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Reforming the land degradation policy agenda

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Introduction

This policy brief analyses Dutch Development policy in respect of land degradation against the background of the 8th Convention of Parties (COP-8) of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD). Countering land degradation is, as this paper argues, a precondition to allow key institutional vehicles for poverty alleviation and environmental rehabilitation such as the Millennium Development Goals, the Convention on Biological Diversity and the Kyoto Protocol, to meet their objectives. However, its chief international mechanism – the UNCCD – has been hobbled by tardy and inefficient implementation, opaque financial mechanisms, a narrow focus on desertification and – despite formal commitments – a limited engagement with civil society. Over time, these problems have reduced the commitment of both states and NGO's to the UNCCD process. Many donors and NGO's have turned away from UNCCD, preferring to focus on implementation of *land care* initiatives rather than engage with the complex negotiations and long time horizons of multilateral initiatives. As a result of these problems, a fundamental reform of the land degradation policy agenda is on the cards during the COP-8, held from 3 to 14 September 2007 in Madrid. For all its shortcomings, the UNCCD is a pioneering and indispensable legal framework. For example, the UNCCD is exemplary for its call for the creation of innovative and flexible mechanisms to channel resources to local levels. The challenge for the reform process is to resurrect a global legal foundation for *land care* without standing in the way of initiatives that prioritise action.

The rationale for enhanced efforts to combat land degradation

Land degradation is an issue that cannot be separated from either poverty alleviation or from major environmental problems such as climate change, biodiversity loss or freshwater depletion. In fact, it is integral to both. Furthermore, it cannot be separated from security issues, as conflict over scarce resources is a driver of violence and displacements resulting in migration.

Firstly, commencing with poverty, land degradation is an acute environmental problem that is adversely affecting the livelihoods of the majority of the world's poor. Thus it is estimated that currently some two thirds of the world's undernourished people live in the rural areas of poor countries. Of this group, roughly half live in marginal areas, and their livelihoods are threatened by land degradation¹. It is estimated that the annual economic costs of *desertification*² alone exceed US\$ 42 billion, including both output forgone and damage to natural resources, while the costs of effectively combating desertification is estimated to be in the range of US\$ 10 to 22 billion per year³. And in degraded areas, the food deficit is demonstrably increasing amongst the poor⁴.

¹ European Union (2007): Report on activities undertaken and support provided by the European Community to combat desertification in countries in Asia, Latin America and Caribbean, Central and Eastern Europe in the period from January 2001 – December 2005. Brussels

² Not all land degradation can be classified as *desertification*. Desertification refers only to those specific circumstances in which land degradation takes place in *drylands*. The word 'drylands', in turn, refers to those areas in the world where the average annual rainfall is less than half the amount of water that could potentially be lost through evaporation.

³ Toulmin, C. in Bergesen, H.O. and G. Parmann (eds.). Green Globe Yearbook of International Co-operation on Environment and Development 1994. Oxford: Oxford University Press. pp. 79-88.

⁴ See Kieth Wiebe (2003): Linking Land Quality, Agricultural Productivity, and Food Security. Washington: USDA Agricultural Economic Report no. AER 823. The United States Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service, selecting four different measures of food security, shows an increase in the food gap in 30 countries facing land degradation between 2000 and 2010 on all four measures based on historical consumption and price developments. The food gap (the amount of food needed to raise individual consumption to above 2000 kilocalories per day) among and within countries is expected to increase, i.e. the inequalities in access to food will worsen

In other words, land degradation is now a key driver of economic loss and stagnation, poverty, and insecurity.

Every year, worldwide, some 84 billion tonnes of productive topsoil are lost through degradation, predicted to result in losses ranging from one third (Latin America) to two thirds (Africa) of the total available agricultural land between 1990 and 2025⁵. Land degradation has already affected 1900 million hectares of land globally, of which 500 million are located in Africa, representing some 65% of that continent's agricultural land⁶. For this reason, action to combat land degradation is often connected to or related to activities on the African continent. Over the last 50 years, soil quality has remained relatively constant on some three quarters of the world's arable land, but the remaining quarter – the 1900 million hectares referred to above – is faced with degradation that is increasing in pace⁷. This degradation is taking place all across the globe and on a wide range of different kinds of land – i.e. it is not localised but is symptomatic of a global tendency towards unsustainable land use practices. As such, it constitutes a major threat to world food production.

Some 70% of the world's drylands are affected by degradation to a greater or lesser extent. Degradation is concentrated in areas with degradation prone soils, such as in Sub-Saharan Africa, in areas featuring inadequately managed irrigation, such as in South Asia, in areas featuring rapidly intensifying production without associated sustainable production techniques, and especially where the economy offers those dependent on dryland agriculture no alternative livelihood options⁸.

Desertification and poverty are strongly interrelated. In total, drylands provide a livelihood for some 2.3 billion people worldwide. However, obviously, not all those living in drylands are poor. Definitions vary, but most sources estimate that around 1 billion people living in poverty also live in drylands. In other words (and despite the global trend towards urbanisation), a large proportion of the world's poor is concentrated in dryland areas. Within this group there are large differences from one country to another in terms of the structure of the economy and the ability of economic sectors outside agriculture to provide employment for those seeking alternative livelihoods. Thus for instance India, with 45% of its population living in drylands, has a much larger capacity to absorb the impacts of desertification⁹ than Mali, where 96% of the population is dependent on drylands for a living¹⁰.

Despite these clear links between land degradation and poverty, land degradation remains an issue that is low on the policy agenda. However, in view of the above, it is unlikely that major poverty alleviation initiatives such as the Millennium Development Goals will be achieved without according a strategic role to *land care* initiatives.

Secondly, land degradation is linked to other major environmental issues such as climate change, biodiversity loss and freshwater depletion. Climate change affects drylands in that drylands harbour fragile ecosystems that are less resistant to change than ecosystems in more humid areas. Ecosystems in drylands have a relatively limited capacity to recover from environmental damage induced by, for instance, severe droughts. In the Sahel region, for instance, rainfall levels have fallen by between 20 and 40% in the past decades, inducing changes in vegetation cover and the removal of topsoil through wind action. Conversely, *land care* is central to efforts to stem climate

⁵ Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (2003): Better Living Conditions Through Global Action. The BMZ's goals with regard to the UN Convention to Combat Desertification. Bonn: BMZ

⁶ UNEP (1999): Global Environment Outlook - 2000. United Nations Environment Programme. Earthscan Publications, London;

⁷ See Scheer, S (1999): Soil Degradation: a threat to Developing Country food security by 2020? Washington: IFPRI Food, agriculture and the environment discussion paper no. 27 Ibid.

⁸ Ibid, pg. 12.

⁹ Without necessarily changing its underlying causes

¹⁰ From Dobie (2001): Poverty and the Drylands. Nairobi: UNDP

change. Plant cover slows local climate change by absorbing carbon from the atmosphere, holding moisture in the soil, slowing wind speeds, protecting the soil from the direct impact of sunlight, and generating atmospheric moisture.

Land degradation is also linked to biodiversity loss. In fact, part of the definition of land degradation relates to a loss of biodiversity through the loss of plant cover and soil biomass. Biodiversity loss can impact negatively on nutrition, on the availability of traditional medicines, on ecosystem health which underlies our health, and it can adversely affect cultural traditions based on indigenous knowledge of the environment. Growing pressure to increase agricultural production in pace with population growth and to produce cash crops for export often leads to the replacement of intercropping by monocropping and the unsustainable use of marginal lands. For instance, the growth of world demand for biofuels is placing pressure on the world's agricultural lands¹¹. This growth requires a switch from the production of food crops to the production of energy crops, a switch that is already taking place on a large scale and, because most dominant energy crops (soy, palm oil, sugar) are mostly grown unsustainably, lead to a further degradation of fragile lands¹².

Furthermore, land degradation affects freshwater availability. The growth of global water scarcity is intimately related to desertification through, amongst other things, the overuse and misuse of water in irrigated agriculture and the removal of vegetation cover for monocropping. According to the UN's 2006 human development report, some 700 million people worldwide live below the water stress threshold and this is expected to increase to 3 billion by 2025, driven in part by dropping groundwater tables typical of dryland areas. Increased water stress is expected to further reduce the viability of rural livelihoods¹³. Also, a large proportion of the virtual water flows between countries is related to international trade of crops and crop products. Rich countries (mostly located in moist, temperate areas) are mostly net importers of water, and where importation is from semi-arid and arid areas, there is a net transfer of water out of arid areas through global trade structures.

Thirdly, land degradation is strongly linked to insecure land tenure, overpopulation and conflicts over access to land. Land degradation and droughts can intensify conflicts over access to land and contribute to migration flows. Environmental change, in part induced by land degradation, is accelerating the pace of migration through the displacement of 'environmental refugees' fleeing areas which have become too inhospitable to live. UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon underlined these issues when he stated that the **Darfur** conflict was rooted in the fencing off of land by farmers to prevent nomadic herders ruining agricultural land¹⁴. It is estimated that globally, more than 135 million people are at risk of being displaced as a result of severe desertification, including 60 million environmental refugees pushing northward into North Africa and - to the extent feasible - into Southern Europe¹⁵. Desertification has been recognized by Spain and France as a direct reason for migration to Europe, an issue Europe will face in the next 20 or 30 years which cannot be solved by security measures.¹⁶

¹¹ World production and consumption of biofuels has increased at an average rate of 32 % per year between 2000 and 2005, and is expected to grow at more than 100% per year from 2008 onwards.

¹² See CNN (16/08/2006): *Ethanol could leave the world hungry*.

¹³ See United Nations (2006): Human Development Report 2006. Beyond Scarcity: power, poverty and the global water crisis. New York: United Nations

¹⁴ Ban Ki Moon (16/06/2007): *A climate culprit in Darfur*. Washington: Washington Post.

¹⁵ See Rechkemmer, A (2004): Postmodern Global Governance. The United Nations Convention of Combat Desertification. Baden-Baden: NOMOS;

¹⁶ 18 th Franco-Spanish Summit.

UNCCD as a Cinderella treaty?

In June 1994, following calls made at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification or UNCCD was adopted in Paris. The treaty entered into force in December 1996, 90 days after the fiftieth ratification had been received, and henceforth the 17th of June became the world day to combat desertification. It is one of the three major international treaties that emanated from UNCED, alongside the Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD).

Since its entry into force, there have been seven conventions of parties to oversee progress in its implementation. However, of the three conventions that emerged from the UNCED process, the UNCCD has been the most beset by institutional and financial problems. Many parties to the convention, as well as outside observers, would agree that progress in its implementation has been slow and beset by obstacles. Thus the Dutch government, for instance, states that "because the implementation of the convention is difficult in practice, the Netherlands has now shifted its focus to the concrete implementation of policy"¹⁷. Canada, too, has expressed its misgivings about institutional processes related to the UNCCD and has threatened to shift its focus to bilateral programmes in order to ensure implementation¹⁸. Many NGO's have called for a much larger role of civil society in the process, a promise laid down in the original convention but which has not been adhered to sufficiently since then. It is also strongly argued that traditional and modern knowledge are complementary and can strongly stimulate bottom-up sustainable development. It is thereby recognised that men and women often have very distinct roles in managing natural resources in areas affected by desertification.

Although there are still many parties who wholeheartedly support the expansion of work through the UNCCD¹⁹, overall commitment of policy makers to the UNCCD process is low. In fact, at an international conference on desertification and policy in Algiers in 2006, UN under secretary general Hans van Ginkel went so far as to state that "a wealth of experience in combating desertification has been amassed around the world, but is routinely ignored by policy makers"²⁰. Over the last ten years, then, the UNCCD appears to have been relegated to the status of Cinderella relative to its sister treaties. In Algiers, Van Ginkel urged governments to counter the trend and to make desertification a top priority in policy making. Currently, there is an urgent need to bring about in-depth reform of the UNCCD in order to rebuild multilateral commitment to *land care* issues and, through this, make inroads into endemic poverty in degraded areas.

The role of Both ENDS

With the support of the Dutch government (DGIS) and the European Commission, Both ENDS and its partners have made land degradation one of their key issues since UNCED, integrating it within the broader theme of sustainable land use. The main focus has always been the support of southern organizations in their efforts to enhance *land care*. Local farmers and civil society organisations in many parts of the world have developed alternative land management strategies, often based on land use practices that rest on local knowledge and local traditions that have stood the test of time. Many of these approaches have achieved noteworthy successes. However, these successes are often not published and need to be brought to the attention of colleagues in other countries as well as policy makers in the north. Both ENDS is devoted to the analysis and publication

¹⁷ See <http://www.minbuza.nl/nl/themas,milieu/milieu/milieu-wat-en-hoe/droge-gebieden>

¹⁸ From analysis of COP 6 provided by Lisa Schipper of the University of East Anglia and David Weber of the IVM in Amsterdam

¹⁹ French government statement on millennium development goal 7 (sustainable development). See website of French ministry of foreign affairs

²⁰ UNCCD (2007): Algiers: desertification and the international policy imperative. In: UNCCD (2007): Down to Earth. New and views on desertification, issue 22

of these cases and supports the exchange of learning experiences amongst southern partners²¹.

Both ENDS staff has recently contributed to the EU Report to the UNCCD on activities undertaken and support provided by the European Community to combat desertification. Also, Both ENDS is currently working on an EU-financed project known as Drynet, which involves 14 project partners in 17 countries affected by land degradation. Drynet supports developing countries in their efforts to integrate the environment and poverty linkages in drylands into their national development processes and place land degradation higher on the political agenda. Both ENDS also ensures the link between civil society and local stakeholders in drylands and the scientific community in ongoing research projects.

Policy Recommendations

- Bring drylands and **land care back into the heart of development policies** such as the MDG's;
- Acknowledge the **linkages between climate change, biodiversity loss and land degradation**. Bring degraded areas back into the mainstream of efforts to enhance carbon sequestration and restore biodiversity;
- Assist in the reform of the UNCCD based on:
 - an **agenda of enhanced civil society participation**;
 - broadening the scope from desertification to land degradation;
 - dependable financial commitments as seed funding for investments both by local land users and external investors;
 - and effective implementation;
- Appropriate technology: **marrying traditional knowledge and modern know-how**: policy should strive to be inspired by local solutions and priorities, in which the role of traditional knowledge should be acknowledged as an important ancillary to 'modern' knowledge.

In all activities we will continue to **cooperate with partner organisations**, including:

- Centre d'Actions et de Réalisations Internationales (France);
- League for Pastoral peoples (Germany);
- Instituto Sertão (Brazil);
- Observatorio Latinoamericano de Conflictos Ambientales (Chile);
- Probiomo (Bolivia);
- Tenmiya (Mauretania);
- The Environmental Monitoring Group (South Africa);
- Environnement et Développement du Tiers Monde (Senegal);
- Central Asian Regional Environmental Center (Kazachstan);
- Lokhit Pashu Palak Sansthan (India);
- Turkish Foundation for Combating Soil Erosion (Turkey);
- The Centre for Sustainable Development and Environment (Iran);

²¹ See for instance Both ENDS: *Polyculture in the Brazilian Drylands. A new version of an old technique.*

Further reading

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