

REDD+ and Desertification

The management, conservation and sustainable development of dry forests are central to combating desertification.

2011 World Day to Combat Desertification, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon



Dry forest - Desierto cerca de La Balleja, Chihuahua, Mexico
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Dry forests play an important role in preventing land degradation and desertification, conserving biodiversity and providing ecosystem goods and services and mitigating and adapting to climate change and the impacts of drought. To make use of the promising potential of forests and agroforestry schemes in arid areas they need to be fully included in the REDD+ mechanism with a special focus on the co-benefits.

Why are dry forests important for sustainable land management?

Forests in drylands play a very important role. According to the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (2005), drylands occupy 41% of the earth's land area and are home to more than two billion people. They protect the land from desertification and conserve biodiversity. They also provide ecosystem goods and services. However, despite their value, forest ecosystems are threatened by deforestation and land degradation. This is especially true in dry forests — forests in arid, semi-arid, and dry sub-humid areas — where the mean annual precipitation is lower than the potential evapotranspiration. There are two major reasons for this: 1) dry forests are more vulnerable to degradation due to low rainfall which increases soil-erosion and reduces water storage capacity in the root zone; and 2) overexploitation of trees, land and soil resources which contributes further to deforestation.

The degradation of forest ecosystems in drylands results in a loss of biomass and biodiversity, water resources, and carbon storage capacity. However, this can be avoided. The protection, restoration and sustainable management of forest resources can both prevent land degradation/desertification and help mitigate and adapt to climate change and the impacts of drought.

At the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) held in Rio de Janeiro in 2012, the international community highlighted the social, economic and environmental benefits of forests and the importance of promoting sustainable land management policies and practices.

Why REDD+ in drylands?

REDD (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation) is a mechanism which emerged from the UNFCCC negotiations that provides developing countries with incentives for the protection and better management of their forests in order to avoid emissions from deforestation and forest degradation. The concept of REDD+ was introduced to capture

the co-benefits of REDD activities by including the roles of conservation, sustainable management of forests, and enhancement of forest carbon stocks.

In addition to climate change mitigation, it is expected that REDD+ in drylands will create further momentum for alleviating poverty and improving the living conditions of indigenous and local communities by promoting sustainable forest and land management. Soil conservation, agroforestry and silvopastoral practices along with sustainable water management are some of the proven methods for enhancing both the ecological and socio-economic benefits from REDD+ projects in dry forest regions.

REDD+ in drylands – Where are we now and what needs to be done?

Box 1: Major REDD+ initiatives:

Many initiatives, including the UN-REDD Programme, the Forest Carbon Partnership Facility (FCPF) and the Forest Investment Program (FIP) are currently developing and supporting REDD+:

UN-REDD: The UN-REDD Programme finances national programmes for REDD+ readiness in partner countries and the global programme that develops common approaches, methodologies, and best practices for national REDD+ action. <http://www.un-redd.org/>

FCPF: The FCPF assists developing countries in preparing for REDD+ as well as implementing pilot projects based on performance-based payments. For this, the FCPF uses two financing tracks: the Readiness Fund and the Carbon Fund. <http://www.forestcarbonpartnership.org/>

FIP: The FIP bridges the gap between the FCPF's Readiness Fund and the Carbon Fund. Areas not covered under the Readiness Fund, such as reforms in infrastructure, land tenure and policies, and restoration of degraded land are supported by the FIP. <https://www.climateinvestmentfunds.org/cif/node/5>

Dry forests cover 18% of the land in arid zones (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005). Approximately 81% of tropical and subtropical dry forests are located in Africa, Latin America, and Asia (Figure 1). Among those countries with areas of dry forest, 22 (about 63%) are participating in multilateral initiatives such as UN-REDD, the Forest Carbon Partnership Facility (FCPF), and Forest Investment Program (FIP) or are receiving bilateral development assistance (Box 1). These countries are currently in the REDD+ readiness phase which is meant to set the basis for the future participation in phase two and three of the REDD+ mechanism (Box 2).

Box 2: REDD+ Phased Approach

REDD+ initiatives follow a phased approach. During the first phase, countries build REDD+ 'readiness' with a focus on capacity building, and the development of a national REDD+ strategy. The second phase requires the development and/or alignment of national policy frameworks for the implementation of REDD+ schemes. The third phase envisages the full-scale implementation of REDD+ activities with performance-based payments.

Even though dryland forest countries are participating in REDD+ initiatives, they face several constraints. These include the narrow and inconsistent definition of the term "forests". For example, the definition of forests in the Global Forest Resource Assessment (FAO, 2010)¹ includes abandoned shifting cultivation land with trees if certain height and canopy cover criteria are met, whereas it excludes fruit tree plantations and agroforestry systems where crops are grown under tree cover. On the other hand the United Nations Forum on Forest (UNFF) includes "all types of forests". The inclusion of agroforestry land in REDD+ would contribute significantly to the co-benefits envisaged while also sequestering carbon. To further facilitate REDD+ activities in drylands, a broader and more consistent definition of forests should be considered by international institutions and initiatives. This would enable low forest cover countries to integrate REDD+ as an add value element in their SFM/SLM strategies and benefit from the REDD+ phased approach. Dryland countries would particularly benefit from the capacity building and institutional reform components of REDD+ in order to improve their forest governance, data availability and monitoring systems.

Another constraint to REDD+ participation is the naturally low carbon storage potential in dry forests. The exact storage potential is often not known, meaning that more research needs to be conducted to identify where carbon storage

potential is high enough to attract carbon funds. Also, the inclusion of soil carbon would make REDD+ financially more attractive for dryland countries. Research would also be needed to have a better understanding of the co-benefits of REDD+ in dry forest (e.g. prevention of land degradation and desertification as well as income creation for indigenous and local communities).

The role of the UNCCD

The UNCCD invites all Parties to adopt and scale up sustainable forest management policies and practices to prevent soil erosion and flooding, to increase carbon sinks, and to conserve and sustainably use biodiversity (decision 4/COP.8). The UNCCD, being the sole legally-binding instrument on land and soil, recognizes the importance and potential for REDD+ in drylands to contribute to land degradation neutrality, sustainable economic growth, poverty eradication and other urgent goals pledged at the Rio+20 conference.

Moreover, the UNCCD is one of the founding institutions of the Collaborative Partnership on Forests (CPF), a policy forum and partnership on all types of forests, including dry forests. In collaboration with other organizations of the CPF, the UNCCD facilitates the UNFCCC, UNFF and other processes related to REDD+.

To foster SLM/SFM with the aim of climate change mitigation and adaptation, the UNCCD COP10 adopted the Advocacy Policy Framework (APF) on Climate Change which invites Parties to include considerations on DLDD in their national REDD+ processes. In addition, the UNCCD secretariat encourages country Parties to include REDD+ strategies in their National Action Programmes (NAPs) to combat DLDD and build synergies between DLDD, climate change and biodiversity activities.

In 2011, the UNCCD organized for the first time the 'Land for Life Award' competition to promote and foster SFM/SLM in arid, semi-arid, and dry sub-humid areas by awarding projects that showcase best practices. Applications received for the first two rounds demonstrate that many of the initiatives aiming at sustainable use of forest resources and their rehabilitation do have the potential for inclusion in the REDD+ mechanism in the near future. The UNCCD will play a role in supporting dry forest countries interested and/or participating in REDD+ initiatives

Figure 1: Map of Dry Forest Regions, modified by the UNCCD.
Source: FAO - Global Ecological Zones for the Global Forest Resources Assessment 2010



¹ Forest is defined as land spanning more than 0.5 hectares with trees higher than 5 meters and a canopy cover of more than 10 percent, or trees able to reach these thresholds in situ.