

Joining up to stop desertification

The field-level implementation of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification could be within reach

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Receding? Dry forests, such as this in northern Myanmar, sustain millions of people but are threatened by excessive extractive pressure. *Photo: H. O. Ma*

“IF YOU want to lean on a tree, first make sure it can hold you.”

—African proverb

Desertification is the degradation of land in arid, semi-arid and dry sub-humid areas resulting from various factors, including climatic variations and human activities. Dryland ecosystems, which cover more than one-third of the world's land area, are highly vulnerable to over-use and also to relatively minor climatic changes.

Desertification is at the root of many political and socioeconomic problems and poses a threat to the ecosystem stability of affected regions. The land's loss of productivity exacerbates poverty and can stimulate the large-scale movement of peoples. In the next 20 years, for example, some 60 million people are expected to move from the degraded areas of sub-Saharan Africa towards northern Africa and Europe. In fact, 135 million people—equivalent to the population of Germany and France combined—are at risk of being displaced as a consequence of desertification.

Desertification also has serious natural consequences. It can make land areas more flood-prone, cause soil salinisation and lead to the deterioration of water quality. Unsustainable irrigation practices can dry the rivers that feed large lakes; the Aral Sea and Lake Chad, for example, have both seen their shorelines shrink dramatically in recent years. Land degradation is also a leading source of land-based pollution in the oceans.

What is the Convention to Combat Desertification?

The issue of desertification was first discussed at the global level at the United Nations Conference on Desertification held in Nairobi, Kenya in 1977, but attempts to tackle the problem at this level were hindered by a lack of both administrative and financial support. In 1992, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) recommended the negotiation of a Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), which was subsequently adopted in Paris on 17 June 1994. The treaty entered into force in December 1996 and has since been ratified by more than 190 countries, making it truly global in reach. It is the first and only internationally legally binding framework set up to address the problem of desertification. It is based on the principles of participation, partnership and decentralisation—the backbone of good governance. Its primary objective is to:

combat desertification and mitigate the effects of drought in countries experiencing serious drought and/or desertification, particularly in Africa, through effective action at all levels, supported by international cooperation and partnership arrangements ... with a view to contributing to the achievement of sustainable development in affected areas.

National action programs

Countries affected by desertification are implementing the Convention by developing and carrying out national, sub-regional and regional action programs. National action programs (NAPs) are at the heart of the Convention and constitute the conceptual and legal framework for implementing it at the national and local levels. Their purpose is to identify the factors contributing to desertification and the practical measures necessary to combat it and to mitigate the effects of drought. Under the Convention, affected countries should elaborate and implement their NAPs with the full participation of local communities and all interested stakeholders and fully integrate them with other development programs.

Criteria for preparing NAPs are detailed in the treaty's five regional implementation annexes: Africa (considered a priority because that is where desertification is most severe); Asia; Latin America and the Caribbean; the northern Mediterranean; and Central and Eastern Europe. Drawing on past lessons, the Convention states that these action programs should adopt a democratic, bottom-up approach. They should emphasise popular participation and the creation of an enabling environment designed to allow local people to help themselves to reverse land degradation.

Governments remain responsible for creating such an enabling environment. They can do this by, for example, decentralising authority, improving land-tenure systems, and empowering women, farmers and pastoralists. They should also permit and encourage non-government organisations to play a strong role in preparing and implementing the NAPs. In contrast to many past efforts, NAPs should be fully integrated into other national policies for sustainable development. They should be flexible and modified as circumstances change.

Tropical dry-zone forests

Dry-zone forests are the most fragile of all forest types and provide sustenance to millions of people in developing countries. Due to excessive pressure on extraction, the rate of forest degradation and deforestation in dry forests is alarmingly high, requiring urgent global action.

The dry tropical forests pose management challenges very different from those of the moist tropics. For example, most native tree species in such forests are slow-growing and drought-resistant, and fire can be a major hazard. Where rainfall is scarce but reliable, sustainable forest management and restoration projects are technically feasible; the drier the area or the more erratic the rainfall, the poorer the record of replacement-planting tends to be. In both theory and practice, the emphasis in drier areas is shifting towards regeneration management in existing forests and the afforestation with indigenous and endemic species of degraded or even completely barren areas. The ITTO

Guidelines for the restoration, management and rehabilitation of degraded and secondary tropical forests provide a powerful framework under which to carry out this kind of forest restoration under the UNCCD NAPs.

Forest-based sustainable livelihoods

Poverty can force people to over-exploit the land for food, energy, housing and as a source of income; desertification is thus both a cause and consequence of poverty. Any effective strategy for sustainable livelihoods must address poverty at its very centre.

A significant problem in implementing forest management schemes in many dry-zone forests is the intensity of existing land-use. Even in badly degraded areas, people rely on what is left of the forests for browse and fuel. Closing off areas for regeneration, even though this will produce long-term gains, can impose intolerable short-term burdens on people. Where lands are under common ownership, there may also be difficulties in finding satisfactory ways of sharing the various benefits and costs.

Marking the implementation phase

The 6th Conference of the Parties (COP-6) to the UNCCD, which was held in Havana, Cuba, in September 2003, marked the transition from awareness-raising to implementation. Agreement on the role of the Global Environmental Facility (GEF) as a financial mechanism for the implementation of the Convention was clearly a highlight: the GEF will make available US\$500 million to land degradation and desertification programs over three years. Although this amount is much less than is available for the GEF's other four focal areas (climate change, biodiversity, international waters and ozone depletion), it will nonetheless make a considerable difference to the capacity of developing-country parties to implement the UNCCD.

In another decision taken at COP 6, the Conference of Parties requested the UNCCD Executive Secretary to collaborate with other UN conventions and the United Nations Forum on Forests to strengthen the capacity of low-forest-cover countries to combat desertification, land degradation and deforestation. In this regard, the adoption of Decision 12/COP6 provides an expanded framework of opportunities for strengthened cooperation between ITTO and UNCCD. The objective of strengthening the relationship by promoting synergistic approaches between the two organisations can be achieved by expanding the scope of ITTO's current project work in the restoration, management and rehabilitation of degraded and secondary tropical forests to include forests in the semi-arid dry zones of the tropical member countries of both ITTO and the UNCCD. Such projects could focus on disaster prevention, drought mitigation in low-forest-cover countries, and poverty alleviation through the rehabilitation of degraded dry forests in selected countries with the participation of the communities living in and around the forests.

Desertification can only be reversed through profound changes in local and international behaviour—in land-use, trade, greenhouse-gas emissions and participatory processes, to name a few. Step by step, these changes must lead ultimately to sustainable land-use and food security for a growing world population. Efforts to combat desertification, then, can benefit from and be part of a wider sustainable development agenda in affected countries.