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Letter dated 30 April 2009 from the Permanent Representative of Israel to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

I have the honour to inform you that the Government of Israel, through its national agency for international development cooperation (MASHAV), and in cooperation with the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the Secretariat, organized a seminar from 22 to 30 March 2009, as part of its contribution to the preparations for the seventeenth session of the Commission on Sustainable Development.

The seminar, entitled “The Role of Native and Desert-Adapted Species for the Purpose of Slowing Desertification”, was held at the Arava Institute for Environmental Studies based on Kibbutz Ketura in southern Israel. The seminar was designed to contribute to the planning and implementation of national, regional and local policies of Member States related to desertification and dryland development.

The programme included items on the promotion of sustainable agriculture, improving food security, and developing economic opportunities in desert areas while simultaneously combating land degradation and drought.

We therefore request that you kindly issue and circulate the attached report as a document of the United Nations (see annex).

(Signed) Gabriela Shalev
Ambassador and Permanent Representative

* E/CN.17/2009/1.



Annex to the letter dated 30 April 2009 from the Permanent Representative of Israel to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

The role of native and desert-adapted species for the purpose of slowing desertification

Arava Institute for Environmental Studies, Israel, 22-30 March 2009

Introduction

The following is a report on Israel's contribution to the preparations for the seventeenth session of the Commission on Sustainable Development. The activity focused on the policy aspects of combating desertification, as well as issues related to sustainable agriculture, land degradation, and drought. The activity is based upon Israel's accumulated knowledge and experience in the aforementioned fields.

Programme report

Israel is a leader in the research, development and implementation of strategies designed to mitigate desertification. The March 2009 MASHAV programme at the Arava Institute for Environmental Studies, located at Kibbutz Ketura in southern Israel, was designed to share Israel's expertise by training policymakers and professionals about the role of native and desert-adapted species for the purpose for slowing desertification.

As a result of poor land management and ineffective agricultural techniques, desertification contributes to food insecurity and malnourishment in many developing countries. According to the *World Development Report 2008* of the World Bank, *The State of Food and Agriculture* of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, and *The Challenges of Hunger 2008* by the International Food and Policy Research Institute, agriculture continues to be a fundamental sector for sustainable development and poverty reduction. With over 920 million people suffering from food insecurity and, at the same time, with agriculture as the main source of income for most of the world's poor, as well as the motor for economic development in many rural areas, it is crucial that — on a policy commitment and investment level — agriculture and rural development receive appropriate attention.

Israel constitutes a unique venue for an international conference on combating desertification. With nearly all of its territory located in drylands, Israel has managed to make incredible advances in agricultural technology in the past half century. In fact Israel is now self-sufficient in much of its food supply. Forests that had been nearly eliminated from centuries of neglect and occasional use for firewood have been restored and, in some cases, entire new forests have been planted. When Israel was established over 61 years ago, much of its semi-arid regions were degraded and the Negev desert had literally pushed its way north to the Tel Aviv-Jerusalem Corridor. A combination of intensive dryland agriculture, afforestation and economic initiatives has changed the face of the country. Tens of thousands of hectares have been reclaimed to make up today's productive lands.

The MASHAV 2009 programme at the Arava Institute gathered together 17 professionals employed in the fields of research, education, banking and policymaking — six of whom received supportive funding from the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat — to focus on problems of desertification and drought, as well as the interrelated issues of land, agriculture and rural development. These professionals — with diverse backgrounds in agroforestry, conservation and endangered plant species, desertification mitigation, land reclamation, native and/or specialized (for instance, medicinal) plants, sustainable agriculture, or drylands management — travelled to Israel from their homes in Brazil, China, Kenya, India, Nigeria and Samoa to benefit from the extensive expertise on sustainable agriculture in arid climates developed at the Arava Institute.

The training at the Arava Institute sought to develop practical methods of reversing trends of soil degradation, including hydrological strategies and information on native and desert-adapted plant species. With the twin goals of promoting methods for improving food security and economic opportunity, the Arava Institute worked to improve the participants' knowledge base with the ultimate hope of improving the capacity of each participant's home country to develop and apply necessary strategies and policies to mitigate desertification.

Elaine Solowey of the Arava Institute facilitated the lectures and field trips at the core of the MASHAV programme. Her expertise in arid and saline land crop development, as well as her work with rare wild and endangered medicinal herbs of the Arava and Dead Sea area, made her a particularly qualified and effective researcher for programme-related training. In the words of participants, "Everything about Dr. Solowey's presentations was relevant and extremely interesting ... Dr. Solowey's role was central to the course and her insights were quite revealing".

In order to best meet participant expectations of learning practical solutions for actual problems, lectures covered topics about endangered and locally extinct plants, plant domestication, water-saving perennials, carbon sequestration, plant sources of ethanol, and legal and policy aspects of desertification control.

Participants were made aware of Israel's policy measures in combating desertification as presented to the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification and how these approaches may be implemented in the participants' home countries. These measures include:

1. New comprehensive planning initiatives for Israeli drylands
 - Approval of National Masterplan 35 as a new long-term strategic plan that controls urban growth and balances development against conservation
 - Government adoption of the "Daroma" (southbound) development plan to expedite settlement of the Negev region.
2. Upgraded sustainable water management in the drylands
 - Upgrading of effluent recycling for agriculture
 - Construction and operation of new desalination facilities
 - Implementation of water conservation policies to prevent over-exploitation

- Commencement of watershed management projects: Nahal Beer Sheva, Nahal Besor.
- 3. Continued afforestation in the arid and semi-arid regions
 - Implementation of Masterplan 22 for Forests and Afforestation
 - Transfer of legal control of forests to the Jewish National Fund
 - Adoption of a national policy of sustainable forestry to ensure biodiversity, the ecological integrity of Israel's woodlands and the public's involvement in planning and access to forests as recreational resources.
- 4. Policies to promote sustainable agriculture in vulnerable regions
 - Implementation of national soil erosion control policies
 - Ongoing promotion of national grazing strategy and associated regulation.

The Arava Institute coordinated field trips to active research sites to supplement the lecture series. The first trip visited the regional agricultural research and development orchard at the Institute. The second trip was to the Yatir Forest, located in the northern Negev, to demonstrate how the regeneration and reclamation of native species has helped to restore an ecosystem that was severely degraded by over-grazing and erosion. Participants also toured the Dead Sea region to learn about measures being taken to halt the water level decline that is occurring in the Dead Sea owing to over-exploitation of water resources in the northern Jordan River watershed.

The strongest signs of a programme's success can be taken from participant evaluations. Although the Arava Institute engaged in training a diverse population of participants, one common theme emerged from each participant's experience: the highly positive, informative training gained from working with the Arava Institute. One of the students funded by the Department of Economic and Social Affairs reported: "I was a bit skeptical before arriving, for I wondered how such an important and wide topic (as described by the course theme) could be effectively addressed in eight days. Having gone through the course however, I've been fascinated by the achievements of the course ... I cannot remember ever learning so much in eight days". Such praise was consistently echoed throughout the evaluations. "The course was expertly conducted through rich presentations and field visits by a team of experienced scientists on desertification control and policy", said another participant.

As a leader in the research, development and implementation of strategies for mitigating desertification, Israel and the Arava Institute actively fulfil a responsibility to share the knowledge and skills they possess to work for the alleviation of the suffering of hundreds of millions of impoverished individuals. It is indeed an honour to empower others from other regions in the world suffering problems similar to our own.