

Battle of the Desert (and III): UNCCD 's Louise Baker on The Silk Road

Posted by Joan Russow

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By Baher Kamal



Louise Baker

BONN / ROME, Nov 23 2016 (IPS) - Marking this year's World Day to Combat Desertification last June, the United Nations announced the launch of a China-United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) Belt and Road Joint Action initiative to curb Desertification along the Silk Road.

UNCCD is the key United Nations legal framework to combat desertification. IPS interviews Louise Baker, Coordinator External Relations, Policy and Advocacy Unit, UNCCD about the current effects of drought in the countries, which are expected to benefit from this initiative?

Drought is a complex natural hazard that causes more deaths and displaces more people than any other natural disaster. Its socio-economic and environmental impacts are severe and far-reaching, Baker states.

"Desertification and land degradation cause poverty and hunger. In turn, these can lead to

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massive environmental damage and natural resource scarcity that sometimes ends with conflict. It certainly hinders sustainable development."

She then explains that there are 24 types of ecosystem services in the world. 15 are in decline. Desertification and land degradation are major stress factors. Many countries along the Belt and Road are highly vulnerable to both drought and desertification, and are facing social, economic and political stresses.

Asked for specific examples, Baker cites the case of Uzbekistan: 73.6 per cent of the population live in areas affected by drought.

Droughts have reduced the country's water flow by 35-40 per cent below the average "crop yield losses range from 42 to 75 per cent" wetland ecosystems are degraded and up to 80 per cent of the lakes are drying out.

The risk of ground water salinization is growing, says Baker, and adds: Iran often suffers from severe drought and has problems with sand and dust storms. A 1991 drought cost Iran 1.25 billion dollars, and a 2001 drought cost 7.5 billion dollars.

Climate Change

"Droughts will become more frequent, severe and widespread as a result of climate change," she explains. The Belt and Road Joint Action Initiative is a way of managing the land better, mitigating the effects of drought and promoting green economic growth. "That should lead to more equitable economic and social development."

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