Implementing the UNCCD: Towards a Recipe for Success

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INTRODUCTION

The underlying motivation behind the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) is to improve the lives of the millions of people who bear the weight of land degradation and desertification. After 7 years of meetings, it is high time that tangible results were demonstrated.

Unfortunately, it seems very likely that the sixth UNCCD Conference of the Parties (COP) to be held in August/September 2003, like the previous ones, will for the most part be focused on issues of process, institutions and budgets. These are all necessary, of course, because they provide the structure for governance and perpetuation of the Convention. But should these be the priority objectives that are pursued? Is the UNCCD really assisting to reverse land degradation?

THE GLASS IS HALF FULL . . .

Some have argued that it may be time to ‘pull the curtain down’ on the UNCCD. While the Convention needs to adjust its course, the benefits it has yielded must be recognized. First, the fact that the international community was able to reach a minimum level of consensus on the definition of a common problem (in this case desertification), and on elements of its solution, is quite admirable. Discussion, in its own right, is good: its value should not be underestimated.

It may have been naive to expect concrete results in such a short time frame, given the complexity of the issues that the UNCCD tries to tackle. The Convention, like many other multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs), is only beginning to take an ‘implementable’ shape, with strong mechanisms, institutions and procedures. Some of the UNCCD’s mechanisms and institutions, such as the Secretariat, the Global Mechanism, or the group of scientific experts, hold great potential to advance the UNCCD’s objectives. The UNCCD can also benefit from mechanisms established under other conventions, such as the clean development mechanism under the Kyoto Protocol or some of the programmes of work under the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), which can help address land degradation. In addition, the recent creation of a focal area for land degradation within the Global Environment Facility (GEF) will likely provide renewed impetus to the fight against desertification.

The increases in official development assistance (ODA) pledged at the Monterrey Conference, along with a strengthened commitment to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), also hold great promise for the fight against land degradation. In order to access these new resources, other MEAs are now faced with the challenge of enhancing their own links to development. The UNCCD, however, is already well positioned in this regard. Perhaps more than any other MEA, the UNCCD promotes action at the intersection of environmental protection, economic development and social development. The UNCCD has promoted targets of civil society.

1 United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification in those Countries experiencing Serious Drought and/or Desertification, particularly in Africa (Paris, 17 June 1994), Preamble.
3 See Kyoto Protocol to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (Kyoto, 11 December 1997), Article 12.
8 See Millennium Declaration (G.A. Res. 55/9, UN GAOR, 2000).
participation,
poverty reduction and food security,
and an integrated approach to rural livelihoods. Indeed, the Convention embodies the principles of sustainable development better than any other and is, in many ways, best suited as a framework for effective poverty-reduction programming.

THE GLASS IS HALF EMPTY . . .

Some will argue, with good reason, that the flows of resources to address desertification and land degradation issues are insufficient in the face of poverty, disease and war. In particular, the flow of ODA responding explicitly to the UNCCD – for National and Sub-regional Action Plans (NAPs and SRAPs), or Thematic Programme Networks, for example – is perceived by many developing countries to be insufficient. Lack of financial resources is the most commonly cited obstacle to implementation and Convention records abound in decisions calling for increased flows of funding. Despite the fact that many donors support a large number of programmes and projects that help combat desertification, these are rarely explicitly developed under the framework of the Convention. This is common among MEAs and partly explains the alarmingly low ODA amounts the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) can report as being targeted to MEAs generally.

MEAs, and particularly the three Rio conventions (UNCCD, CBD and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)) have unfortunately created competing ways of addressing facets of the same problem. Indeed, from an ecosystem perspective, a separation between combating desertification and the conservation of biological diversity, or adaptation to climate change makes little sense: a community or an individual is seldom faced with only one dimension of environmental degradation. Many people recognize this, and yet the international community continues to create more and more convoluted Convention processes and mechanisms, which require distinct planning and monitoring frameworks. For example, it is not rare for a country to be required to develop a National Biodiversity Action Plan, UNCCD NAP, a UNFCCC National Adaptation Plan of Action, a Soil Fertility Action Plan, and a Forestry Plan in order to access financial aid. Although commendable, even the best attempts at synergies are uncoordinated and duplicative: programmes and the actors involved in them are multiplying with no clear direction, and few initiatives generate benefits on the ground due to this confusion.

It is clear that affected developing countries’ expectations have not been met in terms of the implementation of the UNCCD and that the Convention’s potential has yet to be realized. Perhaps expectations have not been realistic. This Convention continues to struggle to mobilize sufficient political capital to transform it from a discussion forum to a credible tool for sustainable development.

A RECIPE . . .

Without on-the-ground investment and without concrete (and continuing) action, global problems will not be resolved. In terms of sustainable development, it is not the ‘intention that counts’, although intent is an essential first step. As evidenced at the first meeting of

9 See UNCCD, Preamble and Articles 3(a), 5(d), 10(2)(f), 17(1)(f), 18(2)(a), 19(1)(a), 19(3)(b), 21(1)(c) and 22(7). See also UNCCD Rules of Procedure (ICCD/COP(1)/11/Add.1, 1997), Rule 7. An illustration of initiatives to increase public participation can be found in, inter alia, Review of the Implementation of the Convention, Pursuant to Article 22, para. 2(a) and (b), and Convention Review of Reports on Implementation by Affected African Country Parties, including on the Participatory Process, and on Experience Gained and Results Achieved in the Preparation and Implementation of Action Programmes (ICCD/CRIC(1)/2/Add.2, 23 October 2002), Article 26. See also UNCCD Decision 18/COP3 (ICCD/COP(3)/20/Add.1, 31 December 1999).


12 See UNCCD, Articles 10(3)(d), 10(4), 18(1)(d) and 19(1)(h).

13 See, for instance, Decision 3/COP5 (ICCD/COP(5)/11/Add.1, 2001); and see Declaration on the Commitments to Enhance the Implementation of the Obligations of the Convention, Decision 8/COP4 (ICCD/COP(4)/11/Add.1. 25 January 2001), Annex.

14 Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, Aid Targeting the Rio Conventions: First Results of the Pilot study (OECD, December 2000).


16 NAPs are requirements under the UNFCCC. See UNFCCC, Decision 28/CP7 (Marrakech, 10 November 2001). NAPs are meant to be plans in which the least developed countries (LDCs) express their urgent and immediate needs for adaptation to climate change, and allow LDCs to access funding through the GEF.


18 This is a translation of commitments (voluntary) to the international agreements. This paper presents the principles. See Report of UNCED, Annex III, Non-Legally Binding Authoritative Statement of Principles for a Global Consensus on the Management, Conservation and Sustainable Development of all Types of Forests (A/CONF.151/26 (Vol. III), 14 August 1992).
the UNCCD’s Committee to Review the Implementation of the Convention (CRIC) held in Rome in November 2002, few affected developing countries have actually taken concrete steps to translate the UNCCD’s provisions and principles into mainstream national policy and practice. As a general rule, very few international sustainable development commitments (whether legally binding or not) are actually internalized into national policy in developed and developing countries. For example, Agenda 21 has not given rise to the expected major changes in approaches to economic development. Local Agenda 21 initiatives and other plans are still considered add-ons to national policies in many places. Consequently, most NAPs are still irrelevant to mainstream policy making and development cooperation, despite the UNCCD’s undeniable links to development.

On the donor side, the picture is no more positive. There is still an enduring distinction between development and sustainable development: environmental issues are seldom front-of-mind on the cooperation agenda. As a result, most aid agencies have yet to find ways to integrate effectively MEAs into their programmes. This could be attributed to a variety of reasons, beginning with competing priorities on the development agenda (education and health priorities or emergencies), or to the fact that it would require a shift in thinking and in the way development agencies do business.

That said, there has been some progress on both fronts. Recent initiatives aimed at integrating environmental considerations into Poverty Reduction Strategies (PRSP), or efforts within the OECD to strengthen the effectiveness of development cooperation are examples of ways in which these challenges can be overcome. Reconciling the principles of country ownership with internationally agreed (and negotiated) priorities, however, remains a challenge, as commitments are translated into practice.

**THE MISSING INGREDIENT**

The missing link – on both sides of the development gap – is political will. Donors have to be willing to translate MEAs into action and to fulfil their commitments. The argument that developing countries must individually bring up the issues that they wish to see addressed to the bilateral negotiating table is valid, but should not be an excuse for inaction on either side. One cannot claim to be ‘responsive to country-driven’ priorities and select where and how these priorities should be expressed. Donors have to recognize that international forums are indeed legitimate places to express priorities for cooperation.

In some developing countries, the responsibility for combating land degradation and the implementation of the Convention is placed under the highest political authority. In these countries, the NAP is a centrepiece of national policy, and issues related to land degradation are recognized in national development plans, PRSPs and other similar processes. In those cases, land degradation issues have greater chances of making it onto the bilateral cooperation agenda. Those cases remain rare, mainly because of a general lack of capacity and resources. However, when it comes to mobilizing donor responses, national priorities translated into domestic investments (however small) are an important signal.

It is not sufficient to say that there is not enough political will, whether on the donor or on the developing country side. Political will is derived directly from a perception and an understanding of the benefits of implementation – and vice versa: lack of will comes from heavy economic costs and a perception of few benefits. The CCD, unfortunately, has had – until now – very little going for it in this regard. On the one hand, while it is clear that national development benefits will accrue from combating land degradation, these are hard to translate in monetary terms. In addition, the people most affected by desertification are often those who suffer most from socio-political exclusion, leading policy makers to ignore the political benefits of implementation. On the other hand, particularly in the way that most NAPs are formulated, the economic costs of implementing these long-term strategies can be enormous.

In this context, most international institutions and organizations are endowed with mechanisms to help share or reduce costs and to maximize the benefits of implementation. The Convention’s own mechanisms, however, have yet to fulfil stakeholders’ expectations, and a lack of coordination among the main actors of the Convention could spoil the prospects of effective cooperation.

**TOO MANY COOKS?**

The Convention envisages a number of more or less formal processes and mechanisms to share the costs of implementation, such as provisions for technology

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20 See, for an example of implementation efforts, S. Bethune, ‘Review of Legislation and Policies Pertinent to Combating Desertification – A Case Study From Namibia’, in this issue of RECIEL.
transfer\textsuperscript{21} and capacity building,\textsuperscript{22} institutions such as the Secretariat and the Global Mechanism (GM),\textsuperscript{23} but also regional cooperation mechanisms\textsuperscript{24} and international partnership processes.\textsuperscript{25} The multiplicity of such mechanisms is a strength of the Convention; however, these mechanisms are not all as effective as they could be. For example, the GM was created as a mechanism to help share the costs of implementation. By identifying needs, it was meant to tap into available sources of funding and technology and help channel them to UNCCD-specific processes.\textsuperscript{26} It has taken the GM a long time to define a realistic methodology for achieving its somewhat ambiguous and ambitious mandate, and, as a result, many would argue that little has been done to support countries in the implementation process.

While the GM has begun to demonstrate success in some cases, it may be too little too late where developing countries are concerned. For example, while it has assisted several countries in brokering partnerships, and is assisting some in mainstreaming desertification into national policies, the number of countries it has assisted is limited, compared to demand.\textsuperscript{27} This could be due to a lack of human and financial resources, which has restricted the GM in the number of initiatives upon which it can embark. The GM’s successes, in addition, are more diffuse than expected – and fall more under the ‘qualitative’ than in the expected ‘quantitative’ category (as initially hoped). Much of this can be attributed to high expectations, but there is room for improvement. With revised objectives, a tightly focused strategy, and given the appropriate means, the GM as a ‘qualitative’ mechanism can still be a useful tool for the Convention and its parties.

Many look to the GEF to fulfil the ‘quantitative’ side of the equation. The creation by the GEF Assembly of a focal area for desertification and land degradation is a positive step towards reaching that goal, but there are also significant challenges. There will be difficulties in reconciling the local development benefits of combating land degradation with the incremental principle. The incremental principle refers to the fact that the GEF only supports the additional cost . . . between the cost of an alternative project that a country would have implemented in the absence of global environmental concerns and a project undertaken with global objectives in mind’.\textsuperscript{28} This means that GEF funding will only be available for activities that generate global environmental benefits. In fact, it is likely that incremental costs will only represent a small portion of total project costs. Consequently, significant resources will have to be mobilized for the non-incremental portion of GEF projects. To date, the UNCCD community has failed to ask itself where this co-financing would originate, particularly since it has not been available from traditional ODA channels. Perhaps an effective GEF–GM coupling could be helpful in addressing these challenges.

Better coordination among the various UNCCD stakeholders is another means of effectively sharing the costs of implementation. Given the scarcity of resources, their optimal use should be promoted. International institutions, whose programmes are related to the Convention, as well as the Secretariat and the GM, should enhance their efforts to avoid duplication and to streamline processes for the benefit of affected developing countries. Rather than provoking competition, the scarcity of resources for UNCCD implementation should incite stakeholders and partners to become more efficient.

**KITCHEN ECONOMIES**

It is more difficult to share or redistribute costs for desertification and land degradation because they are not the same kind of global problems as, for example, climate change and ozone depletion. Global responsibility for land degradation is difficult to establish. The precise nature of the link between climate change and land degradation is still being debated in scientific forums. While climate change can cause increases in droughts, thus making ecosystems more vulnerable, land degradation itself is usually attributable to local human misuse.

More could be done to alleviate the costs of combating land degradation for developing countries, but that might entail questioning the validity of the NAP process as it is currently implemented. In other words, rather than trying to share the costs of implementing the UNCCD in the ‘traditional way’, changes in the manner in which the UNCCD is implemented should be considered to reduce costs. One way to reduce costs is, of course, ‘mainstreaming’ or integrating land degradation considerations in ‘regular’ policies and programmes. Mainstreaming can result in economies of scale by avoiding duplication between ongoing programmes and the NAP, and in achieving multiple benefits through a smaller number of interventions.

\textsuperscript{21} See UNCCD, Preamble and Articles 6(e), 10(2)(e), 12, 16(a)(iii), 19(1)(c), 19(1)(e), 20(2)(e), 20(7), 21(4) and 24.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., Articles 10(4) and 19.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., Articles 23 and 21.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., Articles 3(b), 4(2)(e), 11 and 12.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., Articles 2(1), 3(b), 3(c) and 10(2)(e).
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., Article 21(4)–(7).
\textsuperscript{27} For information on the Global Mechanism’s work, see Review, Pursuant to Article 21, Paragraph 5(d), of the Convention, of the Report on the Activities of the Global Mechanism, and the Provision of Guidance to it (ICCD/COP(8)/4, 11 September 2001).
For example, approaches for combating land degradation should be integrated in agriculture and land-use policies, as well as environment, water, and rural development policies and programmes. In addition to this integration, these policies have to be coordinated and coherent with one another – a challenge that is often at the root of policy failures. But beyond the sectoral policies that present obvious links to combating land degradation, countries can also pursue integration through less exploited avenues, such as economic policies (credit and pricing schemes), or energy, health and education programmes.

The goal of the ‘mainstreaming game’ should be to integrate land-degradation issues in as many policies and programmes as possible. This can result in flows of both indirect domestic and international funding. Indeed, when most donors turn their attention to macro-policy issues, or support sector-wide programmes, integration can open doors for financial support. This is not a new trend or ‘conditionality’, or ‘smoke-screen’, as many could protest. It is not an argument to delay or avoid the provision of resources for land degradation. References to this integration are found throughout the Convention, such as in Article 6(1) of the Regional Implementation Annex for Africa, which provides that NAPs should ‘be a central and integral part of a broader process of formulating national policies for the sustainable development of affected African country parties’.29

Taking the ‘mainstreaming approach’ to its full potential could ultimately mean the absorption of a NAP into a country’s set of policies. From an institutional standpoint, it would mean a thorough revision of the role of the focal point: rather than being the implementation agency, the focal point’s main role would be to coordinate the implementation of land-degradation control through the mandates and programmes of other ministries. This might not be a bad thing, but hard-gained prerogatives and resources can be very difficult to give up in any country. It would also mean changing the way donors do business and respond to priorities, which can be a challenging undertaking indeed.

As noted above, it is difficult to quantify the benefits of combating land degradation. Over the past few years, the UNCCD has emphasized the links between land degradation and poverty reduction.30 Initiatives through the United Nations Development Programme’s (UNDP) Drylands Centre,31 the Food and Agriculture Organization’s (FAO) Land Degradation Assessment in Drylands (LADA)32 and the Global Drylands Partnership33 stress these links and have assisted in the mainstreaming of desertification and land-degradation issues into the development realm. This is beginning to yield results, such as the recognition of the UNCCD as a tool for sustainable development in the context of the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD)34 and the Millennium Declaration.35

The UNCCD contains the substance of the MDGs, not only in terms of food security, nutrition and health, but also in relation to correcting inequalities and achieving environmental sustainability. Arguably, the low level of attention paid to the UNCCD may be due to its association to the field of environmental agreements, which have in the past often been relegated to low political priority. However, increased awareness of its development-centred approach and of its objective to improve ‘living conditions, in particular at the community level’,36 may generate more serious efforts towards the Convention’s implementation and financing. In addition, the negotiations at UNCCD COPs have focused mostly on institutions, processes and mechanisms for north–south cooperation and transfers. This has led to a tendency to consider the Convention as an end in itself. Now, in order to truly reap the development benefits of implementation, it is opportune to shift focus to the substance of the Convention and the bottom-up, integrated rural development schemes it promotes.37

HAVING THE CAKE AND EATING IT TOO...

Overcoming structural and institutional barriers to implementing the UNCCD will be difficult. However, by increasing awareness of the benefits of implementation, from the local to the international level, investments in implementation activities can be attracted.

29 See UNCCD, Annex I, Article 6. Also see UNCCD, Articles 1(b), 2(1), 2(2) and 4(2)(a).

30 See, for instance, Reducing Poverty through Timely and Effective Implementation of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (ICCD/COP(5)/INF.5, 3 October 2001).


35 See Millennium Declaration, n. 8 above, para. 23.

36 UNCCD, Article 2(2).

37 See n. 9 and n. 12 above.
The benefits of combating land degradation in socio-economic terms are critical (particularly in ‘economic’ terms). An effective economic argument for combating land degradation could convince decision makers from community to central government agencies, as well as donors. Attempts at estimating the costs of land degradation have so far not been very successful – largely because of the methodological difficulties in attaching an economic value to environmental goods and services. However, at the local level, a clear link can be made between declines in agricultural productivity resulting from land degradation and declines in income and well being. The opposite also needs to be comprehensively assessed: in order to generate in-country investment, the national economic benefits of combating land degradation have to be demonstrated.

In addition to demonstrating economic benefits, a stronger link between combating land degradation and achieving the MDGs can also provide an effective means of generating renewed donor support for land-degradation issues. Indeed, given their poverty-reduction focus, few donors (bilateral or multilateral) engage in combating land degradation for its own sake. In addition to obtaining indirect support by mainstreaming, attaching the UNCCD to the MDGs and PRSPs – which shape most donors’ programming – can only help move the implementation of the Convention forward.

These efforts are not only in the hands of developing countries, although much of it lies within their responsibility. As stated above, donors could do more to integrate land-degradation issues and responses to the UNCCD into their programmes. Here also it is a question of political will. If costs can be reduced and benefits multiplied, donor support will be easily gained. Therefore, it must be demonstrated that with small, reasonable investments, a development programme can simultaneously address land degradation and help promote socio-economic development, thus multiplying results and benefits of interventions. This demonstration has not yet been made, and most donors have been lacking the tools to mainstream environmental issues into their development programmes. Integrating land degradation into social development programmes would not be understood as a diversion if the links and convergence of goals, along with measurable results, were demonstrated.

**PARADOX**

In concrete terms, success in mainstreaming land-degradation issues into programmes, whether in developed or developing countries, will likely result in a decline in the political visibility of the UNCCD. Success in combating desertification might entail shifting focus from a mechanical, almost legalistic application of the Convention’s provisions to a more comprehensive and integrated realization of the Convention’s objectives. This means that parties have to give up their preoccupation with the structure of the Convention. It also means that Convention institutions will have to give up some of their political power and clout – for the benefit of the implementation of the Convention. Rather than seeing the Convention as the expression of binding obligations, it must be seen and used as a flexible instrument. This is the paradox. On the one hand, the obligations of the Convention are too diffuse to be measurable, but in trying to strengthen their legality, the scope of implementation is limited. In seeking to ensure a minimum level of implementation, the Convention never moves forward. By making the Convention more flexible, trust among parties is created and the UNCCD’s innovative potential can be more fully utilized. If instead of understanding the Convention’s text as absolute requirements, they are interpreted as suggestions or tools, implementation would be facilitated. The Convention abounds in examples of this: National Desertification Funds and Thematic Programme Networks (TPNs) are not fundamental requirements for implementing the Convention. There is no point in pressuring countries to develop NAPs by 2005, or to multiply TPNs and National Desertification Funds if these instruments prove to be dysfunctional or inefficient.

The methodology for the implementation of the Convention can be revised; however, that would require coming to terms with what has and what has not worked in the past. There is not one method or model for combating land degradation. Most country parties have gone through the expensive exercises, sometimes not adapted to their own realities, of organizing national awareness seminars, national consultation workshops, national validation workshops, subregional TPN launch meetings, annual regional meetings, and so on. But the validity of this approach and the end results in terms of mobilizing in-country and outside support and in terms of concrete implementation have not been questioned. The principles of the Convention of participation, the bottom-up approach and partnership must be cultivated. Country parties also have to let go of the unrealistic expectation that the development of a NAP should automatically lead to new funding. It has not happened, and likely will not: NAPs are meant primarily as national policies, as statements of national objectives. But will countries that have spent considerable resources in developing NAPs according to a set model be willing to engage in a rethink of that process?

**FOOD FOR THOUGHT**

Recent UNCCD meetings, including the CRIC, have failed to yield the kind of discussion necessary to achieve concrete progress in combating land degradation and
desertification. Perhaps upcoming meetings could be designed to facilitate a discussion of the fundamental challenges this Convention faces and of the opportunities that are presenting themselves. It would be opportune to devise a strategic road map for translating the Convention into concrete action, one that would go further in its questioning of the implementation model than the Recife Declaration on Commitments, which provided a framework for priority action, but remains within the bounds of common practice in terms of Convention implementation.38

As a first order of business, donors and developing countries must mobilize their own political capital to address land degradation. As noted above, political will is the first required ingredient for success. In order to attain political will (but perhaps sacrificing the political visibility of the Convention itself), parties should invest resources and efforts in mainstreaming land degradation into development planning. Another tool would be to systematically demonstrate the economic benefits of combating land degradation (and the costs of inaction), so that decision makers can be convinced of increasing their investments. Finally, a shift of focus and a renewed conception of the Convention may be necessary if implementation is to move forward. This will entail giving more attention to the pursuit of the Convention’s broad objectives, rather than on the creation of formal mechanisms. In the end, letting go of a narrow application of the Convention may be the key to its success.

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38 See Declaration on the Commitments to Enhance the Implementation of the Obligations of the Convention, n. 13 above.