION
STATEMENT (social, economic and environmental impacts)**

Intervention from the Farmers' Group by
Mr. Nic Opperman, AgriSA, South Africa

Mr. Chairman, Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to intervene on behalf of farmers through IFAP to highlight some of the key issues related to drought and desertification as key development issues.

Combating the effects of drought, land degradation and desertification is probably one of the most important challenges for the years to come. The recognition of the link between poverty and land degradation during the WSSD in 2002 is encouraging. Furthermore, geography of poverty often coincides with that of drought, desertification and land degradation.

Agriculture can be either an aggravating factor in desertification or a corrective factor resulting in land improvement. Desertification and food security are intrinsically linked. In fact, desertification is one of the causes of lack of food security, leading to socio-economic and political tensions. Farmers are among the first victims of the phenomenon of desertification as natural resources such as fertile topsoil, organic matter, plant cover and healthy crops are the most severely affected by desertification.

The process of land degradation essentially affects arid land and approximately 70% of the 5.2 billion hectares of arid land devoted to agriculture is degraded. For farmers, desertification is not a concept but a question of day-to-day food security. In past the past, those responsible for development projects did not or hardly involved the people affected by the phenomenon of desertification in their projects to combat the problem. However, the local population, in particular farmers, often knows more about any

weaknesses in the ecosystem and holds key information for countering the effects of desertification.

Combating desertification is not just about adopting sustainable farming practices through innovative and adapted techniques. It is all about getting farmers and rural communities to turn dry land areas into real assets. For this change to happen, strong organized farmers and rural community groupings that will take their destiny in their hands are needed. Dry land farmers can best capitalize on their limited resources by forming strong rural organizations exercising socio-political, economic functions and providing various services (training, information, extension).

Since dry lands are inherently less productive and fertile, the challenge lies in increasing the market value of their crops to offset their lower productivity and higher cost of production. Rural livelihood programs such as simple food processing, small-scale manufacturing and others are critical to supplement farm incomes.

These programs should incorporate sustainable and remunerative marketing schemes instead of stop-gap social welfare support activities.

Lack of investment and economic growth represent significant challenges. In order to convince policy makers to invest in agriculture and natural resource management in dry lands and degraded areas, it is necessary to translate the different impacts of Natural Resource Management investments in monetary terms (i.e. increase of biomass, higher levels of water in wells, recapitalized land....) and in documenting success stories. Data is needed to convince policy makers on the economic benefits of regenerating the land. This will help break the image of dry lands as being miserable lands and turn them into real economic assets.