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**It takes 193 to tango: The Ninth
Session of the Conference of the
Parties to the UN Convention to
Combat Desertification**

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Bonn, 14 September 2009. Bonn, 14 September 2009. Germany in autumn 2009: If we look beyond the din of the electioneering, echoing back and forth between Detroit and Kunduz, “Copenhagen” seems to be everywhere. The UN climate conference, set for early December in Copenhagen and expected to come up with a new world climate agreement, has assumed something like pride of place in current political debates, and rightly so, too.

Meanwhile, another global policy process faced with an important test is in danger of being completely overlooked here in Germany, though, that is the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), whose ninth Conference of the Parties is set to come together in Buenos Aires, Argentina, from 21 September to 2 October. A somewhat strange state of affairs considering that the UNCCD has found its institutional home in Germany’s “UN town” of Bonn.

This lack of attention is symptomatic for the intricate history of the convention, which came into force in 1996 and is described, even by well-meaning critics, as modest in scope. It was in unaccustomed unanimity that the industrialised and developing countries, at the last conference of the parties in 2007 in Madrid, adopted an ambitious 10-year strategic plan, launching a set of far-reaching institutional reforms. Besides, UN Secretary-General Ban-Ki Moon appointed a new executive secretary, Luc Gnacadja, a former environmental minister of Benin who has brought to the job a reputation as a firm, assertive, and efficient manager. In short, the prevailing spirit was one of optimism for the future.

It is now proving difficult to sustain that impetus in the run-up to Buenos Aires. However, the upcoming conference of the 193 parties to the convention – all of the UN member states plus the European Community – is far more than just another test. If not enough is done to follow up on the decisions taken in Madrid, the momentum for reform may well dissipate, relegating the convention process once and for all to the background of development policy. That would not be in the interest of Germany, the convention’s host country, and certainly not in the interests of the one third of the global population living in the world’s dryland regions – most of them in absolute poverty. And it would effectively make a farce of the UN Decade for Deserts and the Fight against Desertification (2010-20), even before it had got underway.

One reason for optimism that the conference may take a constructive course is seen in the meeting of the Committee on Science and Technology (CST), a subsidiary body of the Conference of the Parties. In keeping with the decisions on reform adopted in Madrid, the CST meeting will, for the first time, be organised in the form of an international expert conference. Germany had called for this, and the aim of the move is to prevent the CST from being misused – as it often has in the past – as a sideline arena for politicised procedural debates between developing and developed countries. The idea is, instead, to set the stage for the representatives of the parties to engage in a focused exchange on substantive issues with eminent representatives of the scientific community, enabling them to reach agreement on a set of clear and verifiable indicators urgently needed for a result-based implementation of specific convention objectives. If the conference succeeds in coming to viable decisions in this area, it would have achieved at least one paramount goal.



Among the other critical points on the agenda is, as always, the budget of the convention secretariat. In the light of past years' experiences and against the background of the current financial crisis, there is every reason to expect the donor countries to adopt a restrictive course here. The donors would, however, be well advised to understand clearly that it is essential to give the new leadership the scope of action it needs to bring about effective change, both in structural and in personnel terms, bearing on the future organisation of the convention process. The new, results-based management system adopted under Executive Secretary Gnacadja has proven useful in distinguishing between core and non-core tasks of the secretariat, creating a clear-cut basis for funding decisions.

In addition, controversial negotiations are expected on decentralising the implementation of the convention. While many developing countries favour regional offices of the UNCCD Secretariat, developed countries fear that this would in effect mean creating a set of inefficient and – above all – costly parallel structures. Whether or not reasonable and workable compromises are reached on the undisputed need for improved policy coordination at the regional and sub-regional level is a matter that will largely depend on the negotiating skills of the parties.

In all points set for discussion, Germany and the European Union are called upon to contribute their share to the success of the upcoming Conference of the Parties as well as to efforts to implement the 10-year strategic plan. That would mean, first of all, to pay adequate political attention to the convention process. Sending no heads of state and government, or at least pertinent ministers, to Buenos Aires for the Conference of the Parties would be tantamount to signalling precisely the opposite. It would, instead, serve to underline the already prevalent impression in the developing countries that the industrialised countries are at best indifferent to the goals of the UNCCD.

If Germany and Europe are in fact interested in guiding a successful conference tango, they would be well advised to show both resolution and credibility vis-à-vis their partners from the developing world. The diplomatic floor has been set, the roles assigned. And while the steps involved may be as intricate as those of an artful Argentine tango, they are still sufficiently well known. Ultimately, it will hinge on whether or not the 193 partners are inclined to dance together – or prepared to stumble and fail, one and all.



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