The Rio Conventions Pavilion Science Day on 5 September 2019 in New Delhi

Human dimensions of LDN

Key message: Striving towards LDN is not about managing the environment, it's about managing people and moving towards good governance to open up options

Key question: How can scientists and policymakers support the development of good governance?

It's easy for us to think that efforts to achieve LDN need to focus on the environment. Land is the major focus LDN, it's what we're looking to manage sustainably. And land is what gives us benefits in the form of ecosystem services, like food, fuel and freshwater, climate regulation, cultural services and so on. Even the three major indicators used to monitor progress toward SDG target 15.3 focus on the environment. While soil carbon, land cover change and net primary productivity are certainly important to measure so that we can assess the general direction of land quality changes, I want to use this statement to argue that LDN isn't just about managing land; it's about managing people, particularly if we are to advance towards the LDN target in an equitable way, leaving no one behind.

People and the land are an integrated socio-ecological system, where people are part of nature. Thinking of LDN as being about people affects the way we approach the whole concept. It affects the time frames we need to consider in the design and application of policies, laws and investments that set the context for how the land is used. It raises questions about access – who can and who can't benefit from land; and it raises important questions about costs and benefits, winners and losers from the current system, particularly when the site of degradation is sometimes on the other side of the world to the people obtaining the benefits. Thinking of LDN as being about people challenges us to think about equity in terms of not just the distribution of benefits, but also whose voices are heard in its governance and whose are not; and how we can be more inclusive to enable greater participation.

Avoiding, reducing and reversing degradation are actions that people take, and are about what we do to the land, which in turn is defined by the structures and processes we create, and the ways in which we create opportunities, options and choices. Many of the world's poorest people who are eking out a living on degraded land, require a change to the context they are operating in, so that it helps them and empowers them to make better choices. These changes can be supported by good governance, which is at the core of an enabling environment. Good governance means we may have to have difficult conversations to renegotiate the power balance and prompts us to think beyond the short term. Several aspects can assist with this. For example, ensuring tenure security can help land users to have more of a say in what happens to their land. We need stable institutions and economic and financial measures that nudge people to manage the land sustainably, rather than subsidies that incentivise us to degrade for short term profits. And we need knowledge, as do all the other stakeholders in the system who are working towards LDN. Bringing together different types of knowledge, sharing experiences of what works, how, where, and understanding why, is something that I hope we can contribute towards advancing through our discussions today.