

Revitalizing the UNCCD

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Summary for Decision Makers

Land degradation is taking place globally and in all ecosystems; this brings severe consequences for our habitat, economy and well-being. This land degradation also drives economic and environmental migration, which will intensify in the near-future. Accordingly, radical changes are needed in the conceptualization of the UNCCD, re-defining its scope and re-shaping the paradigm.

The present scope of the Convention is not sufficient to meet the global challenges. Ignoring problems beyond the drylands has compromised the Convention's credibility. The ambiguous boundaries of the Convention - sometimes defined as an environmental convention, sometimes as a poverty-reduction convention - has been unhelpful. The environment-and-development issue must, therefore, be resolved within the Convention. A strong macro-economic argument is essential to bring about the necessary radical change in the way that development decisions are made.

An expanded, global mandate for the Convention to encompass land degradation and development would better match today's problems and opportunities. We strongly believe that the Convention should not continue to confine itself to drylands – although drylands deserve continued focus and attention – and expand its scope to sustainable land management and poverty alleviation worldwide. The economic and environmental impacts of land degradation are often felt globally, for example through food and commodity prices as well as environmentally induced migration and conflict. An expanded mandate would correctly capture this broader scope.

Debate on the future of UNCCD and its role within the UN system is critical and should be led by the COP. The Convention is well-placed within the UN framework to set the global agenda on land degradation and desertification. It has a special role as champion of *land* as natural capital – as distinct from the biodiversity and carbon it holds. This is important because land is not inexhaustible, and there are ever-growing competing claims on the land driven by ever-increasing human population, economic development and globalisation. A paradigm shift from *exploiting the land* to *renewing the land* is essential and urgent. To trigger this debate, a broad consultation and dialogue must be led by the Conference of Parties (COP).

To achieve scientific credibility, an independent science-and-policy council or panel should be established that brings together the best biophysical and social scientists, communicators, and decision-makers. To better understand the future impact on economy, society and environment, there is a pressing need for a comprehensive assessment. Therefore, a first task for this panel is to draw up the land degradation equivalent of the Stern Report on Climatic Change.

UNCCD bodies must become more client-oriented and operate on the basis of agreed indicators and targets at the global and regional scale. To overcome its trust deficit, the UNCCD must continue undertaking the wide-ranging changes indicated by the 10-year strategic plan. This plan provides the framework mission, vision and strategic goals for implementation in a powerful and clear-cut manner.

Revitalizing the UNCCD

Radical changes are needed in the thinking about of land degradation, defining its scope and re-shaping the paradigm of the UNCCD. This paper contributes to the UNCCD's re-assessment of its operations; it is prepared independently by a consortium of the willing with extensive experience in the field.¹ In our judgement, the need for the Convention is greater than ever: fifteen years on, the competing claims on the land are greater; climatic change, and unprecedented loss of biodiversity and land degradation on a global scale are no longer intangible threats but today's reality.

1. The Global Context

Land degradation is taking place globally and in all ecosystems; this brings severe consequences for our habitat, economy and well-being. Land degradation is a long-term decline in the productivity and function of the land from which it cannot recover unaided; this means a substantial, persistent loss of ecosystem services. The Convention defines desertification as land degradation in drylands but land degradation is not confined to drylands, it is a global issue. Over the last 25 years, some 25 per cent of the land has been degrading. Every year, more than 13 million hectares of forest (FAO 2005) and 5-6 million hectares of cropland are lost (WRI 1998), and 20 million ha of farmland becomes unfit for crops or buried by urban and infrastructure development (UNEP 2007). Unsustainable land use change is responsible for at least a quarter of the excess carbon dioxide in the atmosphere - through the loss of soil organic carbon; this further reduces the ability to fix atmospheric carbon.

Land degradation is both a cause and consequence of poverty. The rural poor suffer most from land degradation because they depend directly on natural resources and have the least means to cope. Often, they farm degraded land which is less and less able to supply their needs; forced to extract as much as they can, they are both the cause and the victim of land degradation. International trade based on short-term exploitation of resources also acts against the interests of local people. Expert estimates suggest that land degradation costs 3 per cent of the annual GDP in Sub-Saharan Africa, with world-wide losses of some \$65 billion (GEF-GM 2006).

Land degradation is also a consequence of unequal consumption. Globally, 20% of the world's people in the highest-income countries account for 86% of total private consumption expenditures – the poorest 20% a minuscule 1.3% (UNDP, 1998); a pattern the repeats itself in consumption of meat and fish and energy. Drivers for land degradation (especially in forests and rangelands) are closely linked to export of timber and meat products. Corruption surrounding the extraction of natural resources, particularly forest resources, has brought local environmental governance to its knees (Wells and Brown 2004); according to Transparency International, of the 163

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countries they surveyed in 2005, only 12 have significantly improved their overall corruption rating since 2000 (TI, 2005).

Land degradation drives economic and environmental migration, which will intensify in the near-future. People living in degraded and drought-prone areas desert their land to seek other means of livelihood. They migrate to cities or overseas - economic disparities with their homeland allows them to send home remittances, which now more than double the world's overseas development aid (Requier-Desjardins, 2008). Oxford University has often been cited that by 2050, some tens of millions of people are expected to move from the African drylands to Europe and elsewhere. Lambert (2002) estimates the number of people displaced by climate change in China alone at 30 million.

The rate of land degradation and its total economic, social and environmental impact remain poorly evaluated; there is a pressing need for a comprehensive assessment. The complexity of the issue demands an integrated approach to establish credible and effective policies for long-term food and water security, to eradicate poverty, and promote economic development and environmental sustainability. This must involve all stakeholders - government, civil society, development partners and, not least, affected rural communities.

2. The Global and National Policy Disconnects

National and international efforts to tackle land degradation and its associated human issues have been hampered by the lack of a clear policy - or by policies that do not match need, experience and reality.

The present scope of the Convention is not sufficient to meet the global challenges. Its focus on drylands and on both environment and development is unique amongst the Rio Conventions. However, its early emphasis on the problems of Africa made it, in many minds, an 'African convention'; and it leaves ambiguous boundaries between environmental issues and poverty issues. The ambiguous boundaries of the Convention - sometimes defined as an environmental convention, sometimes as a poverty-reduction convention - has been unhelpful. Negotiators from an environmental background find little in common with the poverty-reduction agenda and vice versa. This has led to messy negotiations, a lack of focused targets and, as a consequence, failure to secure adequate resources.

Land degradation is a global issue and the Convention's credibility is compromised by ignoring problems beyond the drylands. When the Convention was drawn up, drylands were thought to be most prone to land degradation. We now know that land degradation is a pressing issue far beyond the designated *affected countries*, even including major food-producing areas in developed countries. It is now difficult to defend a segregation of land into dry-and-degraded and the rest.

Scientific information has not been brought to bear on policy making. The UN Framework Convention on Climatic Change has demonstrated the value of good science in making a political case and stimulating action. UNCCD has not had this benefit and many of its founding assumptions are now challenged: it was believed that

the Sahara was advancing remorselessly whereas satellite measurements and careful field studies show that advance and retreat are cyclical; the classic case is that of the Sahel region in Africa where such patterns have been observed and correlated to rainfall patterns changing over decades. Also, many commonly quoted estimates of soil loss were, quite wrongly, scaled up from rather few point observations.

Biophysical and social sciences must be brought together to support decision making. The causal chain of land degradation is much better understood today, in terms of human influences on natural system and unsustainable land use practices. However, there are still many unknowns in terms of the big picture and what does and does not work at the “meso” scale, e.g., countries, subcontinents and regions. Integrated approaches are required in order to address and synthesize the full spectrum of interactions and complexity of land degradation at different scales. Incentives are needed to encourage greater scientific interactions using much improved methodologies, breaking down disciplinary barriers in academic, governmental and development agencies..

Development assistance and national economic policies have disadvantaged dry lands. The value of drylands and the imperative to supporting their development have not been recognised. Drylands have been considered unproductive and destined to be sinks for humanitarian aid - yet they include the food-exporting North American prairies, South American pampas, Russian and Ukrainian steppe, and Australia. They are home to over 2 billion poor people and, also, burgeoning cities that are already important industrial and commercial centres.

Aid has often been used in a piecemeal and counter-productive manner. Attempts to settle nomadic pastoralists immediately bring about a loss of production, land degradation and social distress; it would make more sense to invest in improvement of the pastoral livelihoods and introduction of more innovative ones. Similarly, laws restricting access to land and water in favour of sedentary farmers ignore the long history of shrewd management of the environment by pastoral peoples.

National Action Plans, drawn up under the Convention, have often been weak and ineffective. Development needs good evidence, scientific support, and open, effective policy making. This should be the focus of the Convention but implementation got off to a bad start with National Action Plans (NAPs) hurriedly prepared during a period of optimism that funds would flow into environment and development with *soft conditionality*. This did not happen. The quality of NAPs was variable - but mostly poor; they seldom tackled real policy issues but presented shopping lists of projects for funding; they were not part of core national development strategies but drawn up by ministries of environment or, occasionally, agriculture. The Convention’s efforts to secure new, additional funding for NAPs created rifts between *affected countries* and donors; intergovernmental negotiating time was wasted in trifling argument while real issues did not come to the table. It is to be hoped that the agreement of a Ten Year Strategic Plan for the Convention and the continued effort by the Global Mechanism in supporting the development of integrated financing strategies and comprehensive investment frameworks will enhance implementation of the Convention at country level.

3. The Big Issues

An expanded, global mandate for the Convention would better match today's problems and opportunities. The Convention's focus has evolved from its early attention to what was perceived as rampant desertification in drylands to the broader issues of land degradation, poverty and development. New attention to the positives of drylands has moved the debate from mechanistic problem solving to a more robust treatment of the challenges and opportunities. We strongly believe that the Convention should not continue to confine itself to drylands, and instead expand its scope to sustainable land management and poverty alleviation worldwide. Figure 1 shows that ongoing land degradation goes far beyond drylands, although they have inherited much of the historical legacy of degradation. The symptoms of land degradation include soil erosion, nutrient depletion, water scarcity, salinity, chemical contamination and surface sealing. Finally, the consequences of land degradation are often felt far beyond the locality, especially in the case of economically and environmentally induced migration and conflict, but also transmitted through food and commodity prices.

Land degradation creates huge costs for the environment, economy and society - costs that are not entered in the national accounts on which decisions are based.

Few economic assessments take account of indirect and off-site effects of soil degradation (CSFD, 2007), possible alternative uses of land, or the depletion of natural capital. Rather, they focus on income foregone as a result of land degradation, so the drive to increase output and GDP (that does not account for depletion of natural capital) does not curb unsustainable land use but stimulates the advance of frontiers into new lands - where the same unsustainable practices are followed.

The UNCCD has a special role as champion of *land* as natural capital – as distinct from the biodiversity and carbon it holds. Proposed priorities that need to be addressed to combat land degradation include land shortage, land-use trade offs, loss of land and water productivity, land restoration, and dryland-specific issues:

Land is not inexhaustible. Ever-growing competing claims on the land driven by ever-increasing human population, economic development and globalisation are driving unprecedented land use change. Arable land per person is shrinking throughout the world, threatening food security, particularly in poor rural areas, and triggering humanitarian and economic crises. Unsustainable land use drives land degradation – which means decreasing productivity. The problem is compounded by fragmentation of land holdings, loss of land to urban development, expansion of cropping into forest and rangeland, and expansion of intensive human activity into the remaining natural habitat. The year 2050 will likely see the loss of 11% of the natural habitat that remained in 2000 (Foley *et al*, 2005).

Global loss of annual NPP 1981-2003, RUE-adjusted

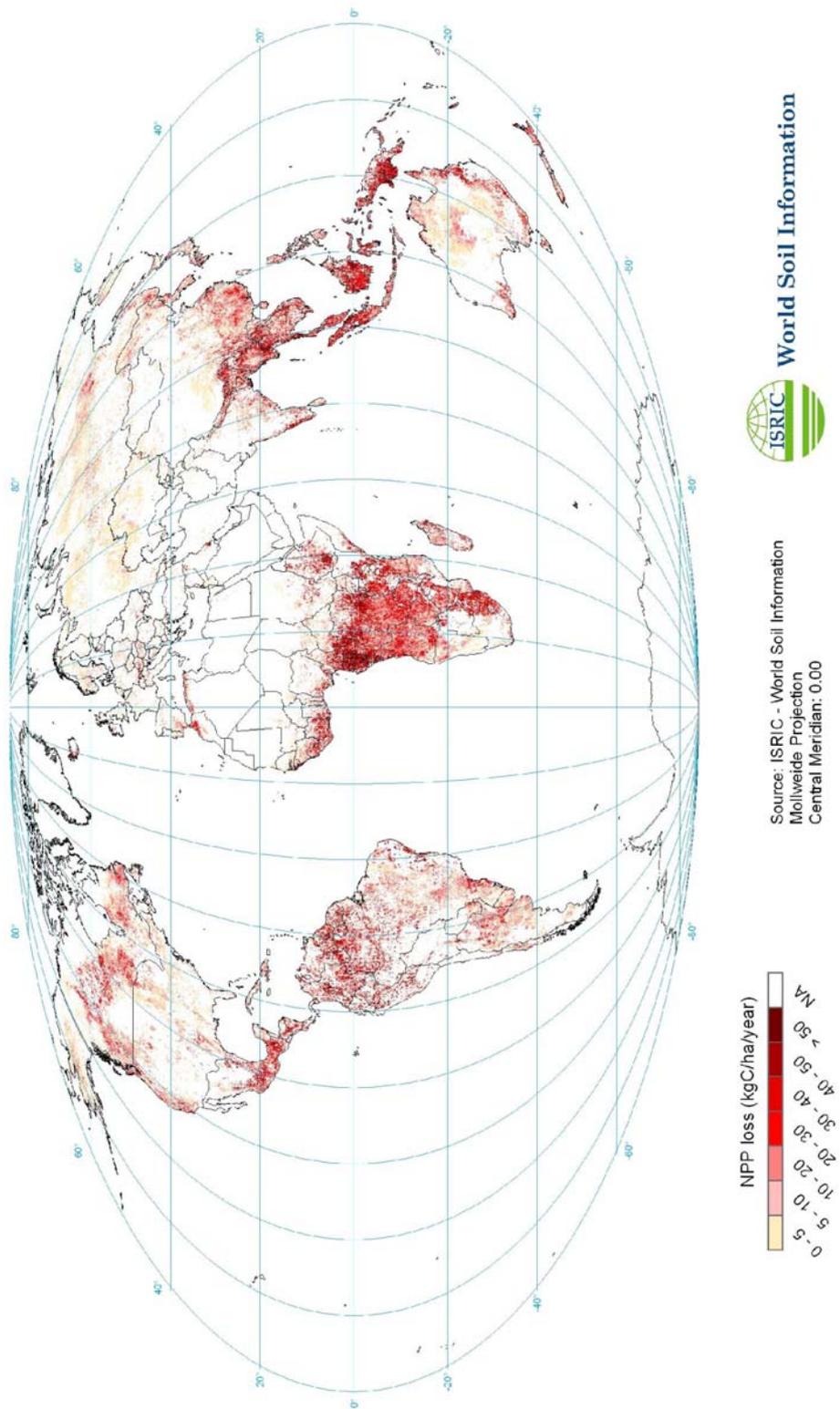


Figure 1.

Established systems of land tenure are no longer coping with land hunger.

In much of the developing world land rights are fragile, with traditional systems operating despite the introduction of “modern” legal systems. Mistakenly, communal land management is often replaced by individual title, to the detriment of resources currently held in common. Transfers of land to individual title have often benefitted elites at the expense of the poor. In the face of unprecedented economic and environmental migration, some countries are considering a moratorium on land sales; others are experimenting with *land credits*. The Conference of Parties should initiate a reliable and comprehensive assessment of land shortage and policy options, including indicators, targets and guidelines to tackle the issue.

Land use changes may not be optimal and need to be monitored. Rates of land use change are not adequately documented. Land-use decisions are always trade offs but presently take account of only a fraction of the total value of land and its natural capital. The Convention should promote two concepts, one old and one new: 1) optimization of land use according to its economic and ecological potential and 2) valuation of all ecosystem services provided. A key example is the unsustainable production of biofuels, responding mainly to the commercial transport sector, which raises the spectre of massive land conversion. Such conversion can have adverse impacts on food security, soil and water quality, rural employment and global climate change.

A paradigm shift from *exploiting the land to renewing the land* is essential and urgent. The Convention should focus on its global aspects, on root causes and drivers of unsustainable land use. We no longer have the luxury of abandoning degraded land; land restoration will become essential and the Convention should promote cost-effective technologies to rehabilitate degraded land; dialogue with the FCCC and Clean Development Mechanism should explore how such practices can be supported by market mechanisms and, given that results are at present problematic, foster a greater involvement by the insurance sector.

There must be a continued policy focus on drylands – first and foremost.

The drylands present particular development challenges that are associated with historical high rates of land degradation. In addition to the above, the Convention is needed to champion urgent, dryland-specific issues, notably: recognition of the value and ecosystem services provided by drylands; arresting the expansion of cropping into rangelands and dry forests which is the single biggest causing loss of these habitats (reference); and policies for better water management and drought management.

4. Policy Response Options

The first response should be to enlarge the scope of UNCCD to encompass land degradation and development globally. A radical change in the appearance of the Convention is most likely to attract substantially greater levels of international support. This doesn't mean abandoning the drylands and their peoples who depend on

low and unpredictable rainfall, lands of low biological productivity requiring mobility and communal access to resources, and who suffer from political as well as geographical isolation. It is no accident that drylands experience very high levels of outward migration, and conflict that has increasingly global implications.

Second, the environment-and-development issue must be brought to the heart of decision making. Poverty drives land degradation and land degradation brings poverty. Between them they restrict the capacity to cope with environmental and economic shocks - and every other human capacity. This is more than an environmental issue; it is an economic issue; it is an equity issue; it is a security issue; it is an issue of survival and should be the immediate concern of the highest level of government and not regulated to environmental ministries. This argument has to be supported by hard evidence, which exists but is yet to be authoritatively marshalled.

Third, scientific credibility requires an independent science-and-policy council or panel that brings together the best biophysical and social scientists, communicators, and decision-makers. Evidence-based decision making requires the support of rigorous, up-to-date natural and social science from a global system standpoint. This has not been provided by the Convention's Committee on Science and Technology, at least in part because it is not politically independent. A new independent body is needed to establish the facts and address uncertainties, and move the basis of policy forward, step-by-step, as uncertainties are cleared away and scientific capacity is built in supporting national and regional institutions. A first task is to draw up the land degradation equivalent of the Stern Report on Climatic Change.

5. Operation and Financing Mechanisms

A strong macro-economic argument is required to bring about the necessary radical change in the way that development decisions are made. Inclusion of natural capital in national accounts and GDP calculations will put a credible price tag on unsustainable management of land resources. For example, it is estimated that the market size for water trading from watershed conservation by 2012 will expand to \$6 billion and the market for habitat conservation and restoration will expand to \$4 billion annually (Forest Trends, 2005). However, arguments for sustainability should not be a ruse for stifling development but to promote investment in the context of national competitive advantage. A coherent set of policies to bring forward new macro- and micro-economic mechanism may include:

First, there must be a rigorous valuation of natural capital and assessment of the cost of unsustainable use of natural resources. This means measuring quantitative and qualitative depreciation as well as indirect and off-site costs, and including all these in national accounts.

Second, facilitate access to commercial finance for sustainable land management initiatives. Developing countries need greater access to credit at all levels – to diversify livelihoods, shift from unsustainable to sustainable production, and expand domestic economic activity but they are trapped by the high cost of capital. Finance through export credits and investment guarantees may be provided against the collateral value of natural capital.

Third, profound change in the manufacturing sector is needed to release pressure on natural resources. Current global consumption and manufacturing over-capacity are not compatible with the carrying capacity of productive ecosystems, particularly in dry lands. Perverse incentives to run down natural capital may be countered by a series of measures including labelling, certification, codes of conduct, and sanctions against unsustainable use.

Fourth, innovative market-based mechanisms including cap-and trade schemes and payment for ecosystem services can generate and transfer significant additional finance for wise use of natural resources.

Finally, development aid should support the creation of an enabling environment. It should facilitate the transfer of *clean and green technologies*, provide a safety net against unavoidable transitional costs, and create a more conducive environment for responsible private investment. To this effect, strengthening the relevant policy, institutional and regulatory frameworks would be of crucial importance

6. Revitalization and Reform of UNCCD

Debate on the future of UNCCD and its role within the UN system is critical and should be led by the COP. The Convention is well-placed within the UN framework to set the global agenda on land degradation and desertification. It should receive this wide recognition, through a broad consultation and dialogue led by the Conference of Parties (COP). This would also mean that the Convention delivers on its promises and develops clear policies based on proven scientific evidence; building credibility and trust are of the essence.

UNCCD bodies must become more client-oriented and operate on the basis of agreed indicators and targets at the global and regional scale. Sound guiding principles for policy development within the UNCCD bodies is a pre-condition. To overcome the trust deficit, the UNCCD must continue undertaking the wide-ranging changes indicated by the 10-year strategic plan (10YSP). The 10YSP provides the framework mission, vision and strategic goals for implementation in a powerful and clear-cut manner.

The complexity of the issues confronting the Convention requires a global, evidence-based approach. Poverty, migration, governance, gender recognition, food and water security in the face of land scarcity, climatic change and loss of biodiversity – all are linked and demand a clear and pragmatic focus. The Secretariat should develop new partnerships with research centres and universities to create and draw upon the science it needs. There is a very strong case for a new and independent, international science-with-policy panel to channel this new scientific input. At the same time, it should foster national scientific and technical capacity to implement programs to combat land degradation and support sustainable development.

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