



Don't Desert Drylands!



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The United Nations declared 2006 as the International Year of Deserts and Desertification (IYDD). June is full of IYDD events, which is why I'm focusing on the CGIAR's role in combating desertification in this letter—and why I've chosen to echo the UN's catchy slogan for World Environment Day (June 5), "Don't Desert Drylands!"

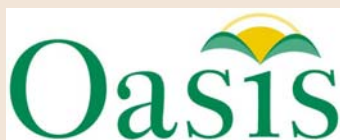
Progress against desertification has been hampered by several myths. The problem began with calls of alarm over 50 years ago that the Sahara was spreading southwards, swallowing towns and farms in its wake. The images were frightening, but alas—they could not be substantiated later by careful science. Important stakeholders became disillusioned by this false alarm, and it was difficult to regain their confidence and support later to tackle the very real problems of dryland degradation. This illustrates one of many reasons why good science needs to be a close companion of major sustainable development campaigns.

And that is what the CGIAR Centers and their partners have been contributing for nearly three decades, especially since ICRISAT and ICARDA were established to focus fully on the drylands. ICRISAT has closely partnered with the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) since its inception in the early 1990s, and brought three additional Centers (ICRAF, ILRI, TSBF-CIAT) together with nine African countries to form the Desert Margins Program (DMP). The DMP has become the CGIAR's flagship program against desertification in Africa, working to better understand land and biodiversity degradation, and to find ways to counter them.

Through DMP in partnership with CIAT-TSBF and FAO we have been advancing our microdosing work, which confronts two other myths about the desertification-prone drylands: that water is always the main constraint, and that fertilizer is too risky. We have also challenged the conventional belief that only low-value grain crops are suitable for the drylands, through our work on crop diversification. All these myths keep farmers mired in poverty and food insecurity, as I discussed in previous letters which you can find here: <http://www.icrisat.org/enewsletter.htm>



The drylands: bleak, but beautiful.



Building on the DMP's success, this year we proposed jointly with ICARDA a major new initiative: a global CGIAR Systemwide Program we call 'Oasis'. We chose the name Oasis because it reflects our optimism that science-based development can cut through the myths and despair and help dryland communities create a much brighter future.

I am pleased that eight Centers have so far joined as Oasis partners. The DMP will continue as a cornerstone of Oasis in Africa, linked to work across the globe done by CIAT, CIMMYT, ICARDA,

ICRISAT, IFPRI, ILRI, WARDA and their many partners. Oasis will help these Future Harvest Centers build synergies and take the holistic, integrated-ecosystem approach that is essential for overcoming the complex problems of desertification.

The UNCCD has commented that desertification is, at its core, a human development problem, and to tackle it we need to attack poverty. IFPRI, also an Oasis partner, carries out world-class research on policies to foster sustainable livelihoods and development. IFPRI will help Oasis tie the pieces together, investigating sustainable development pathways and policies that will work in these zones.



Crops, livestock, people and the land are all interdependent in the drylands.

Oasis also links ILRI's strong understanding of livestock and rangeland management methods and policies, which are a vital complement to ICRISAT's cropping systems expertise, since crops and livestock interact closely in the drylands. The degradation of rangelands and their wealth of wildlife and plant biodiversity is a pressing global environmental issue in which ILRI plays a leadership role.

One of the UNCCD's major constraints has been a lack of techniques for adequately measuring land degradation, especially on large areas. Some have estimated that desertification has already damaged 70% of the drylands, whereas the recent Millennium Ecosystem Assessment

indicates a 10-20% range. That's a big difference, and needs to be clarified. Oasis brings in ICRAF's leading-edge technology for estimating land quality from satellite data using a technique called near-infrared reflectance spectroscopy. This enables the CGIAR to contribute importantly on defining the desertification problem and its extent.

In addition Oasis links the crop improvement and germplasm conservation capabilities of both tropical and temperate-zone Centers. CIMMYT has developed drought-tolerant maize that is about 30% higher-yielding along the moist edge of the drylands in southern Africa. ICARDA and CIMMYT jointly breed dryland wheat for central and western Asia and northern Africa, and are doing leading-edge drought resistance gene work. At ICRISAT we've contributed to varieties grown on a million hectares in dryland Africa, and have had major impact in dryland Asia as well.

And though few think of rice in the drylands, that is yet another myth that needs to be laid to rest. Rice is an important irrigated crop along the

major river systems of West Africa, and in low-lying, heavy-soil dryland areas such as the Lake Chad and Lake Victoria basins. WARDA varieties are widely grown in these areas, and we are glad they'll contribute their rice breeding and inland-valley management expertise to Oasis.

Along with all these complementary capabilities, the Oasis Centers also have some areas of overlap that hold much potential for joint work to create greater critical mass. Several Centers and their partners work on dryland soil science issues, for example. Many of the principles and tools of



ICRISAT strengthens national programs in advanced skills such as geographic information systems.

plant breeding are also similar across crops. Farmer-participatory research is a third area in common. Through Oasis we will share knowledge and expertise to make the sum greater than the parts.

Although I am mainly describing the Centers' work here for brevity, I want to emphasize that none of them operates in a vacuum. They are closely tied to national, regional and international partners in the public, civil society, non-governmental and private sectors. Oasis is, in a sense a "meta-partnership" that interlinks these primary networks. The Center partnerships will drive the agenda, but Oasis will make it easier and more productive for them to work together.

No, we at ICRISAT will not 'Desert the Drylands'. On the contrary, we are forging ahead even more strongly, with well-rounded science through Oasis. I invite you to visit the Oasis website to learn more about the capabilities it brings to the table (www.oasisglobal.net). I would welcome your suggestions and feedback, and certainly your support to make it a great success.



Millet is life for millions in the drylands.

Sincerely yours,

William D. Dar
Director General



About ICRISAT

The International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT) is a non-profit, non-political organization that does innovative agricultural research and capacity building for sustainable development with a wide array of partners across the globe. ICRISAT's mission is to help empower 600 million poor people to overcome hunger, poverty and a degraded environment in the dry tropics through better agriculture. ICRISAT belongs to the Alliance of Future Harvest Centers of the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR).

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