Restoration. Land. Recovery.

We build back better with healthy land

1. Introduction

Across the globe, calls have been growing for a green recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. Such a green recovery would create resilient economies. It would spark strong and urgent action on climate change. It would reverse the loss of nature and biodiversity that is eating away at the foundations of human existence and increasing the risk of future pandemics. This may seem like a big ask, but there is one approach that can help to solve all of the problems at once: restoring degraded land. Restoring degraded land creates jobs and raises income levels. It increases food security. It takes carbon out of the atmosphere, slowing climate change. It brings back biodiversity. It protects against the impacts of climate change.

With trillions of dollars being put into pandemic recovery, and restoration commitments covering almost 1 billion hectares already in place as the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration gets underway, we have a real chance to build back better with healthy land.

2. Objective

The goal of the 2021 Desertification and Drought Day (DDD) is to demonstrate that investing in healthy land as part of a green recovery is a smart economic decision – not just in terms of creating jobs and rebuilding livelihoods, but in terms of insulating economies from future crises caused by climate change and nature loss, and accelerating progress on all 17 Sustainable Development Goals. By doing so, DDD aims to drive actions to protect and restore natural ecosystems as we recover from COVID-19. To achieve this objective, UNCCD will work with the Ministry of Environment and Energy of Costa Rica, the host of the global observance, to encourage households, communities, the private sector and countries to have a better relationship with nature.

3. Problem statement

The land is the basis of our food, feed and fibre production systems. It is home to a vast part

of the global biodiversity and provides ecosystem services such as clean water, air and climate regulation. But growing demand for these goods, combined with expanding cities and infrastructure, is rapidly encroaching upon nature and its support to people. As land degrades and becomes unproductive, natural areas are cleared and converted. This means more greenhouse gas emissions and less biodiversity. It also means fewer wild spaces that serve as a buffer to zoonoses such as COVID-19 and protect from extreme climate events such as droughts, floods, sand and dust storms. Evidence shows that the economic crisis caused by COVID-19 restriction measures led to the loosening of environmental standards and regulations for companies and industries in some countries to pursue quick economic recovery.

Where we stand

- ✓ Nearly three quarters of the Earth's ice-free land has been transformed, mainly to meet the demand for food, raw materials and human settlement.
- ✓ Land degradation is negatively impacting the well-being of at least 3.2 billion people.[1]
- ✓ Land use change is the primary transmission pathway for emerging infectious diseases of humans, over 60% of which are zoonotic.[2]
- ✓ Nearly one million species are at risk of extinction. Changes in land use is one of the main drivers.[3]
- ✓ Land degradation is a lost opportunity for massive carbon sequestration. If humans continue to emit greenhouse gases at current rates, global temperature will rise more than 1.5 degrees Celsius target within decades.[4]

4. Solutions

Current commitments from over 100 countries specify the restoration of almost 1 billion hectares of land over the next decade – an area almost the size of China.[5] If we restore this land, we can deliver massive benefits for people and the planet.

Investing in land restoration creates jobs and generates economic benefits, providing livelihoods at a time when hundreds of millions of jobs are being lost. To give just one example, in Niger efforts to naturally regenerate the land increased tree cover by up to 20 times over 30 years, helping to double farmers' incomes and improving grain yields by 10 per cent on average.[6]

Land-based restoration is particularly helpful for women and youth, who tend to be marginalized in times of crisis. Innovative restoration approaches could not only bring young job seekers back to their communities but also reduce workloads. For example, women,

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[1] IPBES (2018): Summary for policymakers of the assessment report on land degradation and restoration of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services. R. Scholes et al, (eds.)
[2] https://www.unccd.int/sites/default/files/documents/2020-06/1498_UNCCD_%20Covid_%20layout-low%20res-1.pdf
[3] https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/05/1037941
[4] https://unfccc.int/news/10-science-must-knows-on-climate-change-presented-at-cop23
[5] https://catalogue.unccd.int/1599_pbl-2020-goals-and-commitments-for-the-restoration-decade-3906.pdf
[6] https://www.unccd.int/sites/default/files/documents/2020-06/1498_UNCCD_%20Covid_%20layout-low%20res-1.pdf

especially in developing nations, are strongly represented in agricultural production and land management and are often responsible for meeting the basic nutritional needs of their families. They have much to gain from the increased productivity of restored lands, and often have knowledge that can be used to increase the success of restoration projects. The UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration will support initiatives that provide entrepreneurial youths working in ecosystem restoration with the tools they need to succeed.

Investing in land restoration also boosts food security. Of the 1 billion hectares covered by these commitments, 250 million can be restored to produce food. In addition to increasing food and nutrition security, economic security is also improved when degraded land is restored. This in turn facilitates economic empowerment, which raises the standard of living and quality of life for communities.[7]

Restoring forests, wetlands and other ecosystems mitigates against climate change and restores nature's defences against disasters and extreme weather events such as droughts, floods, and sand and dust storms. It provides a natural buffer against zoonotic diseases.

Between now and 2030, it is estimated that the restoration of 350 million hectares of degraded ecosystems could remove up to 26 gigatons of greenhouse gases from the atmosphere – close to almost half of what the world emitted in 2019 – and return USD 9 trillion in ecosystem services.[8] The UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration, which starts this year, is an opportunity to ramp up and scale out these efforts to prevent, halt, and reverse the loss and degradation of ecosystems worldwide.

The UNCCD is therefore calling on all members of the global community to treat the land as a limited and precious natural capital, prioritize its health in the pandemic recovery and push hard to restore the land during the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration. Everyone has a role to play because everyone has a stake in the future.

5. Actions you can take to help

Governments and businesses must deliver. But each one of us can help to protect and restore the land. Here are some things you can do.

1. Raise awareness about ways to build back better with healthy land in your area.
    - ✓ Rate your community's harmony with nature and propose solutions. For example, you can see the potential of the land on which you stand by using a mobile app such as LandPKS. https://landpotential.org/
    - ✓ Experts – such as associations of landscapers, land economists and agricultural university student chapters – can help their urban and rural communities to understand and increase the value of their land through better landscaping, restoration and community conservation projects.
    - ✓ Be informed about the costs of the pollution generated by your everyday consumption

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[7] https://www.unccd.int/issues/land-and-youth; United Nations Environment Programme (2019): Land Restoration for Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals: An International Resource Panel Think Piece, p. 51.

[8] https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/speech/solutions-planet-crisis#:~:text=Between%20now%20and%202030%2C%20the,world's%20total%20emissions%20in%202019.

https://offset.climateneutralnow.org/footprintcalc

- ✓ Support local economies and reduce unnecessary CO_2 emissions caused by long-distance transportation of food and other consumables.

2. Be an advocate for promoting sound policy for nature and economic recovery.
   - ✓ Write a letter urging local authorities to implement commitments on land restoration, drought resilience and land use planning.
   - ✓ Propose 'pro-land' projects to your city, such as increasing biodiversity in parks, beautifying and greening neighbourhoods, promoting local food, etc.
   - ✓ Join groups that cares about environment and flag the important role land plays in building back better.

3. Start a project and involve environmentally conscious companies as your partner.

4. Join the global movement of 10 actions for the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration. https://www.decadeonrestoration.org/strategy

5. Become one of the UNCCD Land Heroes.
   https://www.unccd.int/issuesland-and-youth/unccd-land-heroes

6. Leave No Trace, Leave Green Trace Movement
   https://lnt.org/
   a. Support the conservation of protected lands.
   b. Participate in the land restoration activities.

Get involved. Involve others. Wherever you live and whatever you do, you can contribute to ecosystem restoration and a stronger recovery from the pandemic.