

Discussion Material Paper on the Sub-theme “Current Status of Drylands in Sub-Saharan Africa; Ecological Aspects.”

About 43% of the landmass in Africa (comprising 65% of the countries) are classified as drylands. Assessment of the dryland areas show that approximately 16%, 21% and 8% are arid, semi arid and dry sub-humid lands respectively [Corbett et al, 1996; UNSO/UNDP 1997]. However, this categorization is only approximate since high variability in climatic conditions (especially rainfall amount/distribution) accompanied by drought and effects resulting from human induced activities mean that actual areas/boundaries are shifting overtime. Regular monitoring of the extent of distribution of the drylands based on updated and reliable techniques is therefore necessary.

One distinct phenomenon of drylands is desertification resulting largely from increasing human population. About 41% of Africa’s population live in the drylands with the greatest proportion found in the semi arid (18%) and dry sub-humid zones (17%) respectively [UNDP/UNSO, 1997]. Pastoralism is the major form of land use in the arid lands with agriculture becoming important as one moves to semi arid and dry sub-humid zones. It has been shown that desertification in the arid lands is attributed mostly to overgrazing followed by other forms of overexploitation of the natural resources while in the semi arid zones, agricultural activities begin to emerge. Expansion of agriculture and settlements are considered to be the major causes of devegetation/deforestation and hence desertification [FAO, 2001].

As regards productivity, it is generally observed that drylands in Africa are productive if properly managed but fragile and highly vulnerable to degradation/desertification if forces of degradation are not checked. Some initiative has been undertaken to generate indicators of dryland degradation and desertification risks using data on areas of aridity and human populations in various zones to provide information on countries likely to be vulnerable to desertification [UNDP/UNSO, 1997]. Based on these data, about 58% of the productive land of the drylands in Africa is vulnerable. At sub-regional level, 51%, 63% and 71% of the productive lands in Western, Eastern and Southern Africa respectively are vulnerable and require serious attention and priority in addressing natural resources degradation/desertification.

Concerning conservation, there exist very few successful cases documented on the conservation status of the drylands in sub-Saharan Africa. The search for representative case studies is now on and it is hoped that quite a number will be generated from the e-discussion. Meanwhile, analysis of the available cases show that successful conservation strategies must, of essence, involve full participation of local communities. One good example is in Kenya where a group of local Maasai is being organised to manage resources, make decisions and control activities that affect their lives and environment in a participatory partnership. Already, local level resource governance structure has taken over ownership of the programme and there is overwhelming evidence that the natural resources in the project area i.e. vegetation, wildlife and sand are being utilised at sustainable off-take levels while the general standards of living of members in the project is improving.