

## If you want to get a job done, you need the right tools Next steps for the UN Convention to Combat Desertification

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**Is the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (CCD) bringing the right set of tools to the task of addressing the problems facing dryland peoples around the world? Many of the challenges that face the drylands are not addressed by the current CCD toolkit. Three principal areas where attention should now be focused are working closely with the Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) to identify strategies to help the drylands adapt to climate change, engaging with the changing aid architecture, and securing rights to land and natural resources for dryland populations.**

“If you want to get a job done, you need the right tools” as every workman will tell you. A carpenter lugs around a heavy toolbag to be sure he has the right screw driver to fit. A plumber has spanners and piping of varying widths and lengths. A blacksmith needs her anvil and different hammers and tongs, while a cook needs his knives, pans, whisks and spoons. Without the right tool, the job is a lot harder and cannot be done properly.

In the same way, when we face a big problem, it's vital to choose the right tools for dealing with it. If you get the wrong size screwdriver out to tighten a screw, it cannot engage and how ever much energy you put into trying to make it turn, it leaves you hot, bothered and frustrated at the lack of movement achieved. The UN Convention to Combat Desertification faces the same problem.

It was argued at Rio in 1992 that a desertification convention was essential to ensure the problems of poor, dryland countries were properly addressed. So all the structures and processes of a formal international environmental convention were established. The text of the convention was agreed in 1994 and the ratifications needed for it to enter into force in December 1996.

So ten years on, what has it achieved? And is it the right tool to tackle the problems faced by

dryland peoples around the world? I argue that the international convention model has not been the right one to address drylands development. It has tied people into a series of events which are far removed from real issues on the ground. If the CCD is to make progress over the next ten years, it needs a fundamental re-design.

Dryland dwellers face a range of problems, which vary by place and season. The impacts of low rainfall and its high variability have long been incorporated into farming practices. Different crop varieties are grown and a range of livestock species kept to avoid putting all the household's eggs in a single basket. Pursuit of off-farm activities generates an income to counter-balance the variability in crop yields. Moving herds and flocks between wet and dry season pastures allows animals to grow fat and glossy on the new grass that springs up with the first rains, and helps avoid over-grazing around village settlements. Growing a cash crop like cotton, or groundnuts, gives farmers a cash income increasingly necessary to make ends meet and invest in a better future for themselves and their families.

Yet for many farmers and herders, life has become much tougher. Land is growing scarcer and more valuable as population numbers rise, and a range of outsiders seek to acquire land for agribusiness, wildlife ranching and tourism development. Pastoral nomads are finding that their traditional livestock paths are being ploughed up, and blocked off, making it much harder to get herds from wet to dry season pastures. Cash crops like cotton and groundnuts face unfair price competition due to the large subsidies paid to farmers in the rich world, especially North America and Europe. Cheap imports of flour, wheat products, tomato paste, onions and frozen poultry are destroying the markets for small-holders in much of Africa. And as global warming kicks in, the drylands of the world are likely to face increasingly uncertain weather. In the face of these challenges, it's no wonder that many young people choose to walk

### KEY MESSAGES:

- **Farmers and herders need firm rights to the soils, grazing, woodlands and water sources on which their livelihoods depend. Governments need to recognise local rights, which are vital for promoting farmer investment. And maintaining mobility for livestock is key to managing semi-arid grazing lands.**
- **We need to build on local knowledge and combine this with outside expertise to generate farmer-led innovation. There has been much success achieved through simple small-scale technology and making the best use of indigenous varieties of crops and trees.**
- **Dryland farmers need reasonable prices for commodities on which they depend. With globalisation the price of these commodities is not just a local affairs and subsidies paid out to a few big farmers damage the incomes of poor families in drylands and millions of other around the world**

away from farming as a viable way of life, and chance their luck as migrants on canoes tossed by the powerful currents and waves that lie between the North African shore and Europe.

But dryland areas are not condemned to poverty and destitution. There are many places where people have invested in improving the productivity of their land. From our work with partner organisations in many dryland areas, over more than 20 years, there are three areas where significant progress needs to be made, if people are to face a better more prosperous and secure future.

**First**, farmers and herders need firm rights to the soils, grazing, woodlands and water sources on which their livelihoods depend. It has become increasingly clear that land rights really matter, if people are to feel confident enough to invest not just in their farmland but also in managing the grazing land, wetlands and woodlands from which they make their living – the commons, those collective assets which are vital for livestock production and a hundred daily needs from medicine to nuts and fruit, from firewood to wild rice, and game. Governments need to recognise local rights to control and manage land and natural resources – governments are sometimes reluctant to do so because they like to be able to hand out gifts of land to their friends and political allies – but such action brings short term opportunistic behaviour from all concerned. Long-term rights are vital for promoting farmer investment. Maintaining mobility for livestock is key to managing semi-arid grazing lands. An increasing numbers of governments in West Africa are now formulating pastoral charters - which lay out rights of access to water, grazing and passage for herding communities. The CCD needs to be pressing governments to acknowledge and strengthen local rights to land, water and grazing.

**Second**, we've seen the power of simple technologies to help achieve sustainable farming systems, through a mix of soil and water conservation, combined with better tree and pasture management. We have learnt that much can be done by building on local knowledge, combining outside expertise with local skills to generate farmer-led innovation which is solidly based on local knowledge and priorities. Much success has been achieved through simple, small-scale technology and making best use of indigenous varieties of crops and trees, promoting biodiversity as a means to ensure resilience. The CCD needs to focus on the many success stories from the drylands rather than presenting a picture of hopelessness and despair.

**Third**, we have seen that farmers in the drylands need reasonable prices for the commodities which they grow – such as cotton, livestock, oil seeds and grains (and maybe biofuels in the future). With globalisation, the price of those commodities is not just a local affair – farm subsidies paid out to a few big farmers in rich countries damage the incomes of millions of poor families around the world – and the subsidies paid to cotton farmers in the USA are a particular clear example which it was hoped would be eliminated by the WTO Doha Round of trade negotiations. With the collapse of the Doha trade negotiations, we need another route to lever cuts in farm subsidies in the West. The CCD needs to seize all opportunities to argue for a fairer deal for dryland farmers.

## So how might the Convention to Combat Desertification be re-designed as a tool better fit for its job?

Climate change is a big and worrying threat. The last twelve months have shown increased evidence that climate change is not something that might happen sometime in the future, but is already underway with many of the poorest countries worst hit. The fourth assessment report of the IPCC, which comes out next year, is likely to show significant impacts being felt all over the world. Climate scientists don't know exactly how rainfall levels will change in different regions, but with global warming, even if more rain falls, it will evaporate more quickly in the higher temperatures – hence the importance of investing in effective soil and water conservation. The UNFCCC and associated Kyoto protocol are key elements of the global architecture – negotiations are now underway for Kyoto phase 2 for the period following 2012. Over the next ten years, the CCD needs to work very closely with the Convention on Climate Change to identify synergies, opportunities for selling carbon offsets, and helping define adaptation to climate change and how it might best be supported in the drylands. How can the desertification and climate change agenda be brought closer together in practice? Can funds generated by the climate change convention help provide the investment needed to improve dryland livelihoods and reduce their vulnerability to future changes in rainfall?

The second important path for action is engaging with the changing aid architecture. Increasingly large aid flows are now channelled through PRS and MDG focused plans – clearly very valuable investments in people's welfare and human capital. But this highly centralised funding approach has concentrated resources and power in national capitals away from local level activity and from investment in agriculture, land and soils. The CCD needs to make a strong case for major new investment of donor funds in local level activity, but not through top-down government-led National Action Programmes which have little credibility. Let's try to find more accessible and innovative ways of providing support to local level action – working with dryland peoples as active agents and entrepreneurs seeking to improve their incomes and welfare – rather than the passive, helpless victims so often presented in discussions of desertification.

The third key area for future work involves securing rights to land and natural resources through the many political and legal processes underway in many countries. If the CCD is to make progress in implementing its ambitions it must engage with the process of securing rights for local people to the land and resources on which they depend. But this requires a shift in mindset from seeing local people as victims needing to be rescued to recognising their rights as citizens to manage their own development. There are many positive examples of dryland areas where people are making a living, improving their incomes, investing in their lands. If more of this is to happen, the CCD needs a new focus on supporting local action, in multiple and diverse ways.

After ten years of operation can the CCD re-shape its tool kit to fit the job to be done, the levers to shift and the wheels to be turned? And if not now, then when?

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