**9th session of the Conference of Environment Ministers in the Islamic world**

Theme “Towards Green Transformation in the Islamic World”

Opening Statement: Executive Secretary of the UNCCD

As we gather today in the beautiful city of Jeddah, I wish to express our profound appreciation to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia for graciously hosting this gathering today.

My appreciation extends to ICESCO, the linchpin behind our convening today.

Now more than ever before, as we witness the catastrophic effects of environmental changes, redefining our relationships with nature is of critical importance.

Allow me to bring to your attention the Centrality of sustainable land management to green transformation*.*

Land is not merely the terrain beneath our feet. Land has always been the cradle of our civilizations.

Land provides us with the essential food we eat.

Land clothes us;

Land provides us with the water we drink and the clean air we breathe.

It nurtures our ecosystems, supports our economies, and sustains our cultures.

The health of our lands is therefore the cornerstone upon food security, and livelihoods are built.

Consider this: any land degradation anywhere in the world, is a depreciation of our global economy and an erosion of human wellbeing.

Any efforts to « green the economy » are therefore doomed to fail, unless we prioritize investments in this crucial natural capital.

We know this well: nature provides 30% of the solutions to climate change. Sadly, nature-based solutions only receive 3% of the climate funding.

This should change, and this group of countries has to power to bring positive change. Arguably, countries of the Islamic World have more power to bring positive change to the Planet than any other similar group.

The Islamic World, perhaps more than other groups, needs to control its narrative on climate and environmental change.

Unleashing that power can be truly transformative and bring positive change to the world.

Coming back specifically to land loss, the challenge is huge. According to the UNCCD’s Global Land Outlook report, up to 40 % of the global land has been degraded. If the current trend continues, by 2050, we will further degrade an area the size of South America.

The good news is the solution is literally in our hands: it’s called Land Restoration.

By restoring degraded land, we improve food security and, even more importantly, food sovereignty.

Whether in Arid Lands, in grasslands or in more humid ecosystems, we have one billion hectares of land that can be put back to health by 2030.

Healing one billion hectares of ailing land and putting it back to the global economy is a smart and wise investment.

One good example of such powerful change is the critical role played by Saudi Arabia during its G20 Presidency, when it led G20 Leaders to adopt the Global Land Restoration Initiative.

The ambitious G20 Global Land Initiative, housed within the UNCCD, has set an audacious goal: halve land degradation by 2040. This initiative is global in scope and is committed to working with all countries, including those of the Islamic World and with the ICESCO.

We are also very pleased with the Middle East Green Initiative, which has received substantive financial support from Saudi Arabia and aims at restoring 200 million hectares of degraded land.

We are confident that building on Islamic Civilization and its great principles of solidarity, more countries will support large-scale land restoration as well Drought Mitigation in the world.

Indeed, islamic civilizations were visionaries in fields like sustainable agriculture, water conservation, and harmonious land practices. It's a heritage—a treasure of knowledge- that can be drawn upon.

Yet, as we honor our past, we must confront silent killers that are chocking our economies: land degradation and droughts.

As we build our futures, we must ensure that our progress is in harmony with nature.

To achieve this, we need to combine ancestral wisdom with contemporary innovation. Weaving together Islamic principles of stewardship and reverence for nature with cutting-edge land management techniques, we can chart a course towards a green transformation.

Allow me, before I conclude, to say a word about the Road to UNCCD COP16.

Saudi Arabia’s role as the host of the upcoming UNCCD COP 16 is a testament of commitments to addressing these global challenges. Climate COP 27 in Sharm Es-Sheikh and COP28 in Dubai, while Morocco just hosted the WB/IMF annual assemblies …there is no mistake. There is a clear indication of Islamic Countries strong commitment to multilateralism.

UNCCD COP16 in December 2024, in Riyadh, presents a unique platform for countries of this group to demonstrate their leadership in combating desertification, land degradation, and drought.

We can make the next UNCCD 16th COP the moon-shoot moment for land restoration and drought resilience, for people, for the planet and for prosperity.

Shukran!