

faq

Frequently Asked Questions

Land Degradation Neutrality

Why do we need a Sustainable Development Goal or Target on Land Degradation?

The impacts of land degradation affect the sustainability of the entire world, so a global effort is needed. Land resources – soil, water and biodiversity – are the foundation upon which our societies and economies grow and prosper.

Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN) is a clear and straightforward target that responds to the immediate challenge: How do we sustainably intensify the production of food, fuel and fiber to meet future demand without the further degradation of our finite land resource base?

A global commitment to LDN would explicitly recognize the unacceptable costs of inaction (i.e. continued land degradation as a result of poor management) in terms of food and human security, economic development and environmental sustainability. It would trigger much-needed policy responses that address all three dimensions of sustainable development simultaneously.

How is a Land Degradation Neutral World defined?

In the OWG's proposed target 15.3, and as agreed to at Rio+20, the language remains "strive to achieve a land-degradation-neutral world". Because the SDG targets are global and aspirational in nature, and subject to translation into national targets, this phrase can also be expressed as "a world where nations individually strive to achieve land degradation neutrality".

Simply put, the objective of LDN is to maintain or even improve the amount of healthy and productive land resources over time and in line with national sustainable development priorities. LDN is a target that can be implemented at local, national and even regional scales; at the heart of LDN are Sustainable Land Management (SLM) practices that help close yield gaps and enhance the resilience of land resources and communities that directly depend on them while avoiding further degradation.

Is LDN an offset or compensation scheme that could result in a license to degrade?

No. The focus and aim of LDN is to maintain and improve the productivity of land resources by sustainably managing and restoring soil, water and biodiversity assets, while at the same time contributing to poverty reduction, food and water security, and climate change adaptation and mitigation.

The key principle of LDN is that the people at a grassroots level, whose everyday decisions and actions affect the condition of land and water resources, have to be involved in designing and implementing measures to halt and reverse land degradation.

A LDN approach upholds two complementary pathways of action -- sustainable land management and ecosystem restoration -- which in tandem will help achieve LDN. The restoration of natural and semi-natural areas is often key to maintaining the necessary level of ecosystem services for working landscapes as well as urban areas.

For example,

- South Korea has restored 6.4 million hectares of degraded forest lands over the last few decades using a forest landscape restoration approach, resulting in USD15.44 billion in water storage enhancement, USD11.23 billion in erosion control, USD9.74 billion in recreation benefits, and USD3.95 billion in landslide prevention. South Korea actively supports a LDN target
- In Tanzania, the rebirth of the traditional Ngiti management system led to the restoration of between 350,000 and 500,000 hectares of woodland in the period from 1986 to 2001. This benefited over 800 villages with an economic value of US\$14 per person per month from the integration of SLM and restoration activities at all scales - from small family plots to larger community forests. By focusing on local initiatives (with a range of land uses) and integrated planning at larger scales, nations can increase the economic and ecological feasibility of achieving LDN.

To be clear, LDN does not advocate for market-based offset or compensation schemes which have been proven to be complex, problematic and generally ineffective. When certain land uses are unavoidable, LDN encourages policies, incentives and all efforts to minimize the impacts of land degradation.

Since LDN is not a precise quantitative target, it will be difficult to monitor and communicate?

No. By setting disaggregated targets for SLM and ecosystem restoration, LDN would encourage local, regional and national administrative units to better assess their land resource use and planning. This would give them the flexibility to establish baselines for monitoring, evaluate trade-offs and prioritize action on the ground at the appropriate scale. For example,

- In Iran, The Carbon Project, a community-development-plus-environmental initiative funded by UNDP and GEF, completed its first phase (2004-2010). During that time, 30,000 hectares of degraded drylands have been brought back into production in South Khorasan, cost-effectively restored and sustainably managed by local communities for their own benefit. Phase 2 is now ongoing in six other provinces, including Tehran and Kerman, and a further agreement was signed in 2014 to expand the initiative to a further 10 provinces that are most heavily affected.

On this basis, progress towards LDN can be monitored and communicated in terms of increased productivity, vegetative cover, biodiversity and the resulting socio-economic benefits. At UNCCD COP11, Parties adopted a refined set of six progress indicators (decision 22/COP.11) which will be used for the first time during the second leg of the fifth reporting process in 2016. The set includes two indicators for each of the UNCCD's strategic objectives which could be used to monitor and evaluate progress towards a LDN target.

Strategic objective 1: To improve the living conditions of affected populations

- Trends in population living below the relative poverty line; income inequality in affected areas
- Trends in access to safe drinking water in affected areas

Strategic objective 2: To improve the condition of affected ecosystems

- Trends in land cover
- Trends in land productivity or functioning of the land



Strategic objective 3: To generate global benefits through effective implementation of the UNCCD

- Trends in carbon stocks above and below ground
- Trends in abundance and distribution of selected species

These indicators will need to be integrated in a flexible and interpretative framework that allows countries to measure progress at different scales and according to their national priorities. Working with its partners and various consultation processes, the UNCCD is confident in the establishment of scientifically defensible, even if imperfect, baselines for constructing a functional monitoring and evaluation framework for a LDN target.

Yes, LDN is doable. No, it does not have to be expensive. On the contrary, it is a practical, cost-effective approach for many countries that depend heavily on the health and productivity of their land resources.

First, the **economic benefits argument** for LDN is clear; many projects and programmes around the world demonstrate that SLM and ecosystem restoration can be cost-effective and help drive more equitable and sustainable development, particularly in the less developed countries. The proliferation of community-based and labor-intensive projects around the world has proven that better land management and restoration activities can be successfully implemented at relatively low cost. For example,

- It can take as little as USD10-25 to rehabilitate one hectare of farmland using simple, traditional agro-forestry, water conservation and livestock management practices.
- The benefit/cost ratios of grassland restoration have been calculated in the range of 4:1 to 35:1; these benefits include water retention and carbon sequestration in addition to productivity gains.
- Currently the global cost of land degradation reaches about USD490 billion per year, much higher than the cost of action to prevent it.
- While it is a generalized risk, roughly 40% of the world's degraded land occurs in areas with the highest incidence of poverty; land degradation directly impacts the health and livelihoods of an estimated 1.5 billion people.
- Globally, the Economics of Land Degradation initiative estimates that the adoption of sustainable land management practices could deliver up to USD1.4 trillion in increased crop production.

Second, efforts to achieve LDN could be supported by **multilateral funding sources** with financing contingent upon certain demonstrated actions. This financial support, which would primarily serve to build capacity on the ground for SLM and restoration activities, could come from development banks, the Global Environmental Facility (GEF), the Green Climate Fund (GCF), and other sources where public-private partnerships also have an important role to play. For example,

- In Ethiopia, as part of the internationally-funded Sustainable Land Management Programme, approximately 180,000 hectares of degraded land has been made productively usable through sustainable land management practices, including the use of terracing, crop rotation systems, improvement of pastureland and permanent green cover. These measures are benefiting more than 194,000 households, and are

***Is LDN feasible?
Would it pose
an unacceptable
financial burden
on developing
countries?***

contributing to increased productivity in the affected areas. They are also enhancing the resilience of small-scale agriculture to the impacts of climate change.

Third, **bilateral aid and private sector investments** will be critical for scaling up SLM practices on the ground as part of a LDN approach to sustainable food production. This may include, for example, micro-credit schemes in conjunction with mobile technologies to more directly deliver financial flows to individuals and communities sustainably managing and restoring their land resources. While most LDN activities will be undertaken at the local level, there will be opportunities at national and even regional scales. For example,

- Working with NGO's, the Australia Development Agency is supporting the restoration of the forest cover along Gambia and Senegal border areas. It is clear testimony of cross-border cooperation including the sharing of forest genetic materials. On the Senegalese side, British-based international development charity Concern Universal is restoring forests and training in SLM practices in areas that have experienced 30 years of conflict. An evaluation funded by the FAO and EU found an increase in forest density and decline in illegal logging. There are ongoing requests from other communities for support in replicating the approach, with the US Department of State funding four new community forest projects in the region.

Fourth, governments could use a global commitment to LDN as an opportunity to transform **legislative and regulatory frameworks** to improve land planning and governance, and incentivize SLM and ecosystem restoration on the ground. Within these frameworks, the **"polluter pays" principle** could augment the capacity to finance projects and programmes that restore and rehabilitate degraded land and soils, increasing the likelihood of achieving a LDN target. Under certain conditions, liability for restoration could be imposed on a clearly-defined entity that is responsible for land degradation, such as mining concerns, industrial farming and livestock operations, and other water-intensive industries. For example,

- In Australia, the introduction of its National Soil Conservation Program in 1983 has substantially expanded and improved its soil and water conservation technologies on private and public lands. The national and state governments continue to develop and implement sustainable land management policies, including a program of substantial reform of soil conservation, vegetation, forestry, and environmental planning law and policy. The focus of current efforts is on diversification of the commercial use of agricultural land, encouragement of conservation and remediation, strengthening natural resource management institutions, monitoring effects of changes, development of new extension and education capabilities, and controlling urban settlements on highly productive agricultural land.
- In Brazil, the Forest Act of 1934 was enacted in an attempt to reconcile profitable private land use with biodiversity conservation goals and the provision of ecosystem goods and services to society at large. In 2006, Brazil established a specific legal instrument to protect its most threatened biome—the so-called Atlantic Forest. This Atlantic Forest Law imposes restrictions on any further removal or degradation of remaining natural vegetation in the biome. This unprecedented law is one important incentive mechanism that promotes the protection of remaining forest fragments and restoration of degraded agricultural lands.

Lastly, in the longer term, a LDN target could foster the engagement of communities and businesses, working with relevant NGOs, in the creation of **certification schemes** for SLM and ecosystem restoration. This is known as the “**consumer pays**” principle where most existing certification schemes are incentivized by consumers paying a premium for sustainably produced goods and services. For example,

- Farms and other food production systems that meet the Sustainable Agriculture Network’s (SAN) requirements and binding rules are recognized with the Rainforest Alliance Certified™ seal. Since 1992, more than one million small farms, medium, large and cooperatives in more than 40 countries around the world have met the SAN standards that ensure protection of workers and wildlife, conservation of natural resources and support the financial viability of farms.

It won’t. The OWG makes clear that the proposed targets within the SDG framework are being defined as aspirational global targets. Each government is therefore responsible for setting its own national targets guided by this global level of ambition but taking into account national circumstances and priorities. This flexibility would allow countries that already have national laws, programmes and schemes that address land degradation to avoid any potential conflict and indeed help them in striving to achieve a LDN target. For example,

- In Iceland, the Farmers Heal the Land programme, established by the Soil Conservation Service in 1990, assists farmers to halt soil erosion and re-vegetate degraded land on their properties by offering them expert consultation and advice, as well as seeds and fertilizer. The programme, which involves about 25 per cent of all Icelandic farms, has successfully increased awareness of sustainable land management, built bridges between disciplines and improved land conditions. Iceland actively supports a LDN target.
- In China, by the end of 2006, more than 200 environmental policies, laws, and regulations had been proposed and enacted, including 58 environmental laws, 9 regulations on water pollution, and 8 regulations on air pollution. At the same time, great efforts have also been made in ecological restoration. The Natural Forest Conservation Program (NFCP) and the Sloping Land Conversion Program (SLCP) are two examples. Their objectives are soil and water conservation, desertification control, flood control, climate-change mitigation, and biodiversity conservation. China actively supports a LDN target. The secretariat and the GM and, when suitable, national authorities or other stakeholders will be given an opportunity to comment on the assessments and evaluations before they are publicized. The evaluation reports will be openly accessible to Parties and stakeholders.

***What if a
commitment
to achieve
LDN conflicts
with existing
national laws and
regulations?***