



United Nations

Convention to Combat
Desertification

HIGHLIGHTS OF ACHIEVEMENTS FROM 2010-2020 UN DECADE FOR DESERTS AND THE FIGHT AGAINST DESERTIFICATION

The General Assembly declared 2010 to 2020 the Decade for Deserts and the Fight against Desertification. The stated aim was “to raise awareness about the causes of and solutions to land degradation and desertification.” The basis of action was the 10-year plan of the Convention to Combat Desertification. An inter-agency team of 13 intergovernmental organizations led the activities carried out during the decade. The team worked with other civil society and private sector organizations to amplify outreach or to benefit for the value they added to the work. The Decade marked significant progress at least 3 broad areas: awareness raising; science and knowledge; and policy.¹

1. Awareness Raising

Awareness about desertification, land degradation and drought grew during the decade.

- Two surveys conducted at the beginning and end of the decade show the public's new thinking about these topics. [10 percent or fewer \(people\) said their top concern was desertification, drought, spread of disease and flooding](#) from a survey carried out in 2010 by Deutsche Welle and Synovate, a market research company, which polled 13,000 people from 18 countries, including Brazil, China, France, Germany, United States, South Africa. In early 2021, about 1.2 million people polled in 50-country study by UN Development Programme for the [People's Climate Vote](#) were asked to rank 18 policies. Two land-related policies, ‘conservation of forests and land’ and ‘climate-friendly farming techniques’ were in the top three.

2. Expanded science and knowledge base

- The Economics of Land Degradation Initiative (ELD) was set during the decade to provide thought leadership on the economic costs of acting or failing to act on land degradation.
- Using the cost-benefit analysis approach, the [Economics of the Land Degradation Initiative](#) has demonstrated the productivity losses countries incur for failing to tackle land degradation. Its study of 2014 estimates that countries lost between 1.5 – 3.4 trillion Euro in 2008 due to deforestation and

¹ Refer to General Assembly document A/75/190 dated 27 July 2020 for the Secretary-General's Report on the Implementation of the United Nations Decade for Deserts and the Fight against Desertification.

land degradation. This is equivalent to between 3.3 – 7.5% of the Gross Domestic Product of all countries in that year.

- The scientific community has published four major reports on desertification, land degradation and drought during the last half of the Decade. The [Assessment Report on Land Degradation and Restoration](#) in 2018 by Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services. [World Atlas on Desertification](#) also in, jointly published by the European Union Joint Research Center. The [Special Report on Climate Change and Land](#) published in 2019 by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. And [Goals and Commitments for the Restoration Decade](#) published in 2020 by The Netherlands Research agency, PBL.
- The combined results of these studies are more precise data and information that was not known before about land degradation: the severity of land degradation; how much land has been altered globally; the changing drivers of land degradation from local to global forces; the multiple and global benefits for avoiding, reducing and reversing land degradation at local levels at large scale; and that close to 1 billion hectares of land can be restored.
- On the global level, scientists agreed on the 11 most potent consequences of desertification.
- The independent Science Policy Interface (SPI) was also set up to provide scientific guidance on the issues of desertification, land degradation and drought.
- SPI's first pathbreaking work was to turn the SDG 15 target 15.3.1 concept of "*Land Degradation Neutrality*" into a concrete measure that looks at three things: land cover, the productivity of the land and the amount of carbon in the soil.
- Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN) is the target countries are aiming to achieve by 2030 to ensure there is a balance in the amount of productive land available for our use today and for future generations.
- Based on the elements identified in the LDN concept, 135 countries collected and submitted in 2015 the baseline data showing the statuses of land degradation. This was the largest number of biennial reports submitted in the Convention's history. With a large and comparable database, SDG target 15.3.1 is deemed among the best datasets and the most advanced tool for measuring land restoration. The LDN assessment tool achieved Tier II status in 2019. It is the most advanced tool for measuring land restoration, according to the Netherlands research organization, PBL.

3. *Policies to guide action*

During the decade governments took policies to create incentives for land users to change from practices that degrade the land degradation to those that avoid, reduce or reverse it.

- Investors started directing funds to areas where sustainable land management technologies are being used not just at farm level, but scaled to landscape level. Managing the land at the level of an ecosystem yield's multiple benefits. An example is the Great Green Wall of Africa.
- The Land Degradation Neutrality Fund was created to help the short-term interests of private sector to be aligned to the long-term yields from farmers and to underwrite the associated risks farmers may encounter, such as crop failure.
- About 70 countries in the world experience drought regularly. But fewer than 10 countries had plans to guide their response actions in early stages of a drought. Consequently, droughts often turned into emergencies that turned into disasters. Three UN organizations in 2013 worked together on in process known as the Drought Initiative that is helping 60 countries to set up stronger drought emergency plans.
- In 2019, governments also set up the Intergovernmental Working Group on Drought to look into at this problem in more depth and make recommendations for action. The process is in progress.
- Governments made positive progress in two areas that drive land degradation but were difficult to solve because they are rooted in many cultures.
 - But in a process started by civil society organizations, governments negotiated a policy on land rights that is helping disenfranchised groups and communities to access, own or control

- land. The policy is built on Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Land Tenure, Fisheries and Forests in the Context of National Food Security (VGGT).
- The Gender Action Plan was also negotiated to bolster gender equality in the coming decade in four areas where women are especially discriminated against: participation; economic empowerment; land rights and access to resources; and access to improved knowledge and technologies.

4. Concrete facts and Data

Status and trends of desertification, land degradation and drought: About 25 per cent of productive land was degraded from 1983 to 2015. But overall, humans have converted 70 per cent of all ice-free from its natural state. Most of it to produce food. The loss of productive land affects a lot more countries than the 100 estimated a decade ago. At least 170 of the 196 countries Parties to the Convention are affected by desertification.

Drivers and Causes of desertification, land degradation and drought: The human actions driving land degradation have changed. Previously, this was due to local forces, such as poor farming or grazing practices. This changed by the end of the decade because more and more consumers eat foreign foods. Consequently, they do not see the effect of their consumption on the practices farmers and herders chose to produce the food. The abuse of chemicals, food produced that does not leave the farms and new forests cleared for farming.

Benefits of avoiding, reducing and reversing land degradation: Land users can reduce or reverse land degradation, which has many positive benefits. It can increase the amount of healthy land and help to avoid degrading natural land in the future. Healthy land produces clean water, safe food and improves air quality. Land that is healthy can store more carbon, which can help carbon warming the Earth back into the soil. It increases ground cover. This protects species at risk of extinction and protects us from the Sun's harmful rays and extreme events such as droughts. It also retains the moisture the soil needs to produce food in the ground.

Land that could be recovered for future use: Momentum to recover degrading land to tap into these benefits grew during the decade. By 2020, governments and private sector had pledged to recover 1 billion hectares of degraded, according to PBL. Under the Convention, 128 countries plan to set their targets for 2030. Of these, 90 of the countries have done so already, for a total of 400 million hectares. About 250 million hectares of this land is farmland or for livestock rearing.