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Message from Ms Irina Bokova,

Director-General of UNESCO

on the occasion of the World Day to Combat Desertification and Drought

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Our land. Our home. Our future.

This must be our motto today -- especially in the struggle against desertification.

The role of environmental changes in migration and population displacement across the world is increasingly clear. Massive numbers of 'environmental refugees' are now regularly presented as one of the most dramatic possible consequences of climate change and desertification. And this is only set to increase. By 2030, the Secretariat of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification warned that 135 million people were at risk of being displaced because of desertification, with 60 million people expected to move from sub-Saharan Africa to Northern Africa and Europe.

These forecasts show that arid and semi-arid regions would be mostly affected by desertification and population movements. Rural populations, relying on pastoral livelihoods, agriculture and natural resources, will be highly exposed due to existing vulnerabilities, including poverty, poor levels of education, lack of investment, remoteness, and isolation.

We must counter these trends and this means acting at two levels.

First, we must manage land correctly, because this is crucial in preventing its desertification and for keeping its productivity. The UNESCO Biosphere Reserve Las Bardenas Reales in Spain shows that informed management of arid lands, based on an alternation between pasture uses, cultivations and fallow periods, allows not only the halt of desertification but also the possibility of inverting the process and restoring

previously degraded lands. This is why the UNESCO International Hydrological Programme is so committed to build capacity and provide policy guidance and tools to address drought and desertification related challenges, particularly related to water resources management, through the Global Network on Water and Development Information for Arid Lands (G-WADI).

Second, we must bolster the resilience of vulnerable populations by supporting alternative livelihoods to break the vicious circle of desertification and related socio-economic consequences often leading to migration. In seeking to foster education and capacity building in science, technology and engineering, for both girls and boys in vulnerable countries, UNESCO's International Basic Sciences Programme is working to create new employment opportunities for youth, lessen the reliance on climate dependent income resources, to offer people a future that is resilient at home.

On this day, we must recognise that desertification is a global phenomenon that threatens everyone and we must start to act globally to build a sustainable and stable future for all.

Irina Bokova