

LAND DEGRADATION

Healthy landscapes are fundamental to the health of life on earth. From food production to quality air and water, nutrient cycling and soil formation, we depend on our land for the very basics of existence.

Yet today, one-third of the Earth's land surface is degraded, affecting more than 2.6 billion people and costing us as much as \$10.6 trillion every year in lost ecosystem services.

Land degradation and desertification, largely due to deforestation and unsustainable land use, are amongst the most pressing problems facing the world today. Without a long-term solution to this issue, the world risks increasing food shortages, rising poverty, and increased migration; all of which threaten the stability of societies and, of course, our sustainable development ambitions.

UN Environment, working in partnership with the Global Environment Facility (GEF), aims to be part of this solution. Together, we have worked on more than 160 projects, promoting sustainable land management practices and helping countries around the world to restore degraded land.

CASE STUDY

The winds of change

The Harmattan wind that blows across northern Ghana from November to March every year brings hot, dry days to the small farming community of Zoborgu. During this time, wildfires are common, sometimes devastating grasslands, crops, livestock and homes. They also threaten the local forest, a vital source of food, fuel, construction materials, and herbal medicines.

Just five years ago, the land around Zoborgu was deliberately set alight to destroy crop residues after harvest; a practice that allowed for quicker ploughing to plant the next season's crops, and killed snakes, scorpions, insects and other pests. For these benefits, the farmers were willing to take a chance on the fire spreading. However, what they didn't know was that the burning was also damaging the soil, reducing crop yields, decreasing profits, and ultimately reducing their livelihoods.

Now this burning is a thing of the past. Crop yields have improved dramatically, there is less soil erosion, and the local pond provides water year round for irrigation, livestock and domestic use. Moreover, the farmers are no longer putting their homes or their forest at risk.

This fundamental change in farming practice is a result of the UN Environment-GEF *Stimulating Community Initiatives in Sustainable Land*

Management project, a regional initiative working with local communities to identify, improve and upscale the best examples of existing sustainable land management practices.

By respecting local leadership and tapping into indigenous knowledge, the project has shown farmers from Ghana, to Morocco, South Africa and Uganda how their communities can benefit from sustainable land management.

In Zoborgu, farmers have doubled their productivity per acre – and thus their incomes – alongside seeing decreased erosion and better water retention in their fields.

"Zoborgu's farmlands, forests and dams are the envy of other communities around us," Chief of Zoborgu, Naa Mahama Yakubu says. "It is a big relief to know that by just behaving differently and allowing a little extra labour, a household can more than double its yields and become food self-sufficient."



■ UN Environment-GEF Land Degradation project countries

The UN Environment-GEF partnership in Land Degradation

It is now over 20 years since the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) came into force in 1996. The convention, for which the GEF serves as a financial mechanism, provides a global framework that supports national and regional policies to reverse and prevent desertification and

land degradation in order to support poverty reduction and environmental sustainability.

UN Environment and the GEF share this vision and the strategic plans and frameworks of the convention continue to guide the activities and priorities of the partnership.

To date, the GEF has invested over \$130 million in UN Environment-led land degradation projects across 162 countries, including \$55 million in projects currently under implementation.

The UN Environment-GEF land degradation portfolio currently comprises 54 projects, ranging from smaller enabling activities to medium- and full-size projects. Many of these are in Africa, acknowledging the severe land degradation, drought and desertification problems that this region faces.

Partnership projects that have been developed and implemented include:

- Promoting sustainable land management practices through projects such as *Sustainable Rangeland Management for Biodiversity Conservation and Climate Change Mitigation*
- Establishing the portal of the Performance Review and Assessment of Implementation System (PRAIS) for countries to report to the UN Convention to Combat Desertification
- Building the capacity of countries to meet their obligations under the convention – such as information gathering, development of national and regional strategies, raising of public awareness and capacity building

All dollar (\$) amounts refer to US dollars.



Why UN Environment?

UN Environment brings a wealth of expertise to the GEF sustainable land management portfolio. We contribute sound science to guide national, regional and global decision makers; provide technical assistance and capacity building at country level, promote knowledge management, and undertake awareness raising and advocacy.

UN Environment informs and guides policy frameworks and plans, particularly in relation to international environmental agreements. Our 20-plus-year history of supporting countries to meet their Convention obligations means we have the knowledge, networks and expertise to help our country partners work towards land degradation neutrality, advising on and helping implement the policy and projects needed to conserve and renew terrestrial ecosystem good and services.



Global policy



The GEF serves as a financial mechanism for the UN Convention to Combat Desertification and UN Environment supports countries in the implementation of their convention obligations.

UN Environment has played a key role in:

- Negotiating and informing policy for the Convention
- Providing sound science-to-policy linkages to decision makers
- Developing the Performance Review and Assessment of Implementation System (PRAIS) online reporting tool in support of the Convention. The system is currently used by more than 100 countries to report on progress made towards achieving land degradation neutrality

Technical expertise and resources



Globally recognized for our expertise in land degradation, UN Environment is the leading developer of tools and methodologies that support sustainable land management. Just some of these tools include:

- **Land Degradation Assessment in Drylands:** This set of harmonized tools and methods to assess and quantify the nature, extent, severity and impacts of land degradation has been fundamental in the development of the UN Convention to Combat Desertification agenda in pursuit of land degradation neutrality
- **Community Innovations in Sustainable Land Management: lessons from the field in Africa:** Capturing the knowledge gained through the UN Environment-GEF Stimulating Community Initiatives in Sustainable Land Management project, this book provides landmark insights into the potential of adapting and upscaling community knowledge and initiatives in the field
- **Carbon Benefits Project:** This web-based system has become a global standard and is used by land managers, national governments, UN agencies and other multi-lateral organizations to establish the carbon benefits of sustainable land management initiatives

Successful implementation



- **National Action Programmes:** UN Environment has developed tools to enable more systematic and rigorous reporting on the implementation of the UN Convention to Combat Desertification. We have assisted more than 100 countries to align their National Action Programmes with the 10-year strategy of the Convention, setting out the practical steps and measures to be taken to combat desertification in specific ecosystems
- **Strategic Investment Programme (TerrAfrica):** As part of a GEF-supported programme covering 26 countries in Africa, UN Environment developed strategic indicators and monitoring tools for sustainable land management. The programme resulted in the introduction of sustainable land management practices on 2.7 million hectares of land, benefitting 4.8 million people
- **The Kalahari-Namib Project:** Land degradation is a significant problem in parts of Botswana, Namibia and South Africa. Our activities in partnership with the International Union for Conservation of Nature have enabled communities and policymakers to implement sustainable land management practices, contributing to the restoration of the entire Kalahari-Namib ecosystem and preserving the livelihoods of those who depend on it
- **Sustainable Land Management in the High Pamir and Pamir-Alai Mountains:** Focusing on the transboundary mountain ecosystem shared between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, this GEF-funded project used science-based, sustainable management approaches to protect, restore and improve the mountain ecosystems. Over 6,700 households were engaged in developing and implementing sustainable land management practices, alleviating poverty by enabling mountain communities to take primary responsibility for the productive and sustainable management of mountain resources





Towards a degradation-free future

The land on which we live provides us with many of the necessities of life: food, clothing, building materials and fuel, as well as being a recreational, cultural and spiritual resource. Sustainable management of our land is vital if we are to achieve the target of global land degradation neutrality as set by the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development.

Looking ahead, the UN Environment-GEF partnership is focusing on the issues identified by the Science-Policy Interface of the UN Convention to Combat Desertification as priorities to be addressed in order to achieve land degradation neutrality.

Key initiatives include:

- Creating an enabling environment and promoting policies that encourage land degradation neutrality
- Providing incentives for sustainable land management practices and land restoration
- Exploring and assessing the land degradation resilience of current and proposed land uses to assist in developing effective interventions
- Evaluating the social and economic impacts of land use

- Monitoring the indicators of land degradation neutrality to establish the baseline and targets against which significant changes will be measured in the future
- Incorporating land degradation issues into National Action Programmes and mainstreaming them into national development plans and policymaking
- Highlighting the role of the environment and food security in peace-building initiatives

With populations growing rapidly in many countries, the pressure on agricultural land will increase significantly. Withstanding this pressure, while producing the roughly 50% more food needed by 2050 to meet demand will be a major challenge. For the sake of future generations, it is vital that we restore our degraded land, and prevent further damage, by adopting sustainable management practices now.

The UN Environment-GEF partnership will continue to help countries reach the goals set by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, tackling the root causes of environmental degradation and conserving the land that supports us all. Join us.

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