

# THE UNITED NATIONS CONVENTION TO COMBAT DESERTIFICATION: POLICIES AND PROGRAMS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

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## Summary

This paper gives an overview on the implementation of the United Nations Convention on Combating Desertification (UNCCD). The UNCCD is a direct result of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED). Due to its proximity and relevance to the sustainable development agenda, the Convention is rather a sustainable development than an environmental agreement. While other Rio conventions address land degradation as threat to the global common of their focus, the UNCCD sees land degradation as a threat to the natural resources, the very base of sustainable livelihoods.

Although more than 190 countries have ratified the UNCCD, the implementation is still at an initial stage. It is commonly understood that sustainable land management is the best strategy to combat desertification in affected areas. During UNCCD-related

meetings of the signing parties, barriers to sustainable land management have been identified. These barriers relate to the enabling environment, the institutional capacity and technical constraints such as the access to appropriate technologies.

The international donor community has pledged significant funding for the implementation of the UNCCD through regular overseas development assistance. The Global Mechanism of the UNCCD, an institution responsible for the mobilization of funding for the implementation of national action plans, has had only a very limited impact so far. A new momentum for the implementation process of the UNCCD was identified with the designation of the Global Environment Facility (GEF) as a financial mechanism of the Convention. The GEF provides catalytic funding on an incremental cost basis for initiatives supporting sustainable land management. Effective partnerships play a crucial role for success.

This article describes three case studies from Cuba, Kenya and China to demonstrate various approaches taken by countries in support of the implementation of the UNCCD. While Cuba and China have chosen a programmatic approach, the Kenyan Government has put emphasize on the mainstreaming of sustainable land management in the agricultural sector. Kenya has recently engaged in a large investment project with the World Bank that will reform the entire agricultural sector based on the principles of sustainable land management.

### **1. The United Nations Convention on Combating Desertification: An International Policy Framework for Sustainable Land Management**

The United Nations Conventions to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) is a direct result of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), also called "Earth Summit", held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in 1992. It is seen as a major achievement by and a commitment of the international community to address land degradation as a global problem that hampers sustainable development especially in arid, semiarid and sub-humid rural areas worldwide.

Land degradation affects the productivity and structure as well as functional integrity of about 2 billion ha or 23% of the land under human use. Agricultural lands in arid, semiarid and sub-humid zones have been most severely affected. The causes for this alarming situation are twofold, however difficult to strictly separate. Human agricultural activities have lead to an overuse and in some cases even to the irreversible destruction of land resources, the very basis for agricultural production and the provision of ecosystem goods and services. At the same time, climate variations, short-term (extreme climatic events) and long-term (variability in temperature and rainfall), have led to the aggravation or the unexpected initiation of degradation processes that are often beyond human's capability to adaptation. Therefore, the UNCCD points out that desertification is caused by complex interactions among physical, biological, political, social, cultural and economic factors.

The impact of land degradation reaches from socio-economic and political crisis to the destruction of invaluable ecosystem functions leading to an imminent and constant threat of peoples' livelihoods and of the sustainable existence of global common goods

such as biodiversity and a stable climate, including clean air.

With the adoption of the UNCDD on June 17<sup>th</sup>, 1994, a global and legally binding coalition between developed and developing countries was created that includes concrete national commitments for practical action, particularly at the local level where desertification has to be primarily fought.

In 1992, a historic set of agreements was signed at the Rio Summit, including two binding agreements, the Framework Convention on Climate Change, which targets industrial and other emissions of greenhouse gases (GHG) such as carbon dioxide, and the Convention on Biological Diversity, the first global agreement on the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity. While these international treaties have been initiated primarily by the developed countries, the UNCCD has its origins in the developing world.

It is remarkable that mainly the African countries, highly dependant on rural productivity, called for the establishment of the UNCCD because their land resources have been under great stress, posing a significant threat to peoples' livelihoods (e.g. agricultural productivity), and the functional integrity of ecosystems (e.g. clean water, habitat functions). During the UN Conference on Desertification in Nairobi, Kenya in 1977, land degradation was for the very first time, put on the international agenda as a worldwide economic, social and environmental problem. Since then, and culminating in the adoption of the UNCCD, the issue of sustainable land management as major strategy for combating desertification, enjoys great ownership especially with the developing countries.

The UN Convention for the Conservation of Biodiversity (UNCBD) was adopted in 1992 and focuses on biodiversity as a global common good. The Convention establishes three main goals: the conservation of biological diversity, the sustainable use of its components, and the fair and equitable sharing of the benefits from the use of genetic resources. Regional and national initiatives promoting these objectives address the loss or threat to biodiversity of global importance by promoting e.g. the establishment or strengthening of various types of protected areas and systems or the conservation of species or germ plasma to ensure the future use of plant and animal species native to specific habitats and ecosystems.

The CBD also makes the link to land degradation, however initiatives under this Convention see land degradation solely as a threat to the global common. Only recently, it has started to establish a stronger link to people's livelihoods by also putting emphasis on the production landscape by mainstreaming biodiversity concerns into the production sectors (e.g. agriculture, forestry, tourism, mining). By now, it is common knowledge that no global environmental benefit can be sustained without creating sufficient local benefits that address people's immediate needs for sustainable livelihoods.

The UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) was adopted in 1992; and entered into force in 1994. The ultimate objective of this Convention is the stabilization of GHG concentrations in the atmosphere that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system. It is stated in the Convention text

that “such a level would be achieved within a time-frame sufficient to allow ecosystems to adapt naturally to climate change, to ensure that food production is not threatened and to enable economic development to proceed in a sustainable manner”.

Activities financed by the Global Environment Facility (GEF), the financial mechanism of the UNFCCC, have until recently concentrated on the mitigation of greenhouse gas emissions by supporting technology-based initiatives such as the introduction of technologies based on the use of renewable energy, market transformation for high-volume commercial low GHG products or processes, access to financial markets or the removal of barriers in the policy framework.

The international community, however, seems also to be determined to address the issue of adaptation to climate change by mainstreaming climate change issues into sustainable development policies and planning frameworks. The GEF recently announced the provision of finances for pilot initiatives for adaptation to climate change. Adaptation to climate change is seen as one of the cross-cutting themes that affect the action frameworks under the UNCBD, UNFCCC and the UNCCD.

All three conventions have a high potential for synergies and can individually make the other conventions more effective. The UNCCD demonstrates synergies with the other two conventions, since land degradation is often cause for the loss of biodiversity and is aggravated by climate change. The follow up on synergies between the conventions has gained momentum and will play an even more important role in the future. All three conventions have developed, or are in the process of developing, a joint work program with the objective to identify synergetic program areas and propose an action plan on how to implement these synergies on the ground.

Ten years after the UNCED, the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg, South Africa in September 2002, reaffirmed land degradation as one of the major global environment and development challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, calling for action to “...address causes of desertification and land degradation in order to restore land, and to address poverty resulting from land degradation.” Addressing land degradation would, therefore, contribute significantly to the Millennium

Development Goals of reducing by half the proportion of people in poverty by 2015 and ensuring environmental sustainability. In this context, it is remarkable that while the Rio Summit focused on development and environment as interlinked, however two separate issues, 10 years later, the WSSD found it more appropriate to talk about sustainable development, indicating that environment and development are dialectically dependant.

It can be said that the existence of the UNCCD is an indicator that addressing land degradation only as a threat to the global common goods is not sufficient to combat the phenomenon of desertification. Land degradation has to be addressed as a global problem. Hence, combating desertification is a goal in itself, leading to sustainable livelihoods and ecosystem integrity. Therefore, the UNCCD directly supports the sustainable development agenda as discussed during the WSSD, and deserves the title of a sustainable development rather than an environmental convention.

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### **Biographical Sketch**

**Andrea Kutter** works as Natural Resources Management Specialist in the Global Environment Facility (GEF) in Washington, DC, U.S.A. As member of the Land and Water Team, Ms Kutter is involved in the implementation of the strategic guidance of the recently introduced new focal area of the GEF: “Land Degradation (Desertification and Deforestation)”. She had her first professional experience at the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) in the field of integrated land resources management and was integrated in a group which was the task manager for Chapter 10 of the AGENDA 21. Ms. Kutter worked for three years in a project in Argentina, where she gained valuable field experience. The project, funded by the German Technical Cooperation Agency (GTZ) had a strong link to the implementation of the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD). She is author and co-author of a variety of publications and articles related to sustainable land resources management.