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Opinion: How to reduce drought disasters? Try better land management

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Disasters – from droughts and dust storms to hurricanes and floods – are becoming more frequent and more severe as our planet warms. They bring a high cost to human life, economies, and ecosystems. But how we deal with these disasters is not keeping pace.

Drought, for example, affects every region of our globe. In the last few months, North Korea saw its worst drought in 37 years, Alaska saw its first extreme drought, and Australia had to import wheat for the first time in 12 years as drought ate into grain production.

Despite their frequency, however, we deal with these events the same way we always have. We respond to the disasters, struggling to cope with the damage to economies, health, property, infrastructure, and security – but we don't do enough to prevent these calamities from happening in the first place. We have repeated this cycle for years.

It doesn't have to be this way, as Sunday's [International Day for Disaster Risk Reduction](#) reminds us. By shifting to proactive strategies that put sustainable land-management and restoration at the heart of disaster preparedness, we can help communities increase their resilience and help countries manage soaring response and recovery costs.

The statistics tell us that we must act with urgency.

According to the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, [droughts affected 60 million people](#) each year between 2000 and 2017. Droughts destroy enough farm produce to feed [81 million people](#) for a year, the World Bank says. And droughts cost farmers in the developing world [\\$29 billion a year](#) from 2005 to 2015, according to a study by the Food and Agricultural Organisation.

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The list goes on. There are both short- and long-term health impacts. A dry shock in the first 1,000 days of a child's life means they are more likely to grow up stunted, undernourished, and unwell. Competition for water and productive land brings [conflict](#), civil unrest, and forced [migration](#). Women are disproportionately hit, having to spend hours each day [searching for water](#).

But changing our relationship with the land can rewrite this narrative.

Firstly, we can build the land's resilience to disasters, and with it, resilience in the livelihoods of the most vulnerable households and communities. We can do this by, for instance, boosting soil productivity and restoring forests that store water during rainy spells.

Secondly, these types of changes will reduce sand and dust storms arising from bare and dry soils. These storms – which affect at least [150 countries](#) – damage human health, agriculture, industry, transportation, as well as water and air quality. In May 2018, for example, high-velocity dust storms swept across parts of northern India, killing 125 people and injuring more than 200. Up to 25 percent of global dust is caused by human activity.

Thirdly, changing our relationship with the land will reverse biodiversity and ecosystem decline, which is threatening human health and livelihoods across the planet. By restoring land and habitats, and adopting land-management practices that boost biodiversity, we create flourishing ecosystems.

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Fourthly, better land management will help limit climate change. The first 30 centimetres of soil alone [holds 680 billion tonnes of carbon](#) – almost double what is in the atmosphere. But the land can take far more carbon if we prioritise agricultural practices that restore soil carbon and promote afforestation.

In short, properly managing and restoring land wouldn't just mitigate the effects of drought or sand and dust storms: it would bring benefits across the global development targets known as the Sustainable Development Goals.

The world is acting to seize all of these benefits. At the most recent meeting of the UN Convention to Combat Desertification in New Delhi last month, nations made decisions that could reduce the likelihood of extreme events and build the resilience that communities and ecosystems need to bounce back.

For instance, they agreed to promote land-management practices that prevent and reduce new sources of sand and dust, increase land cover to reduce ecosystem collapse, absorb carbon, and build resilience.

They also agreed to share tools to plan for and respond to drought effectively and to reduce the risk of human-induced water scarcity. They set up a [global process](#) to search for ways to enhance early action, which is cheaper than emergency responses. They pledged to make land and nature a major part of the solution to climate change by stopping land degradation and by accelerating land restoration and rehabilitation.

These decisions make fiscal sense. For example, restoring 350 million hectares of degraded landscapes over the next decade will cost an estimated \$800 billion. But it could generate benefits from thriving, healthy [ecosystems](#) worth substantially more.

The decisions taken last month are a good start, but we must rapidly accelerate – and implement – these types of promises. Governments cannot do it alone. I urge you to consider what you can do to support changes that can minimise future disasters for the benefit of people, the economy, and the planet.

(TOP PHOTO: A caravan of camels walks through the desert in the middle of a dust storm near Mao, Western Chad)