

## Desert

### Desertification

#### What is desertification

According to the figures reported by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), 25% of the earth's land is threatened by desertification. The lives of over one billion people in over 100 countries are at risk since farming and cattle breeding become less productive.

Desertification does not mean the deserts are still expanding or taking over the neighbouring lands. As defined by the UN Conference on "Environment and Development" held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, desertification is a process of "deterioration of the arable land into dry, medium dry and sub-humid dry areas as a consequence of many factors, including climatic changes and human activities". A common element shared by the areas threatened by desertification is the relentless reduction of the surface layer of the soil and its productive capacity. This is a serious phenomenon since it determines other ecological disasters, such as the loss of biodiversity and the increase of the temperature all over the world.

Areas of degraded land may be found hundred of kilometres from the closest desert. But they can expand and join each other into something that may resemble a desert. The most serious reasons underlying this phenomenon are drought and human activities: intensive farming exhausts the soil; cattle breeding removes the vegetation, which would otherwise.

#### Fighting against desertification

The 1992 Rio conference produced the Agenda 21, an agreement containing a set of measures for the 21st century, locally applicable and aiming at addressing a global issue that could only be solved by combining economic development, the protection of the environment and social growth.

On December 26th 1996, a UN Agreement came into effect, proposing a partnership-based approach to be implemented through initiatives involving international co-operation; the common purpose is to improve the productivity of the farmland, to reclaim and preserve it and to manage water and soil in a sustainable manner. The measures taken tend to give priority to those projects that have been expressly developed for specific areas, by emphasising the involvement of the local communities, the restoration of precious traditional customs and the reappraisal of the role played by the rural communities to prevent the deterioration of the land. In addition, while in the past more emphasis was laid on technical solutions, now problems are addressed as global issues, in view of the relentless population increase and a number of political and socio-economic factors.

A number of UN organisations are addressing the desertification issue world-wide, such as the FAO (Food and Agriculture Organisation), the IFAD (International Fund for Agricultural Development), the UN Development Program (UNDP), the World Meteorological Organisation, the UNEP (United Nations Environment Programme) and the UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation).