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OUTCOME OF PROCEEDINGS

From:	General Secretariat of the Council
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To:	Delegations

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Subject:	European Court of Auditors' Special Report No 33/2018 entitled "Combating desertification in the EU: a growing threat in need of more action" - Council conclusions (16 May 2019)
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Delegations will find in the annex the Council conclusions on the European Court of Auditors' Special Report No 33/2018 entitled "Combating desertification in the EU: a growing threat in need of more action", as adopted by the Council at its 3690th meeting held on 16 May 2019.

**Council conclusions on the European Court of Auditors' Special Report No 33/2018 entitled
"Combating desertification in the EU: a growing threat in need of more action"**

THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION:

1. WELCOMES the Special Report No. 33/2018 entitled "Combating desertification in the EU: a growing threat in need of more action" from the European Court of Auditors;
2. ENDORSES the Conclusions and Recommendations of the Special Report;
3. HIGHLIGHTS the importance of a close collaboration between the Commission and Member States to address the growing threat of desertification, land degradation and drought in the EU;
4. ACKNOWLEDGES
 - (i) the vital role of a sustainable management of land based resources in order to address the growing threat of desertification, land degradation and drought;
 - (ii) the increasing need for coherence and synergies within the EU legal framework, especially between the Common Agricultural Policy, the Thematic Strategy for Soil Protection, the EU Strategy on Adaptation to Climate Change, the EU Forest Strategy and the EU Biodiversity Strategy;
 - (iii) the need to speed up actions at EU and MS level and actively engage to preserve soil protection;
 - (iv) the need to increase the quality of soils and to stop the land and soil degradation process, in line with the commitments of the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development, in particular Target 15.3. related to the voluntary achievement of the Land Degradation Neutrality¹;

¹ Adopted as a core concept of the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), Strategic Framework 2018 – 2030.

5. BEING AWARE OF

- (i) the results of recent international reports on climate change trends, such as the last IPCC² Assessment Report that shows increasing rate of aridity data, especially in South and South-Eastern European States and the quantity and quality of extreme events (including events relating to drought);
- (ii) the findings of the IPBES³ and Degradation and Restoration Assessment;
- (iii) latest climate change projections, based on international studies, showing an increase of drought and changes in rainfall patterns, which are triggering desertification processes;
- (iv) international studies showing an estimated progress of desertification of 10%⁴ in the last decade for South and South-Eastern Europe⁵ and a constant advance northwards⁶;

6. ACKNOWLEDGES

- (i) the growing convergence of international studies and analyses on healthy soil as a crucial factor in mitigating the effects of desertification, given that soil is the largest carbon pool and the ground base of all ecosystems and crop fields and has a significant water holding capacity, as well as its role in improving societal resilience to environmental changes;
- (ii) the risks associated with desertification on the quality of life and on the income of rural population;
- (iii) and the importance of soil organic carbon for both mitigation and adaption to climate change as well as the potential negative effects through desertification in reducing the stocks of soil organic carbon;

² Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change Special Report Global Warming of 1.5 °C, <https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/>

³ Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services.

⁴ Data estimated based on the information included in the European Court Auditors' Special Report No 33/2018, para 5, p.11; EEA study on desertification in southern, central and eastern Europe, 2008; Prăvălie, R., Patriche, C., Bandoca, G., "Quantification of land degradation sensitivity areas in Southern and Central Southeastern Europe. New results based on improving DISMED methodology with new climate data", Catena – An Interdisciplinary Journal of Soil Science –Hydrology – Geomorphology focusing on Geoecology and Landscape Evolution, No 158, 2017; pp. 309-320.

⁵ European Court Auditors' Special Report No 33/2018, para 72, p.43

⁶ European Court Auditors' Special Report No 33/2018, para 8, p.13

7. INVITES the Commission accordingly to further investigate the strong correlation/ linkage existing between desertification, land degradation and effects of drought phenomena with climate change mitigation and adaptation, as well as biodiversity measures, as highlighted in the outcomes of the audit report;
8. EMPHASISES the need to reinforce synergies between UNCCD⁷, UNFCCC⁸ and CBD⁹ to address land and soil degradation;
9. ENCOURAGES the Commission to consider, in cooperation with the Member States
 - (i) the need to support a complete assessment of desertification and land degradation phenomena at EU level;
 - (ii) the available options and the status of commitments at the EU level regarding the land degradation neutrality target, including the necessity to foster the adoption of a shared methodological framework, based on harmonised and reliable definitions for addressing SDGs requirements¹⁰ related to desertification and land degradation;
 - (iii) the need to develop methods and indicators in accordance with the most innovative studies and technologies, including Earth Observation techniques and satellite imagery, in order to improve the measurements of progress in achieving SDGs with an efficient and concrete feed-back from all funded project;
10. UNDERLINES the importance of monitoring systems, their complexity (in-situ and remote sensing methods, especially the satellite imagery), their harmonisation, first of all on regional level in order to achieve the SDGs including land degradation neutrality;

⁷ United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification.

⁸ United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.

⁹ Convention on Biological Diversity.

¹⁰ In particular, the MS will be fully involved in the project launched by the Commission on the implementation of soil and land related Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the EU.

11. SUPPORTS the Commission for undertaking a full assessment of desertification and land degradation in the EU in collaboration with Member States building on the World Atlas of Desertification¹¹ and the outcomes of EU research projects, taking account of available information at EU and Member States level, including from Earth Observation data;
12. INVITES the Commission to conduct such full assessment in building on existing data to the extent possible, taking into consideration the methodology developed for UNCCD reporting;
13. RECOMMENDS that the results of the dedicated study should be shared in a more interactive and user friendly way and to utilise the work of the Expert Group on Soil Protection for discussion on methodology development and possible target setting for LDN;
14. EMPHASISES the importance of the work of the Expert Group on Soil Protection and the horizontal impacts (e.g. climate change, biodiversity loss, migration etc.) on desertification land degradation and drought;
15. ACKNOWLEDGES the need of a baseline for defining the status of desertification in the EU, by taking into account the economic, social and environmental effects;
16. HIGHLIGHTS the need to have an integrated understanding regarding the risks associated to land degradation, desertification and drought phenomena and their social and economic impacts in order to develop efficiently a more coherent policy in the EU for supporting policy makers at EU and Member State levels;
17. CALLS for a further reflection on a funding scheme designed to assist Member States in implementing the UNCCD with special regard to the LDN target setting process and related measures needed to reach such target;

¹¹ European Commission, Joint Research Centre,
<https://wad.jrc.ec.europa.eu/aridityprojections>

18. INVITES the Commission to

- (i) Further reflect on a funding scheme to map the degraded land through dedicated soil inventories, based on the common policy approach;
 - (ii) actively engage in order to preserve and to increase the quality of soils and to stop the soil degradation process;
 - (iii) take arrangements in order to introduce the eligibility of desertification, land degradation and drought project in existing funding mechanisms in EU;
 - (iv) study new ways of financing the implementation of direct actions against desertification.
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