

UNU Land Restoration Training Programme
Graduation Ceremony
September 17, 2015
Address by
Mr. Stefán Haukur Jóhannesson
Permanent Secretary of State

Dear fellows, Director and employees of the UNU Land Restoration Training Programme, Rector of the Agricultural University of Iceland, Director of the Soil Conservation Service of Iceland,

Ladies and Gentlemen, Dear Friends.

I am honoured to address this graduation ceremony of the UNU Land Restoration Training Programme. The Minister for Foreign Affairs was unfortunately unable to be here today, but he sends his best wishes to all of you, and in particular the fellows graduating here today.

The UNU Land Restoration Training Programme has now graduated a total of 76 fellows, half of whom are women. I want to commend the programme for achieving gender parity each year, and for the implementation of their gender equality policy. As you know, we must never cease our work towards achieving gender equality, and by addressing it in every aspect of our work, like the UNU-LRT has been doing, we will achieve our goal one day.

Sustainable land management and combatting land degradation is perhaps one of the most pressing issues to tackle over the next decades. Whether in your home countries of Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, Ethiopia, Ghana, Malawi, Namibia and Uganda or Iceland. This is a global matter that also needs global attention and solution.

In the new 2030 Agenda (or "post 2015" as we have grown so accustomed to use), land degradation is referred to as a major challenge in the political

declaration that accompanies the new Sustainable Development Goals. Furthermore, the declaration states political will to strengthen cooperation on desertification, dust storms, land degradation and drought. Most importantly, we have a whole new goal among the SDGs which is dedicated to these issues: Goal 15 on terrestrial ecosystems specifically addresses halting and reversing land degradation.

This is an important achievement, in which I am proud to say that Iceland played a part. Two years ago, Iceland and Namibia established the Group of Friends on Desertification, Land Degradation and Drought. Together with 20 other countries, among them also Kyrgyzstan, that are as diverse as they are united on this front, we have consistently had our voices heard in these negotiations.

Another key development is that the importance of financing land restoration is made clear in the Addis Ababa Action Agenda on Financing for Development that was adopted in July. At that juncture, the Group of Friends hosted an eye-opening side-event on land-degradation neutrality. Two of the panellists there represented the UNU-LRT: The Director of the Programme, Dr. Hafdís Hanna and Mr. Mulugeta Sebhatleab Tesfay, Lecturer at Mekelle University, former fellow of the UNU LRT. The Icelandic delegation was proud to hear the clear vision put forward by the Director, and to see the results of the program and how it benefits people on the ground through Mr. Tesfay's presentation.

The UNU-LRT has truly been an inspiration for us Icelandic diplomats in this process. And so it has been for others. I know that the Executive Director of the UNCCD, Ms. Monique Barbut, who we were happy to receive last year, and met with fellows of last year's programme, was very impressed!

The thing is that the issue of land degradation is a common, global issue and that we can learn from each other on how to tackle it, even if our ecosystems are

different. I hope that Icelandic officials will be lucky enough to get to meet some of the UNU-LRT fellows at future meetings, such as in the UNCCD.

Furthermore, in our efforts to combat climate change we have emphasised the importance of including land use, land use change and forestry in our intended nationally determined contributions before COP21 in Paris this year.

Dear friends,

To conclude, allow me to congratulate you fellows once again on your graduation and with your final research projects. I wish you all the best of luck in continuing to fight land degradation in your home countries. Your work is an important part of the global battle.

Thank you.