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REVIEW OF PROGRAMME PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTATION

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Desertification and Land Degradation

Note by the Secretariat

CONTENTS

I. BACKGROUND.....	2
II. OVERVIEW OF SUBREGIONAL PROGRESS ON COMBATING DESERTIFICATION AND LAND DEGRADATION.....	3
III. PROGRESS OF NEASPEC'S WORK ON DESERTIFICATION AND LAND DEGRADATION.....	5
IV. ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION.....	7

I. BACKGROUND

1. North-East Asia faces a range of desertification and land degradation (DLD) challenges due to its vast landmass, geographical and climate variation, and differences in stages and choices of development pathways. Over the past decades, NEASPEC has developed and implemented various projects to provide capacity building, knowledge sharing, and training supports for member countries to combat DLD began with initiatives on the control of dust and sandstorms (DSS) in 2003.

2. Since 2005, NEASPEC has developed knowledge sharing and capacity building programmes in line with the “Regional Master Plan for the Prevention and Control of Dust and Sandstorms in North-East Asia” jointly developed by the Asia Development Bank (ADB), United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) and United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), and adopted by the governments of China, Mongolia, the Republic of Korea and Japan to mobilize coordinated action.

3. In particular, NEASPEC carried out a field project on tree planting and awareness raising of local community in Zamyn-Uud, developed a GIS-based information system for activities and projects on combating desertification in Mongolia during 2011-2012, and supported capacity building training programmes for Mongolian experts held in China in 2011 and 2013.

4. Following to the adoption of the UNCCD land degradation neutrality target (LDN) at UNCCD COP12 and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development¹ in 2015, the Secretariat reviewed the subregional DLD activities and conceptualized the North-East Asia Multi-Stakeholder Plan (NEAMSP) as a practical tool to support the public sector, private sector and civil society to scale up their existing work through better information sharing and coordination. The plan of implementing the NEAMSP was elaborated at an International Multi-Stakeholder Workshop on DLD organized jointly with the National Forestry and Grassland Administration (former State Forestry Administration) of China in 2015. NEAMSP was adopted by SOM-20 in 2016. SOM-20 also agreed to change the title of the NEASPEC programme area from Dust and Sandstorms to Desertification and Land Degradation.

5. Furthermore, the Secretariat has facilitated various outreach activities with member governments, civil society organizations and international organizations to showcase progress in DLDD work in North-East Asia and forge partnership.

¹ Goal 15.3, to combat desertification, restore degraded land and soil, including land affected by desertification, drought and floods, and strive to achieve a land degradation-neutral world by 2030.

II. OVERVIEW OF SUBREGIONAL PROGRESS ON COMBATING DESERTIFICATION AND LAND DEGRADATION

Subregional progress on LDN target setting

6. To date member States including the Russian Federation, China and Mongolia have taken the lead in setting voluntary LDN targets with the support of the Global Mechanism under the UNCCD².

7. The Russian Federation submitted the country report of the LDN target setting programme (TSP) in 2018 . The report introduced that 7.5% of the whole area of the country are subject to desertification processes, and the LDN approach can be used as an incentive and platform for harmonizing the land assessment and monitoring systems at the national level. It emphasized the indivisible link with climate change adaptation programmes during the LDN target setting process, as part of the government plan for “implementing measures to improve state regulation of GHG emissions and preparing for ratification of the Paris Agreement by 2020”. The report also noted that the LDN objective is considered not only as a dryland problem but extends to all territories of the Russian Federation³.

8. In China, according to the national report of the LDN TSP, the enlarging trend of desertification has been reversed since 2004 after taken a series of DLD control measures over the last two decades. Despite such progress, China faces the challenge of consolidating and mobilizing more resources to sustain the current results on DLD control and achieving overall ecological improvement and poverty alleviation across the country. China also announced a set of land degradation control objectives to be achieved by 2030, including targets on: cultivated land areas, forest coverage, vegetation coverage of grassland, newly controlled sandification land and soil erosion areas, safe use of polluted arable land and natural wetland protection⁴.

9. Mongolia has committed to setting a national voluntary LDN target and formulating associated measures to achieve LDN as land degradation has significant socioeconomic costs. The estimated annual cost of land degradation reaches USD 2.1 billion, equivalent of 43 per cent of the country’s GDP. Restoring degraded lands (including degraded forest) is among the most cost-effective option for climate change mitigation with multiple co-benefits in Mongolia. As the

²<https://www.unccd.int/sites/default/files/inline-files/List%20of%20countries%20setting%20LDN%20targets%20as%20of%20Sept%202018%29.pdf>

³ <https://knowledge.unccd.int/home/country-information/countries-having-set-voluntary-ldn-targets/russian-federation>

⁴ <https://knowledge.unccd.int/home/country-information/countries-having-set-voluntary-ldn-targets/china>

agriculture, forestry and other land use sector in Mongolia represent 72 per cent of the total national GHG emissions, various projects have been implemented with supports from national and international organizations, such as the on-going projects funded by the Global Environment Facility (GEF) respectively on: Land Degradation Offset and Mitigation in Western Mongolia; mainstreaming Biodiversity Conservation, Sustainable Forest Management and Carbon Sink Enhancement into Mongolia's Productive Forest Landscapes; and establishing a network of Managed Resource Protected Areas in under-Represented Terrestrial Ecosystems for Biodiversity Conservation and Livelihood Improvement⁵.

10. Such initiatives in Mongolia are in line with the *Special Report on Climate Change, Desertification, Land Degradation, Sustainable Land Management, Food Security, and Greenhouse Gas Fluxes in Terrestrial Ecosystems* (Special Report on Climate Change and Land, SRCCL) of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) published in August 2019 which offers an integrated analysis of the interactions, co-benefits and trade-offs between DLD and climate change⁶.

11. The IPCC SRCCL concludes that desertification and climate change, both individually and in combination, will reduce the provision of dryland ecosystem services and lower ecosystem health. While desertification exacerbates climate change through changes in vegetation cover, sand and dust aerosols and GHG fluxes, land degradation is both affected by and contributes to climate change through GHG emissions and reduced rates of carbon uptake. In the meantime, climate change aggravates the rate and magnitude of several ongoing land degradation processes and introduces new degradation patterns. The report also notes that many interventions to achieve LDN commonly deliver benefits for climate change adaptation and mitigation.

New and emerging initiatives

12. The Government of the Republic of Korea announced a Peace Forest Initiative (PFI) in July 2019. As a partnership framework focusing on LDN in fragile and conflict-affected areas, the PFI aims to build trust and peace through restoring degraded lands and forests in the border areas, and ultimately contributes to the alleviation and reconciliation of political tension between

⁵ Mongolia country profile: Investing in Land Degradation Neutrality, https://www.unccd.int/sites/default/files/inline-files/Mongolia_3.pdf

⁶ "Land degradation" is defined in IPCC SRCCL as a negative trend in land condition, caused by direct or indirect human-induced processes including anthropogenic climate change, expressed as long-term reduction or loss of at least one of the following: biological productivity, ecological integrity or value to humans. The difference between land degradation and desertification is geographic. "Desertification" is land degradation when it occurs in arid, semi-arid, and dry sub-humid areas, collectively known as drylands. Desertification is not the same as the expansion of deserts, also note limited to irreversible forms of land degradation.

neighboring countries. It is expected to foster actions on sustainable land management and facilitate economic cooperation to support the achievement of multiple SDG targets. The UNCCD secretariat was proposed to play a key role in collaboration with other UN entities in the initial phase of PFI. A multi-partner trust fund and a PFI secretariat is proposed to be established in a long run⁷.

13. In the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), following to the development of the National Agroforestry Strategy and Action Plan (NASAP) for 2015-2024 by the Ministry of Land and Environment Protection, agroforestry development and expansion continues with active multi-stakeholder participation. The objective of the Plan is to create a reliable base to produce various raw materials to ensure food security whilst accelerating forest ecosystem restoration. Tree plantation in disaster-prone areas also continues to reduce disaster risk and improve agricultural production. Further cooperation and financial and technical support from international organizations is expected to implement priority projects of the NASAP⁸.

III. PROGRESS OF NEASPEC'S WORK ON DESERTIFICATION AND LAND DEGRADATION

North-East Asia LDN study

14. Following to the discussion at SOM-21 on developing a subregional study on LDN and sustainable development, the Secretariat has worked with relevant mechanisms such as DLDD-NEAN and the UNCCD secretariat since 2017 and provided inputs for the *Northeast Asia Thematic Report on Partnerships to Achieve Land Degradation Neutrality* as part of the Global Land Outlook subregional initiative in 2019. The report examines the transboundary impacts of sand and dust storms (SDS), DLD and drought faced by North-East Asia, and highlights the intensified environmental cooperation and partnerships to effectively address the sources, drivers and impacts of DLD in the subregion.

15. The report suggests the need to facilitate coordination among actors involved in the current partnerships and strengthen multilateral cooperation via NEAMSP under NEASPEC; alternatively, to task the DLDD-NEAN as a core implementation platform for achieving LDN and enhancing the implementation of the UNCCD in the subregional.

⁷ Briefing session on Peace Forest Initiative, 23 July 2019, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Korea Forest Service

⁸ https://www.eda.admin.ch/dam/countries/countries-content/the-democratic-people-s-republic-of-korea/en/DPRK-AF-Strategy-2015-2024_EN.pdf

North-East Asia Multi-Stakeholder Plan

16. As many new stakeholders and innovative approaches emerged in the DLD community, the Secretariat held a partner event in collaboration with the Korea Forest Service and the FAO on “Multi-stakeholder Cooperation in North-East Asia on Combating Desertification and Land Degradation” during the Asia-Pacific Forestry Week (APFW) in June 2019 in Incheon, Republic of Korea. The event was participated by policy makers, practitioners, NGOs, research institutes and international organizations, and offered an overview on the landscape of multi-stakeholder collaboration on DLD in North-East Asia. The event also shared experience and lessons learnt on the institutional, financing and technological innovations, and introduced successful practices of different stakeholders that could be replicated beyond the subregion on combating DLD⁹.

Informal consultation on refocusing NEASPEC's work on DLD

17. Following the discussion at SOM-22 on creating synergies and refocusing the work of NEASPEC on DLD, the Secretariat organized an informal consultation with member States during the APFW in June 2019. The meeting was joined by representatives from the Korea Forest Service of the Republic of Korea, the Ministry of Environment and Tourism of Mongolia, and the National Forestry and Grassland Administration of China. Discussions focused on the current institutional arrangements of DLDD-NEAN and NEASPEC on facilitating policy dialogue and technical cooperation in North-East Asia, and the Secretariat sought for inputs on developing possible new arrangements refocusing NEASPEC's work on DLD. Highlighting the DLDD-NEAN as a unique subregional cooperation platform and reporting entity to the UNCCD, the meeting suggested exploring further options to identify possible arrangements between NEASPEC and DLDD-NEAN to enhance the efficiency of efforts on DLD in the subregion.

18. Given the overlap of key stakeholders and activities between DLDD-NEAN and NEASPEC's work on DLD, the Secretariat would like to recall the discussion at the previous SOM and seek member States' views on the options of:

- i. Discontinuing the programmatic work area on DLD under NEASPEC to avoid duplication with the DLDD-NEAN;
- ii. Focusing on operating the NEAMSP to help stakeholders share and disseminate information and coordinate activities on DLD, through organizing annual multi-stakeholder forum in collaboration with the DLDD-NEAN and other partners;

⁹ <http://neaspec.org/article/asia-pacific-forestry-week-apfw-2019-escapneaspec-side-event>

- iii. Integrating NEASPEC's work on DLD with interlinked issues or projects, focusing on the co-benefits and interplay between DLD and other sectors, such as climate change, agroforestry, renewable energy and biodiversity.

IV. ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION

19. The Meeting may wish to invite member States to share views and guidance on the three options proposed above.
20. The Meeting may wish to invite member States to express their interest in hosting annual multi-stakeholder forum on NEAMSP.
21. The Meeting may wish to invite member States to propose specific areas of work and potential projects if there is a consensus on the continuation of the DLD work.

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