



“From Thoughts to Action”

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3rd International Disaster and Risk Conference IDRC Davos 2010

PRESS RELEASE

Davos, Switzerland – A United Nations diplomat chairing a panel at this week’s biannual Global Risk Forum (GRF) gathering of some 800 experts in this scenic alpine town calls today’s growth of barren deserts “the skin disease of Planet Earth”.

But, while agreeing, the panel’s moderator – himself a former UN civil servant – insists: “We need more than a beauty parlour” to cope with the trend. Hence the GRF’s focus on “sustainable opportunities” based on input from those with their “feet on the ground”.

As another panellist, Khadija-Catherine Razavi of Iran, puts it, this means giving desert farmers a greater voice in crucial decisions. She told her fellow global-risk experts that 30 years of experience with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) had taught her to trust “people on the ground”.

And Razavi, now executive director of Iran’s Center for Sustainable Development, holds that the UN and NGOs must “fight for them” with intercontinental zeal, breathing new life into plans to counter desertification and draught.

The Iranian distrusts the role of multinational firms, which she sees subverting the goals of the “green revolution” at every turn. Thus risk experts must focus on what she calls “food sovereignty”.

Two business-oriented scholars share a more upbeat outlook. One of them, Chris Reij, a Dutch senior specialist in sustainable land management at the University of Amsterdam, points to drylands reforestation success in Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Tigray, Ethiopia.

“In many places the situation is improving,” Reij says. Even in Niger, the poorest country in the world, he points out, farmers have transformed barren desert land into productive acreage. Moreover, “green investment” bankers have led the effort to regenerate the drylands.

Another Dutch “green investment” spokesman, Roland A. Jansen, heads a firm called Mother Earth Investments AG, based in Switzerland. His firm manages asserts in natural resources for banks, private clients, and pension funds.

According to Jansen, the good news can be viewed in the response of the market economy – especially in so-called jatropha plantations that now flourish in places like Egypt, western Mongolia and China’s Chengdu province.

“Deserts are bringing disasters in some places,” the businessman says, “but in others they offer great investment possibilities.”

The plant growth of jatropha requires great early care, Jensen says. But the plants can eventually make former parched desert areas green oases. They produce nuts for bio-diesel and bio-kerosene that can counteract carbon erosion while fertilizing desert land. And they delight green donors, as shown by numerous Mother Earth Investment test-crop projects.

“We like to make a dollar,” the businessman admits, “but we also like to give jobs to people who have had no chance in life.”

The French executive director of the NGO CARI, Patrice Burger, lends enthusiastic support to initiatives like those described by Jansen and Reij. His NGO recently formed partnerships with local green groups in China, Russia, Botswana, Cape Verde, Mexico, and Chile. Another bloc of 14 more partnerships has sprung up in 17 other countries.

“We’re beginning to have some good results,” Burger reports. Yet the effort to save oases and re-vegetate the deserts remains fragile and requires concerted global effort.

“Don’t compromise the future of oases ecosystems,” the Frenchman urges fellow experts in the field. “It’s up to you to support efforts like these in your countries.”

Pointing to projects like a successful pilot project to harvest dates in Morocco, Burger sounds optimistic. His CARI has adopted a slogan reminiscent of Barack and Michelle Obama’s campaign reminder: It’s not a resounding “Yes we can!” but at least “It’s possible!”

Lyn Shepard, Conference Journalist

Global Risk Forum GRF Davos

Davos, 2 June 2010

