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### The Peace Forest Initiative

#### *Summary*

The first Global Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN) Forum was held on 4–5 July 2018 in Seoul, the Republic of Korea. The Forum showcased experiences and lessons learned on environmental cooperation promoting peace and security in cross-border areas, such as Cordillera del Condor Peace Park (Ecuador–Peru), among others.


The Forum also highlighted the pivotal importance of LDN implementation as the accelerator for achieving multiple Sustainable Development Goals. Inspired by the discussions, the idea of a Peace Forest Initiative was presented to the Forum to demonstrate the added value of LDN target-setting, implementation and monitoring in cross-border, post-conflict situations.

With the assistance of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification secretariat, like-minded country Parties have engaged in initial consultations to further shape the rationale and objectives of the Peace Forest Initiative with the aim of its formal recognition at the fourteenth session of the Conference of the Parties as an evolving but promising Initiative to further the implementation of the Convention.

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## I. Introduction

1. Forest and land degradation undermines the foundation of human prosperity and well-being. It threatens our food and water supplies, our climate and the biodiversity that underpins the ecosystems that sustain us. Land degradation is one of the critical aspects of the gathering environmental crisis that humanity must address.
2. Land and forest degradation in conflict areas is an emerging concern for the global community. Globally, around 1.8 billion people – over 20 per cent of the world’s population – live in fragile, conflict-affected countries.<sup>1</sup> The long-term negative effects on communities are exacerbated by their vulnerability and undermine their resilience to climate-related disasters, such as extreme heat, droughts, and floods. People in conflict areas are considered the most vulnerable and frequently suffer from a lack of basic needs (e.g. food, clean water, fuel) traditionally obtained from the land and forest.
3. Prolonged conflict is a significant root cause of degradation of natural resources and the ecosystem services they provide.<sup>2</sup> Conflict has both direct and indirect impacts on land. It can directly destroy land and forest through physical damage, such as soil erosion and contamination when people are forced to use land and forest resources unsustainably. Scarcity of basic needs tends to drive people to overexploit already depleted natural resources which can lead to irreversible land degradation or desertification in the drylands. In most conflict areas, there are little or no governance, institutions or policies to help effectively avoid, reduce and reverse land degradation. This increases the risk of land and environmental degradation in post-conflict areas.
4. Poor governance, combined with limited access to natural resources (e.g. forest and pasture lands), is often seen as a primary driver and amplifying factor in a given conflict situation.<sup>3</sup> For example, in the Lake Chad basin, the increased variability of rainfall, coupled with tribal conflict, has restricted local communities’ access to land and water resources, in some cases leading to internal displacement. When combined with rapid deforestation, these multiple stresses have resulted in the loss of livelihoods, decreased resilience to external shocks and, in some cases, the increased risk of sand and dust storms.
5. Deforestation is one of the most common negative environmental impacts resulting from conflicts, including the associated greenhouse gas emissions and loss of ecosystem services.<sup>4,5</sup> Severe deforestation often occurs after conflict due to the increased need for fuelwoods, reconstruction or development.<sup>6</sup> In average there was a 68% increase of annual forest loss in the five years,<sup>7</sup>.
6. There is an urgent need for interventions to protect environmental assets in conflict and post-conflict areas. It is imperative to restore degraded/abandoned land and forest to sustain their vital functions and thus support the livelihoods of affected communities. Only human agency can trigger landscape regeneration by working in harmony with natural systems and shifting from an extractive to a regenerative mindset. Instead of just taking from the land, we can take and give back in equal measure.
7. Sustainable land management (SLM) is a powerful measure to protect people from the loss and damage caused by land degradation. Land degradation neutrality (LDN)

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<sup>1</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2018), States of Fragility 2018, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development Publishing, Paris, <<https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264302075-en>>.

<sup>2</sup> <<https://environment-review.yale.edu/land-degradation-war-and-conflict-regions-0>>.

<sup>3</sup> <<https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/Terra%20Incognita%20-%20Clingendael%20Report.pdf>>.

<sup>4</sup> David M.Landholmab, Prajal Pradhana, Juergen P.Kropp. Diverging forest land use dynamics induced by armed conflict across the tropics, *Global Environmental Change*, 2019 <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2019.03.006>>.

<sup>5</sup> Elsa M.Orday. Political shifts and changing forests: Effects of armed conflict on forest conservation in Rwanda. *Global Ecology and Conservation*, 2015 <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gecco.2015.01.013>>.

<sup>6</sup> Issues Brief: Forests and Violent Conflict, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2005.

<sup>7</sup> Nelson Grima, Simron J. Singh. How the end of armed conflicts influence forest cover and subsequently ecosystem services provision? An analysis of four case studies in biodiversity hotspots. *Land Use Policy*, 2019; 81: 267 DOI: 10.1016/j.landusepol.2018.10.056: <<https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2018/12/181205134032.htm>>.

provides a flexible platform for integrating policy-making in the pursuit of multiple environmental and socioeconomic objectives. LDN actions can safeguard rural communities by providing ecosystem services, including clean water, food, biomass fuel, animal fodder and jobs, and thus improve the living conditions of local communities affected by land degradation.

8. Studies on the relationship between natural resources and disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration have found that 50 per cent of former combatants participating in reintegration programmes chose agriculture (the figure was as high as 80 per cent in some cases)<sup>8</sup> as their preferred method of reintegration. This underscores the opportunity offered by LDN activities focusing on the rehabilitation of degraded land to first stabilize, then transform society.

9. The shared management of land, forests, water, wildlife and protected areas are cited as examples of environmental cooperation for peacebuilding. One example of environmental conservation as a means to mediate hostility between nations is Cordillera del Condor Peace Park (Ecuador–Peru). In 1999, Ecuador established the El Cónдор Park, while Peru created an Ecological Protection Zone and the Santiago-Comaina Reserved Zone. These peace parks were established as mechanisms for bilateral cooperation. They were used to promote the social, cultural and economic development of local communities in both countries. In addition to helping to resolve a long-term territorial dispute between the two countries, the transboundary agreement initiated an important phase of bilateral diplomacy, cooperation and commercial relations in the post-conflict phase.

## II. Rationale

### A. People-centric approach

10. In 2015, 193 United Nations Member States adopted the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to end poverty, promote peace and preserve the planet for future generations. These include SDG15 on “Life on Land”, because all life on earth depends on access to healthy and productive land. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development upholds that the SDGs be integrated, indivisibly global in nature and universally applicable, taking into account different national realities, capacities and levels of development. They set out what all countries should strive to achieve in order to restore a balance between humans and the environment that is good for people, the planet, prosperity, peace and partnership where no one is left behind. The challenge is to move from ambition to action.

11. SDG target 15.3 on LDN is a building block and accelerator for the achievement of multiple SDGs. By securing the ground beneath our feet, achieving the overarching goals for sustainable development will become more realistic for current and future generations. LDN can play a critical role in accelerating the achievement of many SDGs: maintaining and restoring productive land resources can make a significant contribution to tackling climate change, biodiversity loss, food insecurity and disaster risks, while maintaining ecosystem services and ensuring shared prosperity and well-being. Healthy and productive land is an essential natural asset with unparalleled importance, serving as a common engine for sustainable economic growth and a source of livelihoods for billions worldwide, including the most vulnerable populations.

12. Natural ecosystems do not recognize political boundaries. It is the shared responsibility of humanity to protect and care for the environment, including land and forest, which will in turn care for humanity. A nature-based solution promotes actions to protect, sustainably manage and restore natural or modified ecosystems that address societal challenges effectively and adaptively, offering benefits in terms of both human well-being and biodiversity.<sup>9</sup> It is a critical moment to channel fragmented efforts into concerted action to ensure our collective well-being through cooperation and collaboration

<sup>8</sup> <[https://environmentalpeacebuilding.org/assets/Documents/LibraryItem\\_000\\_Doc\\_148.pdf](https://environmentalpeacebuilding.org/assets/Documents/LibraryItem_000_Doc_148.pdf)>.

<sup>9</sup> <<https://www.iucn.org/commissions/commission-ecosystem-management/our-work/nature-based-solutions>>.

on the sustainable management of natural ecosystems, including the land and forest spanning our borders.

## **B. Land degradation neutrality is an effective tool**

13. LDN represents a paradigm shift in land management policies and practices. As a voluntary and flexible process, the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) Parties recognized LDN as “a strong vehicle for driving implementation of the UNCCD”,<sup>10</sup> with the adoption of various decisions. At the thirteenth session of the UNCCD Conference of the Parties in 2017, country Parties formally adopted LDN as a key goal in the UNCCD 2018–2030 Strategic Framework.<sup>11</sup> Pursuant to decision 3/COP. 12, LDN serves as the guiding principle for the implementation of the Convention.

14. It is a unique approach that counterbalances the expected loss of productive land with the recovery of degraded areas. The LDN framework provides a means to verify the status of land and forest degradation, understand its magnitude and evaluate its current and potential impact on the environment and livelihoods. Stakeholders can use the LDN framework to identify an optimal mix of policies and interventions aligned with existing international agreements and initiatives. Countries with different economic and geographical conditions are now successfully integrating voluntary LDN targets and measures into their planning systems.

15. LDN provides an additional opportunity to forge a partnership to support SLM with maximized synergy and complementarity. Under the overarching principles of the Nature based Solution,<sup>12</sup> LDN can serve as a linchpin in addressing land-related environmental issues such as watershed management, drought, biodiversity conservation, disaster risk management and sand and dust storms at a landscape scale that often transcends national boundaries.

16. LDN can further play a role in sustainable ecosystem management in fragile and conflict-prone areas. Achieving LDN by jointly caring for land and forests can foster confidence-building and underpin our collective security and peace. Building on existing mechanisms and/or initiatives, LDN can forge collaboration to mobilize further exchanges and practical actions between concerned stakeholders. Where governance systems for SLM are not in place, LDN can provide an entry point for environmental cooperation.

## **C. Contribution to global priorities**

17. LDN actions can safeguard rural communities by providing multiple benefits. They will boost livelihoods, secure food and water supplies, store vast amounts of carbon and conserve biodiversity while helping to achieve many other SDGs (2, 3, 6, 7, 13, 15, 16 and 17). They contribute to improving the basic living conditions of populations and communities in fragile and conflict-affected areas as well as preventing resource-related disputes and social unrest.

18. Forests play a vital role in the achievement of LDN. Restoration, rehabilitation and the sustainable management of forests can help achieve multiple SDGs.<sup>13</sup> For instance, forest restoration would create direct and indirect economic gains in both the short- and long-term, including increased forest products (e.g. wood, biomass and non-timber products), food security and health, reduced soil erosion, disaster reduction, improved watershed and carbon sequestration. It may contribute to economic growth by providing job opportunities and reducing the maintenance cost of major infrastructure.

19. While contributing to global goals and targets, LDN actions can facilitate the establishment of regional priorities and environmental goals. Broader and strengthened

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<sup>10</sup> Decision 3/COP.12.

<sup>11</sup> Decision 3/COP.13 and decision 7/COP.13.

<sup>12</sup> <<https://www.iucn.org/commissions/commission-ecosystem-management/our-work/nature-based-solutions>>.

<sup>13</sup> <<https://sdg.iisd.org/news/special-forests-issue-focuses-on-role-of-forests-in-achieving-sdgs/>>, 19 March 2019.

LDN cooperation at the regional level could be ensured with proper investment opportunities and engagement of local communities which is at the heart of the LDN approach. Cooperation and collaboration can also build upon ongoing regional processes and initiatives related to sustainable land and forest management.

### **III. Strategic vision and approach**

#### **A. Vision**

20. The Peace Forest Initiative seeks to promote peace and confidence-building through cooperation and collaboration on the rehabilitation and restoration of degraded land and forest in post-conflict situations, drawing on various success stories.<sup>14</sup> The Peace Forest Initiative will nurture and enhance partnerships in the implementation of LDN in cross-border areas, including areas of mutual interest.

21. The Peace Forest Initiative is global and meant to serve as a partnership framework to facilitate exchanges and promote peace between involved stakeholders through transboundary cooperation. It can help enhance common understanding and lead to tangible action on the ground to protect and restore ecosystems. This will, in turn, strengthen relationships at all levels and contribute to intensifying partnership activities and scaling up cooperation in addressing various cross-border issues. Under the Peace Forest Initiative, practical steps with the right institutions and governance systems in place to manage land more efficiently, equitably and sustainably, can promote peace and well-being in fragile and post-conflict situations.

22. LDN has the potential to serve as a vehicle to facilitate cross-border cooperation. On sustainable land and forest management in the context of LDN, cooperation can play a significant role in sustainable reconstruction and confidence-building while contributing to SDG 16 on peace. Cooperation can improve mutual understanding, help identify common needs and enable land and ecosystem restoration. Long-lasting cooperation and tangible action will help provide stability, security and sustainable peace.

23. LDN and SDG 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions) can be effectively linked through the Peace Forest Initiative. SDG 16 seeks to promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development. Together with efficient and transparent regulations towards protecting individual rights, institutional capacity to deliver inclusive environmental protection is crucial to advancing many SDGs, including SDG 16. It is important that governments, civil society and communities, including women and youth, work together to implement lasting solutions that reduce violence and ensure inclusive participation at all times. In this spirit, the Peace Forest Initiative advocates broader partnerships engaging diverse stakeholders.

24. The overall goal of the Peace Forest Initiative is to contribute to building confidence and promoting peace through transboundary cooperation in SLM in fragile and conflict-affected regions, especially post-conflict situations.

#### **B. Approach and principles for action**

25. The Peace Forest Initiative aims to function as a practical platform to facilitate cooperation and collaboration on SLM, sustainable forest management and LDN in cross-border post-conflict situations, including exploring a common LDN target(s), joint project development, implementation and monitoring.

26. The objective of the Initiative is to forge a broader and concrete partnership engaging diverse stakeholders, including governments, civil society organizations (CSOs), local communities, donors, technical experts and international actors including relevant United Nations entities such as the United Nations Headquarters/Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, and the Peacebuilding Support Office. It is expected to facilitate

<sup>14</sup> Environmental Peacebuilding: Conditions for Success, 2007.

technical cooperation among concerned countries in related disciplines of sustainable land and forest management and restoration. The Initiative could also support individual approaches and link numerous activities to enhance coordination and effectiveness in the context of LDN and the SDGs.

27. The Initiative will be supported by a set of principles for concerted and actionable interventions based on the contexts, capacities and comparative advantages of involved stakeholders. These principles include:

- (a) Ensuring equitable access to and shared benefits from restored natural resources;
- (b) Strengthening the enabling environment, including the governance system, for the implementation of LDN;
- (c) Encouraging cooperation among government officials, local communities, CSOs and private sectors to manage land and forests in sustainable ways;
- (d) Making women, youth, and children an integral part of the implementation of these activities;
- (e) Advocating and mainstreaming actions to promote confidence and reconciliation.

### **C. Expected impact**

28. The Peace Forest Initiative has the potential to substantially enhance trust and build confidence. Cooperative efforts on actions such as sustainable land and forest management and land rehabilitation can facilitate exchanges and trigger economic collaboration, while also supporting the realization of SDGs targets, notably LDN. This would ultimately contribute to reduced political tension and reconciliation or may be embedded in permanent peacebuilding processes. Three impact areas have been identified:

- (a) Focus area 1: Reduced tension, enhanced trust and increased peace and security through exchanges and cooperation in the field of sustainable land and forest management and restoration. This would be achieved by:
  - (i) Establishing a platform/framework to facilitate exchanges, including multi-stakeholder dialogue and meetings, and thematic/technical working groups on sustainable land and forest management;
  - (ii) Promoting dialogue among relevant authorities, technical meetings including workshops, seminars and training sessions, ensuring the engagement of diverse stakeholders, including local communities;
- (b) Focus area 2: Sustainable management and restoration of degraded land and forests. This would be achieved through:
  - (i) An appropriate governance scheme/strategy/plan in place and implemented for sustainable land and management;
  - (ii) Joint target-setting for SLM and the co-development of transformative projects and programmes (TPP);
  - (iii) Joint efforts to mobilize resources to implement projects and programmes;
- (c) Focus area 3: Improved food security and nutrition, and the delivery of vital ecosystem services through the restoration of degraded land and the sustainable management of natural resources, including forests. More particularly, this would be achieved by:
  - (i) Enhancing land productivity, ecosystem services and biodiversity conservation by adopting SLM techniques, methodologies and approaches;
  - (ii) Improving access to land and other productive resources, including for women, youth and highly food-insecure vulnerable populations;

(iii) Reducing vulnerability to climate crisis and natural disasters.

29. By 2030, it is anticipated that the Initiative, benefitting from other local, national and regional actions, will have contributed to the following improvements:

- (a) Promoting exchanges and cooperation between relevant partners through joint activities related to land and forest management and restoration in the context of LDN;
- (b) Facilitating sustainable land and forest management, ecosystem restoration and natural disaster prevention with the participation of like-minded countries in the targeted region;
- (c) Ensuring stakeholder engagement and empowering local communities, non-governmental organizations and private sectors, with special focus on vulnerable groups, including indigenous people, women, and children;
- (d) Promoting sustainable economic growth and more resilient livelihoods, supported by diversified production, increased income and employment opportunities for the most vulnerable;
- (e) Building the capacity of government officials and local communities to implement sustainable land and forest management practices;
- (f) Strengthening peace and trust between countries by restoring degraded lands and forests;
- (g) Contributing to achieving LDN and other relevant SDG targets, including SDG 16.

## IV. Implementation

### A. Operational pathway and activities

30. The Peace Forest Initiative will be implemented through a set of joint programmes and projects in partnership with relevant actors at all levels, including governments, CSOs, the private sector, academia, regional institutions, appropriate United Nations entities etc. Implementation will be centred around the four building blocks used for national voluntary LDN target-setting<sup>15</sup>, namely:

- (a) Leveraging LDN: facilitating the engagement of decision-makers and stakeholders involved in land management and the LDN target-setting process;
- (b) Assessing LDN: strengthening countries' capacity to make informed decisions on what action to take by assessing the current state of land and the drivers of land degradation, using the best available data;
- (c) Setting LDN targets and associated measures: supporting countries in defining country ambitions in combating land degradation by defining LDN targets and measures; and
- (d) Achieving LDN: helping countries to create an enabling environment by integrating LDN into national policies and identifying investment opportunities along with LDN TPP.

31. Building on the national voluntary LDN target-setting process and taking into account the national context of the LDN process, the operational pathway of the Peace Forest Initiative is summarized as follows:

- (a) **Set common LDN target(s):** under the framework of the Initiative, countries agree to set a common target, if appropriate, preferably focusing on a simple but spatially-explicit target relevant to two or more countries, i.e. forest landscape rehabilitation (area/biomass/productivity), while taking into consideration potential joint TPP at

<sup>15</sup> <<https://knowledge.unccd.int/knowledge-products-and-pillars/land-degradation-neutrality-target-setting-building-blocks>>.

landscape level. An assessment may be made, if necessary, with technical assistance from experts, and may include potential common LDN (sub)target areas for joint activity, indicators and monitoring, and modalities of operation for project implementation, all of which will form a basis for a joint project. Joint meetings/workshops/training sessions are recommended to support the implementation of the Initiative.

(b) **Develop joint projects** to implement the common LDN target, where applicable. Project development may be conducted while avoiding duplication with the UNCCD/Global Mechanism LDN TPP in collaboration with other partners, including United Nations agencies, organizations and specialized agencies. Project components may include:

- (i) Sustainable land management and restoration, community-based forestry, community-based rangeland management;
- (ii) Agroforestry, reforestation, forest landscape restoration, silvopastoral systems, paludiculture;
- (iii) Ecotourism and diverse forest recreation services for the good health and well-being of the people;
- (iv) Capacity-building relative to sustainable land and forest management for government officials and local communities.

(c) **Joint project implementation:** project sites should be jointly defined by the countries, e.g. transboundary area, shared mountain system, watershed etc., preferably at landscape scale. Joint project implementation should be delivered by relevant organizations, institutions and United Nations agencies, such as the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations and the United Nations Development Programme, if appropriate. Ideally, the efforts should be upscaled with the economic assistance to cover the full range of degraded forest/land toward achieving the voluntary LDN target by 2030. As an initial step, a Peace Forest may be established in symbolic locations.

(d) Activities would be documented and lessons learned shared for application in other cross-border post-conflict situations.

32. The overall operation of the Initiative could be supported by the UNCCD secretariat in collaboration with relevant United Nations entities, including the United Nations Headquarters/Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, and the Peacebuilding Support Office. This would entail forming a regional steering group with the participation of donors, interested partners and concerned countries to facilitate the implementation of the Initiative.

33. Partnership is an essential element of consolidated and integrated cooperation and collaboration in the Peace Forest Initiative. A tiered partnership structure could be established at different levels, including high-level political dialogues, technical working groups and community-level consultations. A multi-layered partnership such as this one would facilitate and concretize engagement and exchange among stakeholders in the Initiative, ensuring political commitment and engagement.

## **B. Financing mechanisms**

34. The implementation of the Peace Forest Initiative could be supported by various technical and financial partners. At the initial stage, financing should be focused on existing mechanisms that support LDN process. This includes in-kind resources, donors, partnerships and initiatives such as the Changwon Initiative. Additional options include traditional donors and development partners, including the Global Environment Facility, the Green Climate Fund and the United Nations Peacebuilding Fund. The establishment of a multi-partner fund dedicated to the Peace Forest Initiative could be explored.

35. Innovative financing mechanisms could be focused on achieving transformative changes at large landscape scales. This would require a rethinking of both the rural economy and its enabling environment, including incentives. Innovative public-private



partnerships and voluntary private, non-market funding mechanisms can promote shared stewardship, while promoting environmental and economic resilience.<sup>16</sup> Public-private financing mechanisms combine government support with market-based mechanisms to provide both private and public benefits. Voluntary private, non-market funding mechanisms are flexible, transparent and targeted at the local level for specific activities and tangible outcomes.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> <[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/37789874\\_Innovative\\_financing\\_mechanisms\\_for\\_sustainable\\_ecosystem\\_management](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/37789874_Innovative_financing_mechanisms_for_sustainable_ecosystem_management)>.

<sup>17</sup> <<https://knowledge.unccd.int/publication/northeast-asia>>.