

UNU Land Restoration Training Programme
Graduation Ceremony
September 17, 2014
Address by
Mr. Gunnar Bragi Sveinsson
Minister for Foreign Affairs

Dear fellows, Acting Director and employees of the UNU Land Restoration Training Programme, Vice-Rector of the Agricultural University of Iceland and Department Head of Research and Development at the Soil Conservation Service of Iceland

ladies and gentlemen, dear friends.

It is a pleasure for me to address this fifth graduation ceremony of the UNU Land Restoration Training Programme.

Here before us, we have 12 fellows who are graduating from the Programme, five women and seven men - from six different countries. That makes a total of 63 fellows who have graduated from the programme since 2007. Allow me to congratulate you on your achievements over the past six months and your graduation today. I look forward to assist in handing over your certificates later on.

Dear fellows,

I do not have to emphasize for you how important your work is for your home country, this you know very well. Work on the ground locally is, and will be the key to combatting land degradation and restoring lost and degraded land.

However, it is important to remember all the work that is needed on global and regional level. Economic activity and policies, such as in agriculture, water management and trade, all effect land and soil quality. These must be sustainable. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. Unsustainable policies can give short-term gains but be catastrophic for the future. Because of globalization and global economy, production in one country can affect production elsewhere. High demand for cheaper products in a competitive global market can be a negative driver on the environment.

This is why the Sustainable Development Goals that member states have been negotiating in the United Nations, are so important. On a global and regional level, collective actions are

needed, where all countries agree to act differently and respect the environment and its limitations. Global goals and targets on how to sustainably manage land and soil can make a change.

With this in mind we decided to do what we could do to influence the negotiations. A ‘Group of Friends of Desertification, Land Degradation and Drought’ was launched in New York last year, together with Namibia, to act as an informal interest group and forum for informal discussions. The aim was to maintain the momentum generated by Rio+20 and to have desertification, land degradation and drought addressed in the sustainable development goals.

Further, we invited your Programme Director, Dr Hafdís Hanna Ægisdóttir, to be a keynote speaker at a panel discussion organized by Iceland in New York with the Group of Friends. The panel discussion was planned in connection with the negotiations on the Sustainable Development Goals. There, Hafdís Hanna made a strong case for more and stronger focus on capacity building in the field of land restoration.

As part of our outreach I also invited the Executive Secretary of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification, Ms. Monique Barbut, to visit Iceland and the UNU-LRT programme in the beginning of June this year. Part of her visit was to meet with you and I’m told that it was a fruitful meeting. I hope you also enjoyed that opportunity as well.

Furthermore, in July this year I participated in the High Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development as a part of the ECOSOC meeting in UN and used the opportunity to raise the issue of land restoration. I specifically mentioned that the concept of *land degradation neutral world* had to be one of the targets of the SDGs, together with sustainable land management.

Finally let me mention my latest initiative, which was to write a letter to Ban Ki-moon to draw his attention to the urgent need to integrate a land-based approach to adaptation and resilience in any 2015 Climate Change agreements.

Dear friends,

I use every opportunity I get to give praise when I see good work done to advance gender equality. The Land Restoration Training Programme has always lead by example when it comes to mainstreaming gender into all aspects of its work. Not only is it mirrored in almost equal number of women and men who have graduated from the programme – but also do I know that gender perspectives have been a part of their training.

Finally, allow me to congratulate you fellows once again on your graduation. The knowledge sharing that takes place in the UNU training programmes, is something we value greatly – and to contribute to capacity building in the area of land restoration is of great importance to us. Please remember that your training is an important part of a much larger picture.

I know the last six months have been challenging for you, both professionally and personally, but I hope you have enjoyed your stay in Iceland. Together we will continue to fight land degradation and reclaiming land for future generations.

Thank you.