

# The Convention to Combat Desertification: Relevant or a relict?

*In the ten years since it came into being, the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) has had little or no effect on the further encroachment of deserts. More than 80 countries have submitted National Action Programmes to combat desertification, but they appear to lack the financial and political commitment to implement them. What are the causes behind the UNCCD's weakness? How can the Convention be incorporated more effectively and efficiently into the architecture of international development?*

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The evidence is paradoxical: the global environmental problem of land degradation has severely worsened in recent decades – according to the 2005 Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (MEA) by the United Nations, around 40 percent of the Earth's entire land surface and 70 percent of arid regions are at particular risk from desertification. Yet ten years after it entered into force, the importance of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) as an instrument of development cooperation has dwindled considerably. According to the MEA assessments, one-sixth of the world's population is already directly affected by the consequences of desertification in the Earth's arid zones. Nevertheless, despite being tailored explicitly towards resource conservation and poverty reduction in these regions, so far the UNCCD appears to have been incapable of living up to the expectations vested in it as an «environment and development convention». The Millennium Development Goal of halving extreme poverty and hunger by 2015 is looking increasingly utopian, most of all in arid and semiarid regions. An orientation framework like the UNCCD is indeed more vital nowadays than ever. Yet at this moment, the most development-oriented of the Rio Conventions is in danger of slipping from the focus of development policy, not only in the countries affected but also in the donor countries. Why? Does the convention perhaps contain some substantive flaws in its design which make it unfit for its purpose? Or is implementation of the UNCCD simply underfunded because of lacking political commitment by donor countries? What could or should be changed in order to expand the UNCCD into a worthwhile instrument of development cooperation in the context of a reformed international «development architecture»?

## Where we stand

On the surface, the facts tend to cast the Convention as a success story: of the present 191 State Parties, more than 80 of the countries directly affected have submitted National Action Programmes to combat desertification, often drafted with substantial participation by civil society, in which the regional causes of land degradation and effects are specified in detail and entire packages of measures are proposed to address them. In addition, many of these states have convened in groups and jointly drafted Regional and Sub-Regional Action Programmes to enable the cross-border coordination of individual measures.

Throughout this process, the member states not directly affected by desertification processes have certainly demonstrated and continue to demonstrate commitment to technical and financial support for the implementation of these Action Programmes. Germany supports 679 pro-

**The design of the UNCCD as an environment and development convention dealing with the interconnections between desertification and poverty, in all their complexity, made it a tricky undertaking from the outset.**

jects by government and non-governmental implementation organizations which contributed to combatting land degradation in the broadest sense. The measures ranged from investing in erosion control and agroforestry systems, through supporting rural education programmes and local self-help groups, to promoting institution building in the agricultural sector and advice on agricultural policies in the affected regions. The terrain these projects covered was very diverse, in keeping



More than 80 states have produced National Action Programmes. But where are the visible successes?

Photo: FAO/Baidiri

with the complexity of desertification, and each measure in its own way contributed to the implementation of National or Regional Action Programmes. The first international evaluations of these types of Action Programmes and national reports prove that the UNCCD has contributed to greater awareness of the problems involved in the complex issue of land degradation, and overall to the more efficient combatting of desertification.

But that is as far as it goes. Even a cursory glance at the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) of the West African countries, for example, will quickly and strikingly show that despite all the steps taken, land degradation processes such as soil erosion or salinization have not managed to command higher priority on national agendas, even in countries particularly hard-hit by desertification and droughts. Hardly a single PRSP identifies desertification as a principal factor in poverty; the interplays between environmental degradation and poverty are treated as secondary themes at best; and it is virtually impossible to discern any main-

streaming of sustainable land use in national poverty reduction strategies, as the UNCCD demands. Quite obviously, the alarming facts about desertification are not sufficient motivation for governments in the affected countries to set environmental policy priorities which culminate in concrete action within a poverty reduction framework. The lack of coherence between poverty and environmental policy reflects, firstly, the inadequate structural and institutional framework conditions for desertification control and, secondly, the weak political position of the National UNCCD Focal Points, which have been established in many different ministries (e.g. agriculture, forestry or environment). This is one cause of the Convention's insufficient effectiveness to date.

For the State Parties to the Convention not directly affected by desertification, this is undoubtedly a cheap, not to mention politically opportune, statement (depending on their view of the UNCCD). By quoting the claim that many Action Programmes are unduly technocratic, and by insinuating an inherent contradiction in many countries' demands for greater

global commitment to combating desertification when it is not even adequately integrated within their own national political structures, the donor countries can all too easily justify their reluctance to provide technical and political support for the Convention. Such scepticism is manifested, on the one hand, in the diffident efforts to achieve more effective coordination of donor activities, and on the other hand, in the relative unwillingness of many donors to enter into ongoing financial commitments to support implementation of the Action Programmes.

Although the Global Environment Facility (GEF) has been a financing mechanism of the UNCCD since 2002 when it took up «land degradation» as a new focal area, there is no sign of secure long-term funding to implement the Convention in the affected countries; this is clear from the resolutions passed at the last Conference of the Parties in Nairobi in October 2005. The donors' reluctance to support the UNCCD politically and financially can thus be seen as a further reason for the low priority currently given to it when promoting sustainable resource manage-

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ment and poverty reduction in arid regions of the Earth.

## The UNCCD's problems – where do the causes lie?

It would be simplistic to pin the blame for the UNCCD's difficulties on inconsistencies in development policy and financial constraints alone. In our view, the very set-up of the UNCCD as an environment and development convention dealing with the interactions between desertification and poverty, in all their complexity, had inherent flaws from the outset. Specifically, the striking contrast between highly challenging objectives and a minimal level of obligation is a critical hindrance to the UNCCD's effectiveness. In particular, the lack of concrete guidelines for action makes implementation very difficult:

- The objective of the Convention is «... to combat desertification and mitigate the effects of drought in countries experiencing serious drought and/or desertification, particularly in Africa, through effective action at all levels, (...) in the framework of an integrated approach which is consistent with Agenda 21, with a view to contributing to the achievement of sustainable development in affected areas.» Following on from this statement of objectives, however, the body of the Convention contains no suitably clear targets for sustainable resource management as part of poverty reduction efforts.
- There is a lack of scientifically-based quality standards for the Action Programmes and of usable indicators to measure impacts and target achievement.
- The competences of the institutions working within the scope of the Convention, from the Conference of the Parties and the Permanent Secretariat to the Global Mechanism and the Committee on Science and Technology, are not explicitly defined so as to clearly delineate their distinct roles and competences.

A fundamental question that remains to be resolved is whether the UNCCD should be a financing and implementation mechanism with a far-reaching mandate, as many of the affected states would like, or whether it should merely set out a global orientation framework for combatting desertification, as the non-affected donor countries believe.

Certain scientists have somewhat prematurely celebrated the UNCCD as a prototype for successful post-modern global governance. Yet despite its ambition in development policy terms, it is the least binding of the Rio Conventions. Hence there is a real danger that in the critical multilateral discourses between the WTO and the United Nations on poverty reduction, trade liberalization and the consequences of global environmental change, the UNCCD will be sidelined as an anachronistic relict from the hallowed days of Rio, before it even has a chance to prove its fitness for purpose.

## The way we want to go

Since the beginning of 2006, Germany has been a member of the Inter-sessional Intergovernmental Working Group (IIWG) of the UNCCD, convened by resolution at the last Conference of the Parties in October 2005 to develop a ten-year strategy for more effective implementation of the Convention and more efficient work in the Secretariat. Against the backdrop of the problems described, Germany's participation pursues two aims: Firstly, to specify the substantive thrust of the Convention more precisely and secondly to bring the UNCCD into congruence with the new international development architecture, restoring its contemporary relevance so that it can fulfil its important role in international cooperation.

The Convention needs clearly defined targets: unlike the Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) to control emissions or the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) to conserve biodiversity, as yet the UNCCD has no clearly defined conservation or reduction targets covering a specified time-frame. For example, precise guidelines should set limits and targets for relevant legislative measures, and build up corresponding pressure for implementation.

Photo: Wyrwinski

Advancing degradation must be combated as quickly as possible with the help of the UNCCD and the Action Programmes.

The UNCCD requires independent scientific policy advice on a continuing basis so that, for example, regular status reports can better track the impacts of controlling desertification. The numerous ongoing implementation efforts in affected countries should also be pulled together systematically so that there is better coherence between poverty and environment policy, even in donor countries not directly affected by desertification.

To this end, the competences of the institutions should also be reviewed: the Committee on Science and Technology needs far more precise terms of reference for its work, just as the Secretariat and the Global Mechanism urgently need a categorical clarification of their responsibilities and task sharing, so that the complicated consultation processes within the UNCCD can be simplified and the implementation measures improved.

Moreover, the Convention must be incorporated into the new international development policy landscape. The Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness by the OECD's Development Assistance Committee and the «European Consensus on Development Policy» have recently set forth new standards which will substantially change the international development architecture in the medium term.

The intended increase in the European development policy budget to 0.7 percent of gross national product by 2015 will go hand in hand with a greater alignment of development cooperation towards Community financing streams, programme-based approaches and multilateral interventions. And if the aim of the Paris Declaration is (wholly in keeping with the Convention) to better coordinate the development measures of the various partners, and align these more closely with the priorities and programmes of recipient countries than in the past, for a country like Germany it will mean concentrating on the strengths and comparative advantages of its own range of services, also in the field of desertification control. In all events, considerably less bilateral technical cooperation funding will be available in future for the production and implementation of National or Regional Action Programmes to combat desertification.

The outlook for the UNCCD seems to involve one of two possible routes: either it refocuses its profile and brings its comparative advantages to the table, making full use of all potential synergies to achieve its development goals; or it ignores the worldwide efforts to come up with better harmonized and more effective cooperation instruments, in which case it is likely to lead a marginal existence as a venerable old gent in search of prestige and recognition.

