



Combating desertification in the Northern Mediterranean

The Northern Mediterranean region is a complex mosaic of diversified landscapes

It has been settled and cultivated for millennia by various cultures and civilizations. Much of the region is semi-arid and subject to seasonal droughts with high rainfall variability or sudden intense downpours. The region is also characterized by high population densities, heavy concentrations of industry, and intensive agriculture. Although people here often use the term “desert”, they do so in the sense of wilderness, lack of population, or isolation and less in term of sand dunes.

Mediterranean land degradation is often linked to poor agricultural practices

Soils become salinized, dry, sterile, and unproductive in response to a combination of natural hazards - droughts, floods, forest fires - and human-controlled activities, notably overtiling and overgrazing. The situation has worsen by the social and economic crisis in traditional agriculture in recent years and the resulting migration of people from rural to urban areas. The result is abandoned land, particularly on

marginal and easily eroded hillsides, and weakened agricultural planning and land management.

The modern economy is also contributing to the problem

Fertilizers, pesticides, irrigation, contamination by heavy metals, and the introduction of exotic (and invasive) plant species are undermining the long-term health of the region’s soils. Physical changes imposed on watercourses by the construction of reservoirs, the canalization of rivers, and the drainage of wetlands are affecting land quality. Meanwhile, groundwater levels are declining widely, resulting among other things in salt-water intrusion into coastal aquifers. Some 80 percent of the region’s available freshwater is used for irrigation. The dramatic and continuing growth of industry, tourism, intensive agriculture, and other modern economic activities along the coastlines is placing particular stress on coastal areas. In addition, in the last five years the effects of climate change, such as drastic decrease of rainfall and consequent important drought, have had a very serious impact on the region’s land and its productivity.

Among the Northern Mediterranean affected country Parties, seven are members of the European Union

The Fourth Regional Implementation Annex offers concrete opportunities for strengthening mutual cooperation and more effective national action. The European Community, France, Monaco and Israel are participating in the sub-regional and regional processes as observers.

The Sub-Regional group of Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain and Turkey

has worked together for several years on sub-regional activities. Since 2004, a regional consultative mechanism has been established with the assistance of the UNCCD secretariat covering now under the annex IV all Northern Mediterranean countries together. At the regional level, activities are being promoted and undertaken particularly through the establishment of regional thematic networks for scientific cooperation, the organization of workshop on technology and know-how, the development of mechanisms for exchanges of information and documentation and the organization of regional training courses. In addition to



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intraregional cooperation, the Fourth Annex calls on its members to cooperate with other regions and sub-regions, Central and Eastern Europe for example, and particularly with the developing countries of Northern Africa. A Drought Management Center for South Eastern Europe in the context of the UNCCD is currently being hosted by Slovenia and involving countries from both annexes IV and V.

The Annex also stimulates action at national level

As of February 2008, Italy, Greece, Portugal, Spain and Turkey adopted their National Action Programmes (NAPs) to combat desertification. Other affected countries from Northern Mediterranean are in the process of elaboration or finalization of their NAPs.

Desertification research is receiving a renewed emphasis

A number of research programmes are developed, targeting among others the end-users, assessing the impact of climate and weather on land

and soil degradation in the region. EU members are also investing more in the systematic monitoring of land degradation, the development of indicators, although there is still a need for better coordination of the collection, analysis, and exchange of data, including exchange of data with countries outside the EU. In addition, there is a need for more technical and scientific cooperation on research into the socio-economic consequences of land degradation and the cost of inaction.

A number of other policies also have great potential, including the soil strategy of EU

It is widely recognized that one priority for the region should be protecting land that has not yet been significantly degraded. An effective and "integrated" approach to water management at the local, national, and regional levels needs to address simultaneously traditional and intensive agriculture, industry, employment, biodiversity, freshwater resources, water pollution, and the special

problems of coastal areas. Synergies with other treaties should be explored. Traditional knowledge and know-how need to be conserved and used. The development, adaptation, and transfer of technologies to combat land degradation and protect soil, which are environmentally sound, economically viable, and socially acceptable should be more actively promoted. Finally, local communities and non-governmental organizations are being increasingly engaged. The 10-year strategic plan and framework to enhance the implementation of the Convention (1008-2018), adopted at COP 8, will guide the action of all regional stakeholders in putting into practice those policies and marks a important step towards the achievement of their objectives.

Relevant parts of the Convention

Annex IV: Regional Implementation Annex for the Northern Mediterranean.

