INTRODUCTION

An intense debate over the desertification phenomenon has been raging now for well over two decades, since the Sahelian drought of the 70s.

The debate has generated some new knowledge, interest and realities, but also some myths, to the extent that some have questioned the existence of such a phenomenon.

We can vouch that it exists, and that it daily affects the lives and livelihood of millions of people mainly in developing countries, who testify to better times before the scourge descended on them.

Given such contradictions and confusion around the phenomenon, it is important to identify and contrast the myths with the realities because some of the former have the potential to negatively impact on policy decisions, actions and approaches required to effectively tackle the problem.

The issues that will be examined to identify the myths and realities are:

- How old or recent is the phenomenon (historical perspective)
- What is desertification (definitions)
THE ISSUES

1. Historical Perspective

Myth: Desertification is a recent and pressing, post-70s phenomenon

Reality: Desertification is not a new modern-era phenomenon, but an age-old problem dating back several centuries. What is new? Its conceptualization as a potential global problem to which the global community should pay attention.

2. Definitions

Myth: A plethora of answers to the simple question: What is desertification? gives the impression that it is a well-understood phenomenon

Reality: There is a lack of knowledge of what it is, and how to tackle it effectively

3. Extent and Magnitude

Myth: About 5.2 billion hectares of drylands is susceptible, and 70% of this is already affected to varying degrees

Reality: The extent and magnitude are not yet accurately known, and conventionally-defined affected areas have excluded humid areas that are also susceptible.

4. Process

Myth: The process is one of advancing deserts and invading sand dunes swallowing up chunks of land

Reality: The process occurs through the degradation of small areas of land under the influence of a confluent of factors. When neglected, such
small pockets of land grow and coalesce to form larger patches of land that could eventually resemble a desert-like topography

5. Causes

Myth: Three schools of thought claim exclusive knowledge over the causes: climate change is responsible; human-induced activities are responsible; both factors are responsible to varying degrees

Reality: The effect of climate and human-induced activities can not be separated, because they are so intertwined, and should be considered as the DIRECT CAUSES. The INDIRECT CAUSES - the social, economic and political factors - are the driving mechanisms that force people to degrade their land resources and are, perhaps, more important factors to focus on.

6. Consequences

Myth: Affected areas, which in most cases are in the South, live on a daily basis with the consequences of desertification. Therefore this is mainly a problem of developing countries.

Reality: On-site effects may be localised, but are not only restricted to developing countries, and occur in about 18 industrialised countries, including Canada. More importantly, off-site effects, linked to transcontinental dust movements from the affected areas in the South, are increasingly being documented in the North. Such effects include: climate and weather effects, health problems and telecommunications disturbances. The issue of environmental refugees is another important direct cause-effect relationship to bear in mind.

7. Cost of control

Myth: Too much money has already been spent to control the problem
Reality: A number of estimates of the cost rehabilitating degraded drylands put the figure at about $10-22 billion, while the income forgone for not spending this much is about to double that at $45 billion. It should be noted that these estimates do not include the difficult-to-assess social cost suffered by affected people. It has also been indicated that the benefits of rehabilitation are 2.5 times higher than the costs, and that the economic returns from land improvement should continue indefinitely. In other words, the reality belies the myth that too much money has been spent on mitigating the effect of desertification.

SOLUTIONS AND REMEDIES

There can be no single set of solutions for such a complex problem. An integrated approach that considers as many of the causative factors as possible has to be adopted. We believe that the Convention to Combat Desertification provides such a framework, and has all of the required elements. Some of these elements are:

- To develop a knowledge base through appropriate research to unravel some of the obscure issues surrounding the phenomenon
- To transfer, share, and disseminate such knowledge and required technology from North to South and vice-versa
- To establish partnerships at the local level where the problem is most felt. The battle will be won at the local level, so establish partnerships and cooperation among all stakeholders - government, NGOs, communities
- To adopt a bottom-up approach to ensure that decisions on the design and implementation of programmes are taken with the participation of populations and local communities who best understand their environment
- To approach the complex problem with an integrated approach that addresses the physical, biological and socio-economic aspects of the processes of desertification within a National Program of Action
To pay a special attention to the economic environment, both internationally and within nations. Poverty, population growth, land ownership, local and political organizational controls, trade, and marketing arrangements, the underlying driving forces or indirect causes must be tackled, to relieve the stress they impose, in order to have long-term and permanent solutions.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The objective of this document is to draw attention to some of the myths surrounding the desertification debate, and to confront them with the realities so that the former do not distract attention from the task at hand, - that of controlling and combatting desertification. Unfortunately, such myths tend to attract attention, and even when sufficient evidence is provided to dismiss them, they tend to linger in many minds, including those of decision makers who make formulate and implement crucial policies. For example, although there is general consensus that the desertification process is not about advancing deserts, the concept is still to be put to rest, perhaps because it catches and attracts attention. The other side of the coin, however, is that it may lead to the utilization of inappropriate control techniques, and wastage of resources. Efforts must therefore continue to separate myths from realities.