

Q&A: "People Often Cannot Avoid Putting at Risk the Natural Resource Base Upon Which They Depend"

Interview with Farhana Haque-Rahman

COTONOU, Jun 10 (IPS) - With the World Day to Combat Desertification set to take place shortly (Jun. 17), efforts are gearing up to highlight the threats posed by land degradation in much of Africa -- as well as initiatives to safeguard against desertification.

The International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) is at the forefront of the fight against desertification: this United Nations agency has embarked on related projects throughout Africa, and in other parts of the world. Globally, desertification threatens the livelihoods of more than 1.2 billion people in 110 countries.

Media relations head Farhana Haque-Rahman told Michee Boko of IPS more about IFAD's concern with issues linked to land degradation. IPS: Why is IFAD engaged in the fight against desertification? Farhana Haque-Rahman (FH): IFAD works in rural areas to enable poor people to overcome poverty. IFAD has made land degradation and its causes a central part of its work, recognising the link between rural poverty and the environment. Land degradation leads to greater competition for the increasingly scarce resources upon which rural communities depend for their livelihoods and survival.

IPS: And, what have your experiences been to date?

FH: Through our project work we have seen that when communities adopt strategies to increase soil productivity and ensure equitable access by men and women to agricultural extension services, technology and rural finance, the benefits are more likely to be sustainable and become a public good.

Arid and semi-arid areas are often remote and very poor. The people who live in them have little access to technology and information or to markets and basic infrastructure. They often cannot avoid putting at risk the natural resource base upon which they depend, and they do not have the luxury of alternative sources of income and food.

IPS: What projects against desertification is IFAD currently engaged in?

FH: About 70 per cent of IFAD's rural poverty reduction projects are located in ecologically fragile, marginal environments. IFAD's operations in these areas promote innovative approaches to help poor farmers break out of the poverty cycle that obliges them to degrade their land resources to satisfy their immediate subsistence needs. Operations focus on reducing poverty and how it is linked with land degradation.

In addition to projects and programmes, IFAD hosts the Global Mechanism, which mobilises funds and resources to implement the 1994 UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD). IFAD is also an executing agency of the Global Environment Facility, which provides grants to developing countries to promote environmental programmes and sustainable livelihoods in local communities. In addition, IFAD hosts the International Land Coalition, dedicated to improving rural poor people's access to land and natural resources.

IPS: Could you tell us approximately how much IFAD is currently investing in the fight against desertification in Africa?

FH: Between 1999 and 2005, IFAD committed a total of about two billion dollars in loans and grants to relevant programmes and projects, 46.8 percent of which principally targeted UNCCD objectives.

IPS: Which initiatives in Africa have proved successful -- and why?

FH: One particularly successful project in Africa was the seven-year North Kordofan Rural Development Project in Sudan. Irrigated farming is limited in the provinces of Um Ruwaba and Bara in western Sudan, which were hit by a series of droughts in the 1980s and early 1990s. The massive influx of displaced persons from the south has placed further pressure on already fragile resources, and livelihoods have suffered considerably. We are encouraged by the project because even though it has faced difficulties caused by inconsistencies in the decentralisation process, farmers have already registered benefits in productivity. IFAD financed the project with a 10.5 million dollar loan.

IPS: And, what does the future hold?

FH: IFAD currently has plans to address desertification in Niger, Eritrea, Haiti, Syria and Djibouti. In Niger, we are planning the Agricultural Rural Rehabilitation Development Initiative; in Eritrea, the Post-Crisis Livestock Rehabilitation and Development Programme; in Haiti, the Small-Scale Irrigation Development Project; in Syria, the North Eastern Region Rural Development Project; and, in Djibouti the 'Programme de Mobilisation des Eaux de Surface pour le Développement Agro-Pastoral' (Programme to Mobilise Surface Water for Agro-Pastoral Development). (END/2007)