

Notes in response to the call for comments on UNCCD

The proposal presently in hearing is largely of a formal character, and I will not comment upon it in detail. There are, however, a number of general issues of interest in relation to the implementation and to Danida's involvement. I will try to summarize my comments under three headings:

1. 'Desertification': An environmental problem ?

UNCCD has been seen as mainly an 'environmental matter' since Rio. To the extent that desertification is caused by climate change (CC), this is, of course, reasonable. To the extent that it is caused by human overuse or mismanagement of natural resources, this view is not fruitful. The discussion of whether CC or human mismanagement is generally the cause has been ongoing for many decades, at least since the 1930-ies, and there is no reason to expect that a generally correct answer can be given: Both the phenomenon itself and its causes differ greatly from place to place. On the other hand, the climate will definitely change substantially over the next many decades, and it will certainly cause desertification to take place in many locations, whereas others will experience the opposite, so the climatic explanation will certainly gain in strength. Yet, the risk of overuse of natural resources may be expected to increase as well. The actions to be taken against desertification obviously differ greatly, depending on the relative importance of CC and human overuse: In cases where CC is the main cause, the actions to be taken are identical to those associated with mitigation of and adaptation to CC. In cases where human overuse is the problem, the relevant actions are, in very general terms, those promoting sustainable use of natural resources, which involves also addressing the issue of poverty alleviation. These two set of actions are very different, and each of them are dealt with by many other institutions and policies than those directly related to fighting desertification. This may be one of the reasons why UNCCD has found it difficult to attract the same interest and funding as UNFCCC and the 'PRSP-process'. Danida has always preferred to contribute to the objectives of UNCCD indirectly through support to relevant NRM activities in drylands, and this appear to be logical. However, as Danida is increasing its interest in climate issues, it should probably also focus on the interrelationship between CC and desertification.

2. Scientific authority

One of the reasons for the much greater success of UNFCCC in achieving its goals is that a scientific body, known as IPCC, has been established and has achieved a high level of scientific credibility. UNCCD has nothing of the sort, and seems to base itself on limited, and not necessarily balanced, scientific advice. It must be strongly recommended that it is demanded of UNCCD to establish a broadly based and *critical* panel of experts, and that funding mechanisms for research into desertification are established. UNCCD has to date been very slow

in accepting new research into desertification, probably because some of the recent results have contradicted the 'traditional wisdom' on which UNCCD has been built, and because these new findings undermine the traditional approaches to fighting desertification. Since IPCC is so well-established and accepted it may be worth while considering if IPCC should simply be expanded to cover this issue as well, by establishing a new 'working group'.

3. Organisation within the countries affected

Many countries have established separate committees and secretariats to deal with the three Rio conventions and other 'environmental' conventions. As argued above, the phenomena covered by these conventions are, however, interrelated, and the strategies of fighting these problems so overlapping or competing that it would be a better use of limited scientific and administrative capacity in these countries to deal with them under one hat. Attempts to coordinate have been made, but merging them altogether would probably be a better idea in many cases. Again this speaks in favour of much closer collaboration between the secretariats of the three (and probably more) conventions. This requires that the (new ?) leadership of UNCCD is urged to work in this direction.

21/8 07 Kjeld Rasmussen