



CONVENTION
TO COMBAT
DESERTIFICATION

The international community pressed for a treaty to tackle the growing physical and human crisis of desertification at the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. After tough negotiations, the Convention to Combat Desertification - the first legally binding international agreement on the problem - was agreed in 1994. It breaks much new ground, pioneering a „bottom-up“ approach that starts with the people actually affected by the crisis and replaces the concept of aid with one of partnership.

DOWN TO EARTH

A simplified guide to the
Convention to Combat Desertification, why it is necessary
and what is important and different about it.



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the Convention to Combat Desertification



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Preface to the Fifth Edition

Implementation of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification has continued to advance since publication of the first edition of this booklet. Most importantly, the Convention's membership has expanded to over 191 Parties.

1997 marked a major milestone with the holding in Rome of the first session of the Conference of the Parties (COP 1). COP 1 agreed by consensus to establish, by early 1999, a permanent secretariat, in Bonn, Germany.

The commitments made by governments in Rome, and at subsequent sessions of the COP - in Dakar (COP 2) in 1998, Recife (COP 3) in 1999, Bonn (COP 4) in 2000 and Geneva (COP 5) in 2001 and Havana (COP 6) in 2003 - are encouraging. However, these successes and encouraging developments should not make us forget our single most important objective, which remains the creation of an enabling political and legal framework for ensuring the sustainability of the current dynamic in the long term. The Convention must come "down to earth" and make a real difference in the lives of people living in the drylands. In this regard, I am pleased to note that an increasing number of countries, in all affected regions, have already formulated their National Action Programmes for implementing the Convention and that many have launched activities for combating desertification, taking into account the innovative approaches promoted by the Convention. Countries are now moving from the preparation to the implementation phase of the programmes. In this regard, the designation by the United Nations General Assembly of 2006 as the International Year of Deserts and Desertification will help raising the profile of this Convention.

Subregional, regional and interregional cooperation is also developing at an encouraging pace.

I have no doubt that all these activities will contribute to greater mobilization of international efforts to stop desertification and to charting a new course in the sustainable management of the natural resources of the drylands.

HAMA ARBA DIALLO
Executive Secretary
United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification

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of the UNCCD

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1 Losing Ground

It is no accident that our planet is called Earth. All terrestrial life depends on the fragile, friable crust of soil that coats the continents. Without it, living things would never have emerged from the oceans: there would be no plants, no crops, no forests, no animals – and no people.

This precious covering, the very flesh of the planet, is painfully slow to form, and can be destroyed terrifyingly fast. Just a single inch of soil can take centuries to build up but, if mistreated, it can be blown and washed away in a few seasons. And earth is now rapidly vanishing all over the planet that bears its name.

Each year, the Worldwatch Institute estimated, the continents lose 24 billion tonnes of topsoil. Over the last two decades as much has been lost worldwide as covers the entire cropland of the United States. And it is getting worse.

Nowhere is the crisis more acute than in the drylands which stretch across more than a third of the Earth's land surface. It is here – where the soils are especially fragile, vegetation is sparse and the climate is particularly unforgiving – that desertification takes hold. (Land degradation occurs everywhere, but is only defined as 'desertification' when it occurs in the drylands.) Some 70 per cent of the 5.2 billion hectares of drylands used for agriculture around the world are already degraded. Thus desertification now damages almost 30 per cent of the total land area of the world.

Just over a billion hectares of Africa, 73 per cent of its drylands, are moderately or severely affected by desertification. Another 1.4 billion hectares are affected in Asia. But it is not just a problem for developing countries: the continent which has the highest proportion of its dryland severely or moderately desertified – 74 per cent – is North America. Five of the European Union's countries also suffer from it, while many of the most affected areas in Asia are in the former Soviet Union.

In all, more than 110 countries have drylands that are potentially at risk. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) estimates that desertification costs the world \$42 billion a year. Africa alone loses some \$9 billion a year.

The human cost is even higher. The livelihoods of more than a billion people – almost a fifth of the entire population of the globe – are now at risk. Over 135 million – equivalent to the populations of France, Italy, Switzerland and The Netherlands combined – may be in danger of being driven from their land. Nobody knows how many have already had to abandon their land as it turns to dust, but it certainly runs into millions: one-sixth of the population of Mali and Burkina Faso has already been uprooted in this way. Partly as a result of this, urban slums are swelling; between 1965 and 1988, the proportion of Mauritania's people living in the capital, Nouakchott, rose from 9 per cent to 41 per cent, while the proportion who were nomads fell from 73 per cent to 7 per cent.

While the newly landless follow their soil as it blows away in the wind, areas and countries far distant are affected by their migration. Desertification, for example, is one of the factors pushing Mexican immigrants over the border into the United States. Two-fifths of the people of the upper and middle regions of the Senegal Valley have already

emigrated: there are more people from the Bakel region in France than there are in the villages they left behind. Yet, given the chance, people would prefer to stay.

Desertification has played some part in sparking off 10 of the armed conflicts currently in progress in arid lands. It contributes to political instability, starvation and social breakdown in such troublespots as Somalia, and causes huge amounts of money to be spent in disaster relief and humanitarian aid. And it aggravates such gathering environmental crises as global warming and the loss of biodiversity.

In a sense, desertification is a misleading term. To some, it suggests that the world's deserts are spreading, extending their sands over more and more fertile land. It is true that the borders of the deserts expand and shrink cyclically with fluctuations in the climate and rainfall, but this is a different matter. Desertification – an ugly word for an ugly process – is more like a skin disease. Patches of degraded land erupt separately, sometimes as far as thousands of kilometres away from the nearest desert. Gradually the patches spread and join together, creating desert-like conditions.

The Convention to Combat Desertification adopts the definition of desertification agreed by the world's leaders at the Earth Summit in Rio in 1992 – which blames both climatic variations and human activities. It adds that “desertification is caused by complex interactions among physical, biological, political, social, cultural and economic factors.”

Drought often aggravates it or triggers it off. But four human activities are usually the most immediate causes. Overcultivation exhausts the soil. Overgrazing removes the covering of vegetation that protects it from erosion. Deforestation cuts the trees that bind the soil to the land. And poorly drained irrigation turns cropland salty, desertifying some 500,000 hectares each year – about the same amount as is newly irrigated annually.

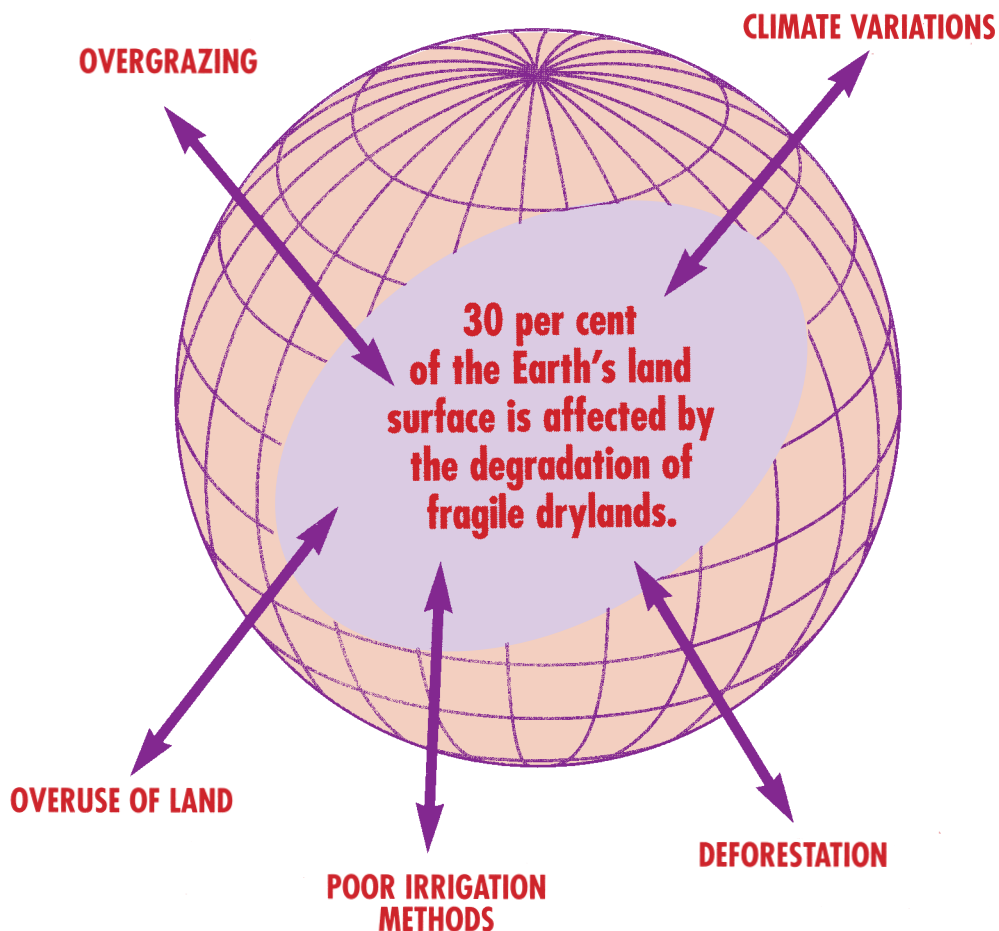
In the past the people of the drylands have often been blamed for destroying their own livelihoods by overusing their land and felling trees. But as the Convention recognises, there are usually deeper underlying causes that give them no alternative. Poverty is principal among them. It drives the poor to get as much out of the land as possible to feed their families in the short-term, even though they are thereby foreclosing their long-term futures.

The poor of the drylands often have little say in determining their fate. They are often marginalised even in their own countries, without rights to their land, and with little influence in national or regional politics. They are among the least visible people in the world, whether economically, politically or geographically – and women, who are usually worst affected by desertification, have the least influence of all, even in their own societies. They are highly vulnerable to the vagaries both of the weather and of national and global economies. Drought can push them into disaster, but so can good rains which sometimes produce surpluses of food, and drive down prices.

As population and the demand for agricultural production increase, traditional systems of managing the land are collapsing – and this is aggravated by the adoption of new practices, often monocultures. So more and more of the good land is being pressed into service, without proper attention to conservation, and poor farmers and pastoralists are forced onto marginal land.

In the past, development planners have too often tended to ignore the people of the drylands. But the poor know more than anyone else about the fragile ecosystems from which they have wrested a living for so long. They should be the key to combating desertification.

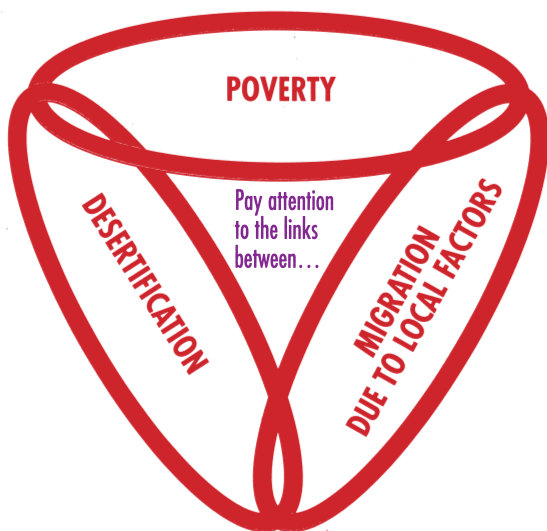
The Convention acknowledges this and recognises, as was underlined at the 1995 Copenhagen Summit on Social Development, that development must be human-orientated if it is to be sustainable. It breaks new ground and embraces a “bottom-up” approach, insisting that local people must be fully involved in deciding how to tackle the problem of desertification and that their poverty should be addressed. It thus simultaneously offers hope that desertification can be halted and rolled back and that the incomes and self-respect of some of the poorest people on Planet Earth can be improved, encouraging them to remain on their land. It offers the best, and possibly the last, chance of effectively addressing the multiple, interlocking crises of desertification.



2 What is Desertification?

Are the deserts advancing? Despite some rhetoric at times of crisis, the sands are not steadily spreading over neighbouring land. Deserts may seem to expand when the rains are poor over a long period, but they usually retreat again with good rainfall.

So, is everything alright? No. Land degradation is continuing and increasing at an alarming pace, seriously eroding the world's precious store of productive land. When it happens in the world's drylands it often creates desert-like conditions and is called "desertification". This process happens piecemeal as different areas of degraded land spread and merge together, rather than through advancing desert.



Is it just an act of God, or the weather? No. Drought is part of the cause of desertification and certainly makes things worse. But essentially it is a man-made problem. It arises from placing too much pressure on the land.

Is it only a problem for the poor in developing countries? No. One billion of the poorest and most marginised people of the earth – who live in the most vulnerable areas – may be the most severely affected by

desertification. But it has other victims too. Some 18 developed countries suffer from desertification. And developed countries as a whole – and more favoured areas of developing countries – are already being affected indirectly as people migrate to them after being unable to live off their degraded land. Desertification provides one of the most graphic examples of how poverty anywhere endangers prosperity and sustainability everywhere.

So, what is Desertification? The definition agreed by the world's leaders at the 1992 Earth Summit and adopted by the Convention is: "land degradation in arid, semi-arid and sub-humid areas resulting from various factors, including climatic variations and human activities."

3 The Road to Paris

Land degradation is as old as civilisation itself, stretching from the plains of China to the peaks of the Inca empire. The world's first ever written story, a Sumerian epic, tells how a man felled the forests of Mesopotamia, bringing down a curse. The ancient Sumerians failed to heed the parable and went on cutting the trees. As early as 2000 BC their literature carries evocative descriptions of desertification. Their great city state of Uruk, which once contained 50,000 people and produced crop yields comparable to those of North America today, is now just a bump in the sand.

Plato wrote of Attica in the 4th century BC: "our land, compared to what it was, is like the skeleton of a body wasted by disease." The Roman Empire's breadbasket in North Africa, where once 600 cities flourished, is now a desert. Christopher Columbus said he had "never beheld so fair a thing" as the forests he found cloaking the hills of Haiti: those same hills are now barren and eroded.

Yet it is by no means all a history of destruction. The people of the drylands generally evolved sophisticated ways of living off their fragile soils without overexploiting them. The people of the Algerian steppe, for example, roamed as nomads over its 20 million hectares to get the best advantage from the changing seasons and climatic variations, while minimising damage to the land, sharing resources with settled farmers to the north and the people of the oases to the south.

The first determined international effort to combat desertification began at the end of the great Sahelian drought and famine of 1968-1974 in which over 200,000 people and millions of their animals died. The United Nations Sudano-Sahelian Office was set up in 1973, originally to assist nine drought-prone countries in West Africa, though its activities spread. Assistance was subsequently expanded to cover 22 countries south of the Sahara and north of the Equator. Sub-regional organisations were established in Africa at around the same time. Similarly, the International Fund for Agricultural Development established its Special Programme for Sub-Saharan Countries Affected by Drought and Desertification in 1985, after another crippling drought: it has mobilised some \$400 million and this, combined with another \$350 million contributed through co-financing, has helped to pay for 45 projects in 25 countries.

The UN first addressed the issue on a global scale at the United Nations Conference on Desertification, held in Nairobi in 1977, which put the issue on the international agenda as a worldwide economic, social and environmental problem. It produced the Plan of Action to Combat Desertification, a series of guidelines and recommendations designed, among other things, to help affected countries to draw up plans to tackle the problem, and to stimulate and co-ordinate help from the international community. In principle the Plan of Action left little to be desired – an external review in 1990 found that its principles were still valid – but in practice, its implementation fell far short of expectations.

For a start neither the governments of the affected countries, nor international aid donors gave it sufficient priority. In 1980 it was estimated that \$4.5 billion would have to be spent each year if the Plan of Action was to be properly implemented: \$2.4 billion of this was needed in countries that would have largely to rely on foreign aid. Yet only a

quarter of the required aid, \$0.6 billion, was actually being provided. Meanwhile only 20 governments, less than a quarter of those whose countries were affected, had developed national plans to combat desertification by 1991 – 14 years after the Plan of Action had been agreed.

When governments and donors did take action, the effort was often spoiled through lack of co-ordination. Aid-giving countries and agencies frequently insisted that recipient countries should draw up new plans as a framework for their assistance – with little relation to similar plans that had already been produced at the behest of other donors – and then all too often did not see them to completion. So the countries became littered with partially implemented plans. Even more important, the social dimension of desertification was given too little attention, and the people actually affected by it became alienated because they were insufficiently consulted. The problem continued to get worse.

The preamble of the Convention appreciates “the significance of the past efforts and experience of States and international organisations in combating desertification and mitigating the effects of drought, particularly in implementing the Plan of Action to Combat Desertification”, but it recognises that “despite efforts in the past, progress... has not met expectations.” It adds: “a new and more effective approach is needed at all levels within the framework of sustainable development.”

Developing nations, led by African countries, insisted that proper attention should be given to desertification during the preparations for the 1992 Earth Summit. Eventually, after tough bargaining, the world’s leaders agreed in Agenda 21 to call on the UN General Assembly to set up an Inter-governmental Negotiating Committee to prepare a legally binding instrument by June 1994.

After 13 months of difficult negotiations in five sessions in Nairobi, Geneva, New York and Paris – and against many observers’ expectations – the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification in Countries Experiencing Serious Drought and/or Desertification, Particularly in Africa (to give it its full name), was adopted on time on 17 June 1994 and opened for signature in Paris in October that year. By May 1995 a total of 105 countries had signed.

The Convention – symbolising agreement between developed and developing countries on the need for a global coalition to address desertification – is different from previous attempts to combat the crisis, since it is legally binding. Countries that accede to it will be obliged to implement it. Unlike some other international environmental treaties, it includes concrete national commitments for practical action, particularly at the local level where desertification must primarily be fought, and places great emphasis on the machinery needed to implement it and monitor its progress. Finalising the Convention is one the most important achievements to date in the follow-up to the Earth Summit, bringing the spirit of Rio, literally, down to earth.

4 Matters of Principle

OBJECTIVES

The objective of having a Convention is to secure the long-term commitment of its Parties through a legally binding document.

The Convention describes its objective as: "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, supported by international co-operation and partnership arrangements, 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."

It adds: "Achieving this objective will involve long-term integrated strategies that focus simultaneously, in affected areas, on improved productivity of the land and the rehabilitation, conservation, and sustainable management of land and water resources, leading to improved living conditions, in particular at the community level."

The Convention takes an innovative approach in the way it tackles desertification and international environmental law as a whole. It is designed to forge a new deal between governments, the international community, development practitioners and local people.

Containing 40 articles and four Regional Annexes (on the implementation of the treaty in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, and the Northern Mediterranean), its regularly repeated aim is to "combat desertification and mitigate the effects of drought." It gives priority to Africa, the continent where the problem causes the most distress. Indeed, the session of the Inter-governmental Negotiating Committee which adopted the text of the Convention, passed a resolution on urgent action for Africa – calling on affected African countries urgently to prepare action programmes and on donors to support them – even before the treaty formally comes into force.

The Convention pioneers a democratic, bottom-up approach in international environmental law. It clearly emphasises that the people who bear the brunt of desertification – and who best understand the fragile environments in which they live – must be fully involved and be allowed to participate in the decisions that will shape their lives. The first principle of the treaty, commits Parties to "ensure that decisions on the design and implementation of programmes... are taken with the participation of populations and local communities and that an enabling environment is created at higher levels to facilitate action at national and local levels."

The second principle again breaks new ground by stressing the need for international partnership and co-ordination, both to avoid duplication of effort and to get away from the traditionally one-sided relationship between donors and recipients of assistance. It says that: "Parties should, in a spirit of international solidarity and partnership, improve co-operation and co-ordination at sub-regional, regional and international levels, and better focus financial, human, organisational and technical resources where they are needed."

The third principle of the treaty extends the concept of partnership to relationships within the affected countries and, in doing so, re-emphasises the importance of ensuring the participation of local people and communities. It lays down that: "Parties should develop, in a spirit of partnership, co-operation among all levels of government, communities, non-governmental organisations and landholders to establish a better understanding of the nature and

OBLIGATIONS OF AFFECTED COUNTRY PARTIES

Affected country Parties undertake to:

- a) Give due priority to combating desertification and mitigating the effects of drought, and allocate adequate resources in accordance with their circumstances and capabilities.
- b) Establish strategies and priorities, within the framework of sustainable development plans and/or policies, to combat desertification and mitigate the effects of drought.
- c) Address the underlying causes of desertification and pay special attention to the socio-economic factors contributing to desertification processes.
- d) Promote awareness and facilitate the participation of local populations, particularly women and youth, with the support of non-governmental organisations, in efforts to combat desertification and mitigate the effects of drought.
- e) Provide an enabling environment by strengthening, as appropriate, relevant existing legislation and, where they do not exist, enacting new laws and establishing long-term policies and action programmes.

value of land and scarce water resources in affected areas and to work towards their sustainable use.”

The fourth and final principle says that: “Parties should take into full consideration the special needs and circumstances of affected developing country Parties, particularly the least developed among them.”

The treaty also insists at the outset that programmes to combat desertification and mitigate the effects of drought must not be conceived and implemented in isolation, but should be integrated into development policies as a whole. And it emphasises the need to “adopt an integrated approach addressing the physical, biological, and socio-economic aspects of the processes of desertification and drought.”

The Convention also lays special emphasis on the economic environment, both internationally and within nations, and makes it clear that this must be arranged so as to enable desertification to be tackled effectively. Parties are obliged to give “due attention” to the effects of trade, marketing arrangements and debt on the affected developing countries among them “with a view to establishing an enabling international economic environment conducive to the promotion of sustainable development.” And they are obliged to integrate their anti-desertification efforts with “strategies for poverty eradication.”

The general obligations of the treaty stress the importance of co-operation – within inter-governmental organisations, within



OBLIGATIONS OF DEVELOPED COUNTRY PARTIES

Developed country Parties undertake to:

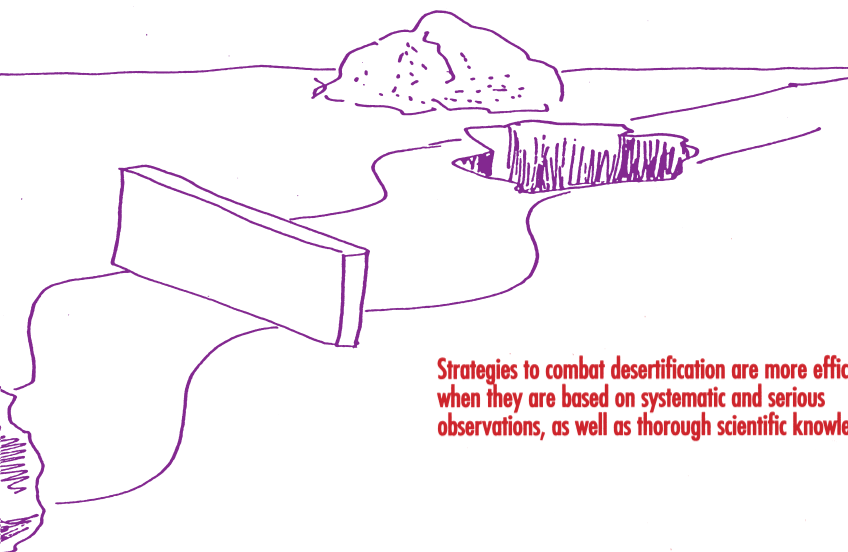
- a) Actively support, as agreed, individually or jointly, the efforts of affected developing country Parties, particularly those in Africa, and the least developed countries, to combat desertification and mitigate the effects of drought.
- b) Provide substantial financial resources and other forms of support to assist affected developing country Parties, particularly those in Africa, effectively to develop and implement their own long-term plans and strategies to combat desertification and mitigate the effects of drought.
- c) Promote the mobilisation of new and additional funding.
- d) Encourage the mobilisation of funding from the private sector and other non-governmental sources.
- e) Promote and facilitate access by affected Parties, particularly affected developing country Parties, to appropriate technology, knowledge and know-how.

regions and sub-regions, and internationally. And they lay down that Parties must “promote co-operation among affected country Parties in the fields of environmental protection and the conservation of land and water resources, as they relate to desertification and drought.”

Both affected and

developed country Parties undertake comprehensive sets of obligations under the treaty (see boxes). The Convention acknowledges the importance of the private sector, and gives an unprecedented role to the whole society, particularly non-governmental organisations, in its implementation.

The treaty redirects scientific and technological efforts, and emphasises the way that local populations can make use of scientific knowledge, and contribute to it. It has flexible and potentially effective review mechanisms, and provisions to ensure co-operation among countries and international organisations.



Strategies to combat desertification are more efficient when they are based on systematic and serious observations, as well as thorough scientific knowledge.

5 From Aid to Partnership

The Convention is probably the first legally-binding international instrument clearly to stress partnership rather than aid. Up to now, efforts to combat desertification – like other development initiatives – have generally been governed by a series of one-sided relationships.

Affected developing countries seek assistance from developed ones. Sometimes affected countries design programmes and projects, and seek finance for them. Sometimes donors insist that they draw up specific action programmes in return for assistance.

There are also one-way processes within affected countries. Assistance is directed from central government to the affected people, often without consulting them or involving them in the decisions of how it is spent.

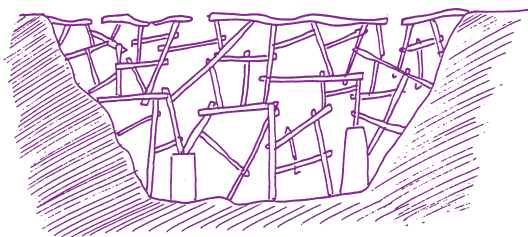
These one-sided approaches have rarely worked and the Convention firmly places partnership at the cutting edge of implementation. It underlines the “importance and necessity of international co-operation and partnership” and says that national plans must be carried out “in a spirit of partnership, between the donor community, governments at all levels, local populations and community groups.”

In practice National Action Programmes are to be drawn up by a democratic, but complex, process which will require all the actors – foreign donors (both bilateral and multilateral), regional organisations, national and local government, non-governmental organisations and the local people themselves – to work together.

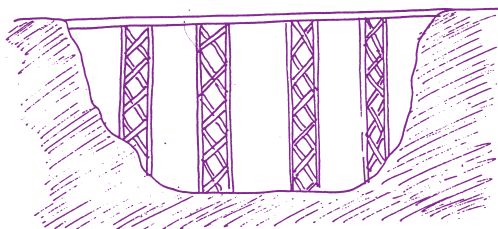
Partnership agreements will be negotiated and agreed on how these plans are to be implemented. So programmes and priorities will be worked out jointly, not imposed by one group on another. This will be much more efficient, as well as more equitable and democratic, because it will avoid duplication and ensure co-ordination.

This spirit runs throughout the convention. The Regional Implementation Annex for Africa, for example, calls on African country Parties “to organise consultative processes at the national, sub-regional and regional levels” which may “serve as a forum to negotiate and conclude partnership agreements based on national, sub-regional and regional action programmes.”

To mobilise financial resources, Parties will rationalise and strengthen the management of existing resources for combating desertification and mitigating the effects of drought...



... by using them more effectively and efficiently.



6 The Bottom-up Approach

The most important partnership to be forged in tackling desertification is between aid donors, national governments and local administrations and the people of the drylands themselves. For as the years have gone by, as many projects have failed, and as the problem has continued to grow, it has become clear that desertification cannot be effectively tackled unless the people most affected are fully involved and committed.

The people of developing country drylands are their greatest resource. They know their land better than anyone. They have just as much skill in making a living off it as the American grain producer or the rice-grower of China. In some ways their skills may be greater, for they have to work in far more difficult conditions, with much more fragile soils, a much harsher climate, and far fewer resources. They are potentially the world's most important asset in combating desertification.

Yet, in the past, they have usually been ignored, and even blamed for desertification. Colonial administrations often imposed solutions that had worked in their home countries, where conditions were very different; the new national governments often persisted with them. Old, sustainable ways of using the land were frequently disrupted, and nomads and other people of the drylands had to abandon their livelihoods.

The local people were alienated, particularly as outside solutions rarely worked – and often deepened their poverty. At times the people who were supposed to be benefiting from a project would actually be longing for it to be completed, and for the outsiders to go away, so that they could get back to doing things in their own way. All too often, two or three years later, little trace of the scheme would remain.

Some projects, however, did succeed: often these had been run by organisations which had set out to listen to the local people, learn about their techniques and priorities, and work out solutions with them. This has reinforced the increasing realisation that the people of the drylands must be able to participate fully in tackling the problems that beset their lives.

The concept of ‘participation’ has been current for many years. But often it has merely been grafted onto the old “top-down” approach: decisions on programmes have been made elsewhere, and then local people have been invited – or told – to participate in them. Real participation means that decisions are taken *by* the people who are to be affected by them, not *for* them, giving them power to put what has been decided into practice.

Special efforts have to be made to enable women to participate, as, even within their own societies, they are the most affected by desertification and yet have the least power to do anything about it. Women do much of the work on the land, but their voices are muted even in their own communities; such help, advice, and communication that come from outside are usually directed at the men.

The Convention breaks new ground by enshrining a bottom-up approach in international law. It repeatedly emphasises the importance of full participation, and specifically underlines “the important role played by women”. It also stresses “the special role of non-governmental organisations” and gives them an important role in ensuring implementation.



National Action Programmes will be elaborated through a continuing participatory process.

Parties commit themselves to “provide for effective participation at the local, national and regional levels of non-governmental organisations and local populations, both women and men, particularly resource users, including farmers and pastoralists and their representative organisations, in policy planning, decision-making, and implementation and review of National Action Programmes.” This theme runs right through the Convention. African countries agree, in their Regional Implementation Annex, for example, that “a consultative and participatory process involving appropriate levels of government, local populations, communities and non-governmental organisations shall be undertaken to provide guidance on a strategy with flexible planning to allow maximum participation from local populations and communities.” They commit themselves to include in their National Action Programmes “the increase in participation of local populations and communities, including women, farmers and pastoralists, and delegation to them of more responsibility for management.” Meanwhile Asian Parties agree, in their Annex, to “involve affected populations, including local communities, in the elaboration, co-ordination and implementation of their action programmes through a locally-driven consultative process, with the co-operation of local authorities and relevant national and non-governmental organisations.”

7 Getting the Act Together

The Convention lays down: "The Parties shall develop operational mechanisms, particularly at the national and field levels, to ensure the fullest possible co-ordination among developed country Parties, developing country Parties, and relevant inter-governmental and non-governmental organisations, in order to avoid duplication, harmonise interventions and approaches, and maximise the impact of assistance. In affected developing country Parties, priority will be given to co-ordinating activities related to international co-operation in order to maximise the efficient use of resources, to ensure responsive assistance, and to facilitate the implementation of National Action Programmes and priorities under this Convention."

Much of the effort that has gone into fighting desertification has been dissipated through unnecessary competition between donors, ministries, plans, projects and approaches. Donor countries or agencies have often made recipient governments draw up new plans as a framework for their help – and these often bore little relation to the programmes they had already worked out with other donors. These programmes were often only partially funded and never completed, because the next donor would want to start all over again.

The Convention, therefore, stresses co-ordination and co-operation, and aims to stop such duplication from continuing. Hence its concentration on partnership, and its determination that all actors shall get together both to work out national programmes and to decide how they shall be implemented.

It lays down that National Action Programmes shall "promote policies and strengthen institutional frameworks which develop co-operation and co-ordination, in a spirit of partnership, between the donor community, governments at all levels, local populations and community groups."

Parties commit themselves to "financial co-operation to provide predictability for action programmes allowing for necessary long-term planning." They agree "to work closely together, directly and through relevant inter-governmental organisations, in the elaboration and implementation of action programmes." They undertake, under their general obligations, to promote co-operation among affected country Parties to protect the environment and conserve land and water, and to "strengthen sub-regional, regional and international co-operation."

The African Parties agree, in their Annex, that National Action Programmes shall be a central and integral part of the broader process of formulating national policies for sustainable

development. All Parties agree to "co-operate with each other and through competent inter-governmental organisations, as well as with non-governmental organisations, in undertaking and supporting public awareness and educational programmes..."

8 Broadening the Focus

Most attempts to fight desertification have concentrated more on its symptoms than on its causes. They have concentrated on mitigating its effects, and on reducing the human activities that seem to be immediately contributing to them.

They have sought to tackle overcultivation, overgrazing, deforestation and faulty irrigation directly, but without addressing the underlying social and economic pressures that have produced them. This has often resulted, in effect, in blaming the victims of desertification for causing it, without making a serious attempt to understand the forces outside their control which are driving them to overexploit the land.

It is now accepted that this narrow focus was one of the reasons why the implementation of the 1977 Plan of Action proved to be disappointing. The Convention has set out to rectify this by integrating social and economic issues into the heart of its analysis and its implementation, and giving them equal weight to the physical and biological aspects of desertification.

Affected country Parties undertake, in obligations under the Convention, to “address the underlying causes of desertification, and pay special attention to the socio-economic factors contributing to desertification processes.”

All Parties have an obligation to “adopt an integrated approach addressing the physical, biological and socio-economic aspects of the processes of desertification and drought.” More specifically they promise to “integrate strategies for poverty eradication into efforts to combat desertification and mitigate the effects of drought.”

It is predominantly poverty that forces the people of the drylands to extract as much as they can from the land, and produces the imperative for short-term survival that gives them no choice but to act against their long-term interests. Any effective strategy must have the assault on poverty at its very centre.

Such a strategy must also take social structures and issues of land ownership into account and pay proper attention to education, training, and transport and communications in order to provide the fully integrated approach which alone can effectively combat desertification. Big national and international plans must be linked to the small decisions actually taken by the people on the ground. Local development programmes must bring an integrated package of investment and capacity-building to affected areas, and strengthen the ability of local people to programme and manage their resources.



9 An Enabling Environment

For affected countries – and the people of the drylands – to tackle desertification effectively, the conditions must be right. It is hard for governments or local people to give much attention to the crisis if they are constantly preoccupied with economic and physical survival. The Convention recognises the need for “an enabling environment” that makes it possible for them to pursue sustainable development.

At the national level, an enabling environment would include good governance and stability, legal and administrative reform, economic incentives and improved infrastructure. It would also require a change in the present bias in the economies of many developing countries which favours industry, towns and cities at the expense of agriculture and the countryside. This can partly be done – and pressure taken off the land at the same time – by diversifying economic options and promoting alternative livelihoods: examples could include establishing and maintaining village forestry schemes, generating renewable energy, and promoting wildlife-based tourism.

Local people need to have secure and equitable rights to their land: they will not look after it if they fear it may be taken from them. In their Regional Implementation Annex, African Parties agree to “adjusting, as appropriate, the institutional and regulatory framework of natural resource management to provide security of land tenure for local populations.”

International economic factors have also caused “unsustainable development practices”, as the Regional Implementation Annex for Latin America and the Caribbean recognises.

Debt, fluctuating and deteriorating terms of trade over the last 20 years, tariff and non-tariff barriers and painful structural adjustment programmes have all caused countries to produce more and more from the land to pay their way. Dumping subsidised food surpluses by some developed countries has sometimes destroyed local farmers’ markets in developing nations.

The Parties agree to “give due attention, within the relevant international and regional bodies, to the situation of affected developing country Parties with regard to international trade, marketing arrangements and debt with a view to establishing an enabling international economic environment conducive to the promotion of sustainable development.”

Parties commit themselves to address the root causes of desertification and to pay special attention to socio-economic factors that contribute to it.



10 Action Programmes

BOX 1

The requirements for National Action Programmes are to:

- “incorporate long-term strategies..., emphasise implementation and be integrated with national policies for sustainable development;”
- “allow for modifications to be made in response to changing circumstances and be sufficiently flexible at the local level to cope with different socio-economic, biological and geo-physical conditions;”
- “give particular attention to the implementation of preventative measures for lands that are not yet degraded or which are only slightly degraded;”
- “enhance national climatological, meteorological and hydrological capabilities and the means to provide for drought early warning;”
- “promote policies and strengthen institutional frameworks which develop co-operation and co-ordination, and facilitate access by local populations to appropriate information and technology;”
- “provide for effective participation at the local, national and regional levels...,” and
- “require regular review of, and progress reports on, their implementation.”

and land-users and what resources are needed, and available.

The Convention lays down seven general requirements for National Action Programmes (Box 1) and five voluntary elements (Box 2). It identifies priority fields for action (Box 3) and says that each affected country Party – depending on its circumstances – should include at least some of them in its National Action Programme.

The Convention is to be implemented through National Action Programmes supplemented by regional and sub-regional ones. Effective action to combat desertification has to be carried out locally – and must be adapted to local circumstances and conditions. But it must also be integrated into national and regional strategies to ensure that it gets adequate priority, to avoid duplication, and to make sure that resources are used as well as possible.

National Action Programmes form the very core of the treaty. Affected Parties should prepare, publicise and implement them as “the central element” in their strategies. They are to use and build on existing successful and relevant plans and programmes. They are to be closely interlinked with other efforts to formulate sustainable development policies, and are to be “updated through a continuing participatory process on the basis of lessons from field action” and from the results of research.

The programmes are to identify the factors contributing to desertification, and practical measures necessary to combat it and to mitigate the effects of drought. And they should specify the respective roles of government, local communities

BOX 2

The voluntary elements are:

- the establishment and/or strengthening of early warning systems and of mechanisms for helping environmental refugees;
- the strengthening of preparedness for drought, and of the management of its impacts, at local national, sub-regional and regional levels;
- the “establishment and/or strengthening... of food security systems, including storage and marketing facilities, particularly in rural areas;”
- the establishment of projects to develop alternative livelihoods “that could provide incomes in drought prone areas;” and
- “the development of sustainable irrigation schemes for both crops and livestock.”

BOX 3

The eight priority fields for action are:-

- "promotion of alternative livelihoods and improvement of national economic environments with a view to strengthening programmes aimed at the eradication of poverty and at ensuring food security;"
- "demographic dynamics;"
- "sustainable management of natural resources;"
- "sustainable agricultural practices;"
- "development and efficient use of various energy sources;"
- "institutional and legal frameworks;"
- "strengthening of capabilities for assessment and systematic observation, including hydrological and meteorological services;" and
- "capacity-building, education and public awareness."

All these also apply to sub-regional and regional programmes. Affected country Parties agree to consult and co-operate to prepare these "to harmonise, complement and increase the efficiency of national programmes."

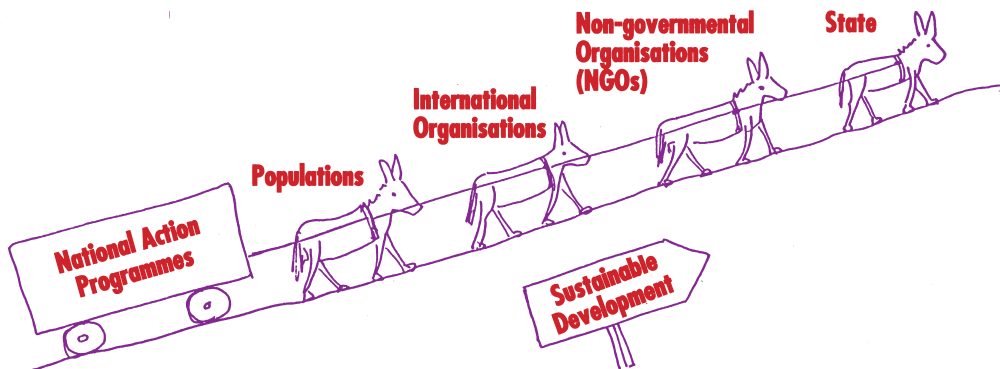
The Parties undertake to encourage the United Nations' system and other inter-governmental organisations, the scientific community and non-governmental organisations to support the action programmes. Developed countries are to channel their assistance both directly and through multilateral organisations. African and other least developed countries are to be given priority.

Specific supporting measures are also laid down by the Convention (Box 4).

BOX 4

Measures to support action programmes should include:

- "financial co-operation to provide predictability for action programmes, allowing for necessary long-term planning;"
- "elaboration and use of co-operation mechanisms, which better enable support at the local level, including action through non-governmental organisations, in order to promote the replicability of successful pilot programme activities where relevant;"
- "increased flexibility in project design, funding and implementation in keeping with the experimental, iterative approach indicated for participatory action at the local community level;" and
- "as appropriate, administrative and budgetary procedures that increase the efficiency of co-operation and of support programmes."



11 Capacity-Building

Action programmes cannot be effective, and the fight against desertification and the effects of drought cannot be won, unless strong enough institutions exist to carry them out – and the people understand and support what is being done. So the Convention stresses the significance of capacity-building and of promoting public awareness.

Parties agree to promote the building of institutions, the training of people and the development of capacities both locally and nationally. And they agree to do so in the co-operative and participatory spirit that pervades the treaty.

Affected developing countries are to review their capacities and facilities – and the potential for strengthening them in co-operation with other Parties and inter-governmental and non-governmental organisations. National institutions and legal frameworks are to be built up and new ones created when needed.

National training and research capacities and strategic planning and management are also to be strengthened, and field agents and members of rural organisations are to be trained in participatory approaches. Strengthening the capacity of local people to draw up programmes to manage their resources is perhaps the single most important step in constructing a healthier relationship between people, power and the environment.

There is to be a technological give and take. Services to disseminate technologies and techniques more effectively to local people are to be established and reinforced.

Meanwhile through a bottom-up approach, the Parties agree to foster “the use and dissemination of the knowledge, know-how and practices of local people.”

Similarly the Parties undertake to provide training and technology in the use of alternative – especially renewable – energy, to lessen dependence on fuelwood. They agree to adapt traditional methods of agriculture and pastoralism and environmentally sound technology to modern conditions. And they are to promote “alternative livelihoods, including training in new skills.”

They are to co-operate in strengthening developing countries’ capacity to collect, analyse and exchange scientific and technological information, and they are to train decision-makers, managers and personnel responsible for data on food production and early warnings of drought.

The Parties agree to co-operate amongst themselves, and with inter-governmental and non-governmental organisations, in organising campaigns to raise public awareness. They will encourage the establishment of associations that contribute to this and help people get permanent access to the information they need.

They agree to assess educational needs in affected areas; expand educational and literacy programmes, especially for women and girls; develop “interdisciplinary participatory programmes” to integrate awareness of desertification and drought into educational systems and programmes; and establish and strengthen networks of regional education and training centres.

Throughout, the Parties agree to promote wide and permanent public participation in education and awareness activities.

12 Technology and Science

The Convention promotes co-ordination of scientific research and co-operation in the transfer of technology. Both are to be redirected to meet the requirements of the people who most need it, with considerable weight placed on the value of traditional knowledge and skills.

The Parties undertake to “promote, finance and/or facilitate the financing of the transfer, acquisition, adaptation and development of environmentally sound, economically viable and socially acceptable technologies.” They agree to use fully existing systems and clearing houses, to facilitate co-operation between affected Parties and access to suitable technologies on favourable terms, and to take measures to create domestic market conditions and incentives that will ease the process.

They also commit themselves to promote and use traditional and local “technology, knowledge, know-how and practices”, to make inventories of them, to promote their improvement and dissemination, to adapt them for wide use and integrate them with modern technology, and to ensure that local peoples benefit directly from any commercial use.

The Parties also agree to support research to increase knowledge of the causes and impacts of desertification and drought. This should “address the specific needs of local populations and lead to the identification and implementation of solutions that improve the living standards of people in affected areas.” It should also “protect, integrate, enhance and validate traditional and local knowledge, know-how and practices.” Local people should benefit from any commercial use of their intellectual property and any technology derived from it.

The Convention commits Parties to develop research capabilities in affected developing country Parties, particularly in Africa; to promote joint research programmes to develop “improved, affordable and accessible technologies for sustainable development through effective participation of local populations and communities”; to enhance the availability of water resources; to take into account the relationship between desertification, poverty and migration; and to include research priorities for their areas in their action programmes.

The Parties also agree to “integrate and co-ordinate the collection, analysis and exchange” of information through the “global network of institutions and facilities.” This is to ensure “systematic observation of land degradation”, which, among other things, would “help accomplish early warning and advance planning for periods of adverse climatic variation.” The Parties undertake to ensure that this addresses the needs of local communities as well as decision-makers.

13 Finance

Not surprisingly, the financial provisions proved to be the hardest part of the Convention to negotiate. Developed countries, in the midst of cutting domestic spending and aid budgets, were reluctant to commit themselves to providing extra money. But developing countries felt strongly that they should receive new and additional resources from the donor community, if they were to dedicate more of their own budgets, adopt new policies and undertake substantial new programmes to combat desertification. Much of the final negotiations were spent trying to reconcile these positions.

Lack of funds – from both developed and developing countries – has bedevilled previous attempts to get to grips with the crisis, notably the 1977 Plan of Action. UNEP has calculated that it would cost between \$10 billion and \$22.4 billion a year for 20 years to fight desertification effectively – but that actual expenditure in developing countries was running at less than \$1 billion a year in the 1980s. It is also true that the resources that were available were not spent effectively enough.

Rather than setting up a single system of funding, the Convention concentrates on mobilising resources through all existing channels, strengthening them and reorientating them to fit its integrated, bottom-up approach. It is often best to provide much of the money in small packages of grants and loans to local people, rather than devoting it to government bureaucracies or expensive consultants, and the Convention makes it clear that major investments should be channeled to the people actually affected by desertification and drought.

The Convention recognises the need for “substantial financial resources, including new and additional funding.” Both developed and developing Parties agree, “taking into account their capabilities”, to “make every effort to ensure that adequate financial resources are available.”

In an echo of these words, affected developing country Parties, undertake “to mobilise adequate financial resources” for their National Action Programmes. In return, developed country Parties undertake to “mobilise substantial financial resources”, including grants and concessional loans, in support of the programmes. They also promise to “promote the mobilisation of adequate, timely and predictable financial resources, including new and additional funding from the Global Environment Facility” – jointly implemented by the United Nations Development Programme, UNEP and the World Bank – which provides grant and concessional funds to developing countries for projects and activities that aim to protect the global environment.

Developed countries agree to facilitate the transfer of technology, knowledge and know-how, and to co-operate with developing countries in exploring “innovative methods and incentives for mobilising and channeling resources, including those of foundations, non-governmental organisations and other private sector entities.” These should particularly include debt swaps, which increase developing countries’ funds by reducing their debt burden.

They resolve to give priority to affected African country Parties, while not neglecting similar countries in other regions, and go somewhat further in their undertakings in the

Regional Annex for Africa, where they agree to “continue to allocate significant resources and/or increased resources.”

Affected developing countries and regional organisations will convene “consultative processes” in support of national, sub-regional and regional action programmes. In Africa, these will lead to partnership agreements, which will set out the roles to be played in funding National Action Programmes by governments, donors, and non-governmental organisations. These should both help to mobilise funds and make sure that they are raised and spent in an integrated way.

Both developed and developing countries undertake to improve the quality of their funding, and to “rationalise and strengthen the management of resources already allocated... by using them more effectively and efficiently, assessing their successes and shortcomings, removing hindrances to their effective use and, where necessary, reorientating programmes in light of the integrated long-term approach adopted pursuant to this Convention.”

They agree to examine how to strengthen regional and sub-regional co-operation and to give “due priority and attention” to supporting the activities of affected developing countries, particularly in Africa, that advance implementation of the Convention in the governing bodies of multilateral financial institutions.

The Convention does not establish a special fund, but sets up ‘a Global Mechanism to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of existing financial sources in tackling desertification and the effects of drought and to “promote actions leading to the mobilisation and channelling of substantial financial resources... to affected developing country Parties.”

In addition, the activities of the Global Mechanism would draw up an inventory of available bilateral and multilateral co-operation programmes; provide advice, on request, to Parties on sources of financial assistance and on innovative methods of raising money to help improve “the co-ordination of co-operative activities at the national level”; and to provide Parties and organisations with information on available sources of funds and funding patterns.

The Conference of the Parties is to consider adopting policies which, among other things, would facilitate the establishment of mechanisms, such as national desertification funds, “to channel financial resources rapidly and efficiently to the local level.”

Developing countries agree to use “National Co-ordinating Mechanisms.” Participatory and integrated into national development programmes, these are to ensure the efficient use of money and involve non-governmental organisations, local groups and the private sector in raising money, implementing programmes and ensuring that funds get to the local level. The convention adds that donors can enhance this by “improved co-ordination and flexible programming.”

It also notes that the full implementation of developing country Parties’ obligations under the Convention, will be “greatly assisted” if the developed nations fulfil their own obligations, particularly on finance and the transfer of technology.

14 Institutions and Procedures

The Conference of the Parties (COP) is established as the “supreme body” of the Convention. The COP’s job is to make “the decisions necessary to promote effective implementation” of the Convention. It will, among other things, regularly review implementation and the functioning of the Convention’s institutions, establish subsidiary bodies, give them guidance, and review their reports to promote and facilitate an exchange of information on measures adopted by the Parties.

The Convention also establishes a Permanent Secretariat: the first COP will designate it and make arrangements for its functioning. It will, among other duties, make arrangements for sessions of the COP and its subsidiary bodies, and compile and transmit reports submitted to it. It will also facilitate assistance to developing country Parties, particularly in Africa, to compile and communicate the information required by the Convention.

It will report on the execution of its functions to the COP and co-ordinate its activities with the secretariats of other international bodies and conventions.

Scientific and technological information and advice will be provided by a multidisciplinary Committee on Science and Technology, which will be composed of government representatives and open to all Parties. The Committee will survey the existing networks, institutions, agencies and bodies and make recommendations on how to link them better.

The COP will set up and maintain a roster of independent experts and draw on it to form ad hoc panels to give it information and advice on specific issues.

All Parties are to give reports to the COP on what they have done to implement the Convention. Affected countries are to describe their strategies to fulfil their obligations under the Convention, and those that have implemented action programmes are to give detailed descriptions of them. The COP will facilitate the provision of technical and financial support for this to affected developing countries, particularly in Africa.

Developed country Parties are to report on what they have done to help in the preparation and implementation of action programmes – and on the financial resources they have provided, or are providing.

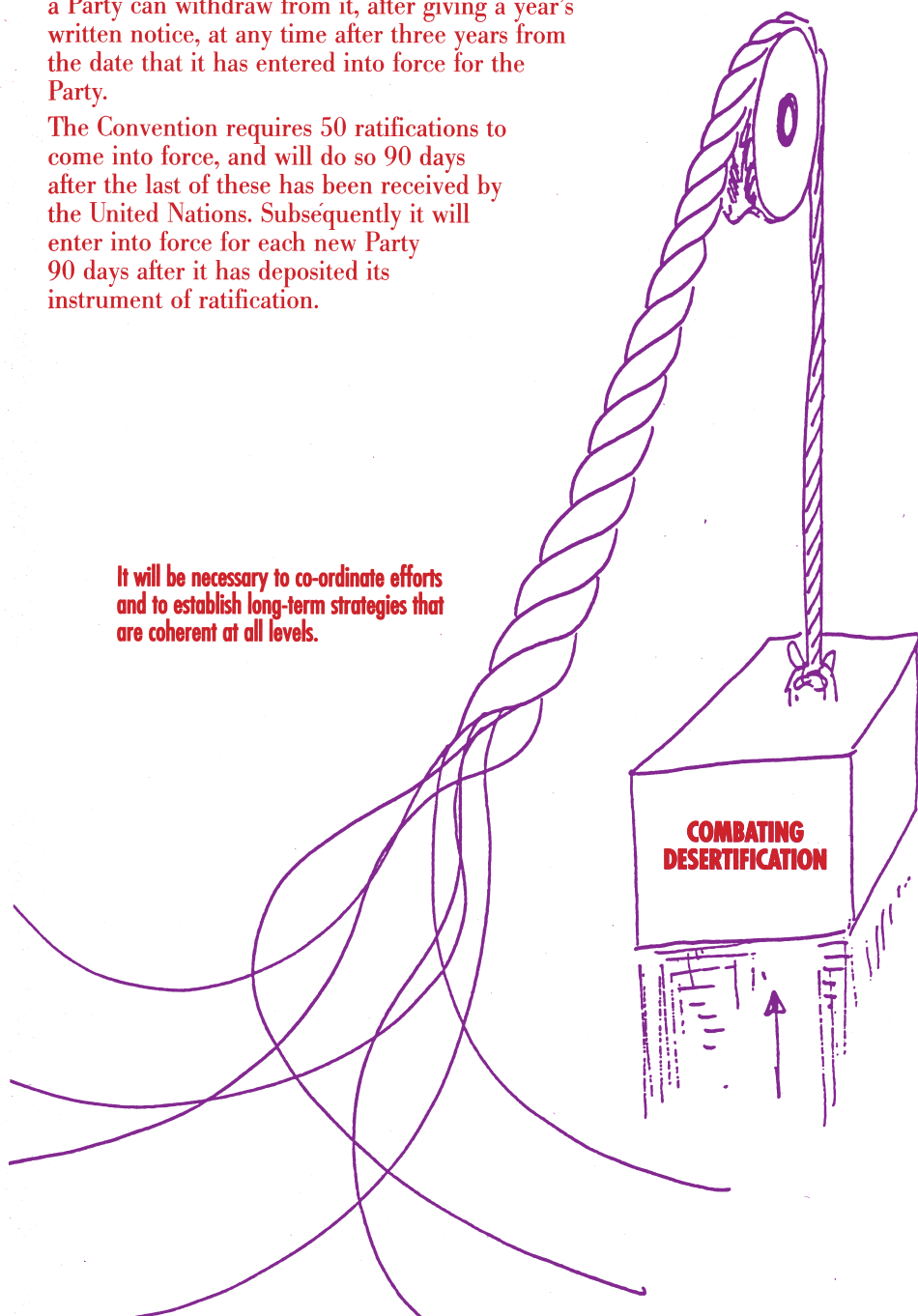
Any Party may propose amendments to the Convention. These would be adopted by an ordinary meeting of the COP, preferably by consensus, but, as a last resort, by a two-thirds majority vote. Any additional annex or amendment to an existing annex can be adopted in the same way, but the majority for adopting or amending a regional implementation annex must include a two-thirds majority vote of the Parties of the region concerned, who are present and voting. Every Party has one vote, but regional economic integration organisations can vote as a block on certain issues.

Disputes are to be resolved through negotiation or other peaceful means. When Parties join the Convention they must choose between arbitration and submission to the International Court of Justice as a means of resolving any disputes. If two disputing Parties cannot agree on the means of resolution after 12 months, they must submit to conciliation.

No reservations can be made to the Convention, but a Party can withdraw from it, after giving a year's written notice, at any time after three years from the date that it has entered into force for the Party.

The Convention requires 50 ratifications to come into force, and will do so 90 days after the last of these has been received by the United Nations. Subsequently it will enter into force for each new Party 90 days after it has deposited its instrument of ratification.

It will be necessary to co-ordinate efforts and to establish long-term strategies that are coherent at all levels.



15 Africa

Africa is given priority and particular attention throughout the Convention and the first of four special Regional Annexes is devoted to the continent. Desertification has its greatest impact in Africa. Two-thirds of the continent is desert or drylands, and 73 per cent of its agricultural drylands are already severely or moderately degraded.

There are frequent severe droughts, and many countries are affected by them and by desertification. Many of the affected countries are landlocked, making communications difficult.

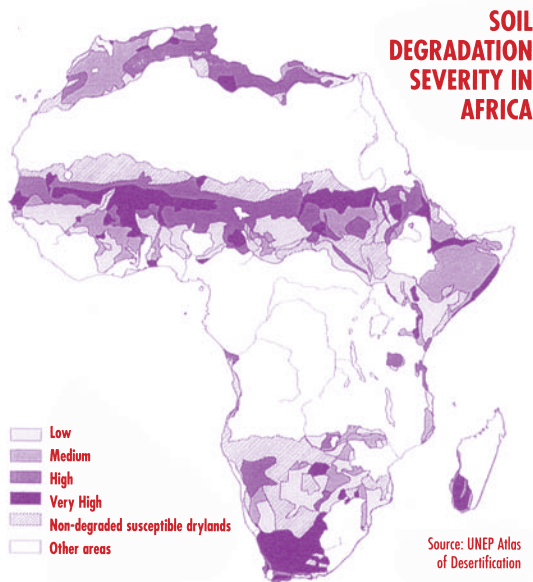
Most suffer from widespread poverty, and many are among the world's least developed countries. They rely heavily on natural resources, need significant international assistance, and suffer from weak institutions and infrastructure, debt, political instability and deteriorating and fluctuating terms of trade. This gives the Convention the potential to help bring about a better structure for co-ordinating aid as a whole.

Developed countries agree, among other things, to "give priority to affected African country Parties" and to "continue to allocate significant resources and/or increase resources" to combating desertification and/or mitigating the effects of drought. The commitments of African country Parties include an undertaking to make this "a central strategy" in their efforts to eradicate poverty. They also agree to aim to make financial allocations that reflect "the new priority" Africa has accorded to the issue, and to sustain and strengthen current reforms toward "greater decentralisation and resource tenure" and to reinforce local participation.

These countries are to draw up National Action Programmes as a "central and integral" part of formulating sustainable development policies, in a process that allows for "maximum participation from local populations and communities." And much more detail on the content of the programmes is specified in the main body of the Convention.

The programmes should identify factors contributing to desertification and/or drought, draw on past experiences in tackling them, and delegate more responsibility to local people and communities, including women, farmers and pastoralists.

They are to include "measures to improve the economic environment with a view to eradicating poverty": the Convention lays down specific actions to increase incomes and employment opportunities, particularly for the poorest, and improve "the long-term prospects of rural economies." They are to reduce pressure on the land through



population and migration policies and to improve food security by promoting the use of drought-resistant crops and integrated dryland farming systems.

The Parties also agree that the programmes should include measures to conserve natural resources – by ensuring that they are managed sustainably and in an integrated way, through education and through ensuring the development and efficient use of diverse, alternative and renewable sources of energy and other technologies “to alleviate the pressure on fragile natural resources.”

There are to be measures to define the roles of the different branches of government, to encourage “active decentralisation” and to adjust, as appropriate, “the institutional and regulatory framework of natural resource management to provide security of land tenure for local populations.”

Finally the programmes are to include measures to improve knowledge of desertification, by promoting research, encouraging studies and improving national capabilities, and to monitor and assess the effects of drought.

But drought and desertification do not respect national boundaries, and so the Annex commits Parties to draw up joint programmes at the regional and sub-regional levels.

The sub-regional programmes are to focus on nine areas of co-operation:

- programmes for the sustainable management of natural resources that cross frontiers;
- programmes to develop alternative energy sources;
- management and control of agricultural pests and diseases;
- capacity-building, education and public awareness;
- scientific and technical co-operation;
- early warning systems and joint planning to mitigate the effects of drought;
- exploring ways of sharing experiences, particularly over local participation, and creating an “enabling environment” for improved management of the land and for the use of appropriate technologies;
- strengthening the capacity of sub-regional organisations; and
- developing policies in such fields as trade and marketing.

African Parties to the Convention are to co-ordinate “the preparation, negotiation and implementation” of the national, sub-regional and regional action programmes, but they can involve other Parties and organisations in the process. They will also organise consultative processes at these levels: developed country Parties will be encouraged to participate in them, if so invited. These may serve as forums to negotiate and conclude partnership agreements. They may also specify the contributions to the programmes to be made by African Parties, and other members of the consultative groups, and identify funding arrangements for implementing the programmes, as well as priorities and agreements both on their implementation and on the indicators needed to evaluate them. The Secretariat may help convene these consultative process, at the request of African country Parties.

The Inter-governmental Negotiating Committee, which drew up the Convention, passed a resolution on urgent action for Africa, calling for steps to be taken to prepare national and sub-regional action programmes, and to establish partnership arrangements – with funding from donors – even before the treaty enters into force.

16 Other Regions

There are three further special Regional Annexes to the Convention to provide “guidelines and arrangements” for its effective implementation. None lay down new obligations on Parties, apart from those in the main text of the treaty, but all provide for action programmes to be an “integral part” of their policies for sustainable development.

Asia

Asia contains the largest amount of land affected by desertification of any continent, just under 1,400 million hectares. Some 71 per cent of its drylands – one-third of its entire area – is moderately to severely degraded. The Annex calls attention to the “high proportion of areas... affected by, or vulnerable to, desertification and drought”, the heavy pressure on natural resources, and the effect of poverty in increasing land degradation and pressure on scarce water resources.

Parties may survey the state of affected areas, evaluate past and current efforts to address the problem, and designate appropriate bodies to prepare, co-ordinate and implement action programmes. They may involve affected people at all stages through a locally driven consultative process. They may then prepare technical and financial programmes based on what they learn from these activities.

They may promote the integrated management of drainage basins, the conservation of soil resources and the enhancement and efficient use of water resources. They may develop and use ways of evaluating the implementation of their action programmes, strengthen and/or establish information, evaluation and follow-up and early warning systems and, when there is international co-operation, “formulate in a spirit of partnership... appropriate arrangements supporting their action programmes” including arrangements for financial and technical resources.

Affected Parties may agree to prepare and implement sub-regional or joint action programmes, which may include: joint programmes for the sustainable management of resources that cross national boundaries; setting priorities for co-ordination in capacity-building and scientific and technical co-operation (particularly information sharing and early warning systems for drought); and ways of strengthening organisations and institutions.

Regional activities may also be undertaken and affected Parties are to hold periodic co-ordination meetings. Parties may also set up a mechanism for such activities as exchanging information, co-ordinating activities, promoting co-operation, identifying needs for external co-operation, and following-up and evaluating the implementation of action programmes.

Latin America and the Caribbean

Nearly three-quarters of Latin America’s drylands are moderately to severely desertified, and the Annex notes “the existence of broad expanses which are vulnerable and have been affected by desertification and/or drought.” It mentions the frequent use

of unsustainable development practices in affected areas and describes the sharp drop in productivity, impoverishment and other severe social consequences caused by them.

The Annex provides a list of thematic issues that affected countries may take into account in developing their national strategies. These include eradicating poverty and improving the quality of life; achieving food security and sustainable development; rational and sustainable management and conservation of natural resources; conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity; and consideration of demographic issues.

They also include formulating and applying emergency plans to mitigate the effects of drought; strengthening and/or establishing information, evaluation and follow-up and early warning systems; developing, managing and efficiently using diverse sources of energy, including promoting alternative ones; “increasing capacities, education and public awareness, technical, scientific and technological co-operation and financial resources and mechanisms”; and establishing or strengthening institutional and legal frameworks to allow the Convention to be applied, which should aim at decentralising administration.

The Parties agree to establish and/or strengthen “national focal points” to co-ordinate action. They will hold periodic co-ordination meetings and set up a similar mechanism to the one outlined in the Asian Annex. Affected country Parties agree that they will, individually or jointly, undertake specific measures designed to disseminate and promote appropriate technologies and know-how.

The Northern Mediterranean

Developed countries suffer from desertification as well as developing ones. Almost two-thirds of Europe’s drylands are moderately to severely affected. The problem is particularly acute on the Northern shores of the Mediterranean, where the rains are highly variable, droughts occur, the soil is poor and vulnerable, and steep slopes are prone to erosion. Frequent wildfires destroy forests, water is used unsustainably and traditional agriculture is in crisis. Urban growth, industry, tourism and irrigation are all concentrated in coastal areas, providing a foretaste of the problems most coastal developing countries are likely to face in the next century.

The Annex places an obligation on affected Parties to prepare National Action Programmes and sub-regional, regional and joint action programmes, as appropriate. These should be finalised as soon as possible. The Parties agree to survey the problem; evaluate past and present programmes to address it; designate bodies to be responsible for the action programmes; involve the local people; prepare technical and financial programmes; and develop and use means of monitoring and evaluating what is done. Affected developed country Parties of the region are not eligible to receive financial assistance under the Convention.

17 Follow-up

Any agreement is only as good as the action taken to implement it and the Convention to Combat Desertification is no exception. The 1977 Plan of Action failed adequately to tackle the problem, not primarily because of deficiencies in the measures that were agreed, but because they were insufficiently put into effect. The Convention tries to avoid this by setting out specific follow-up measures. But governments must ensure that they are implemented and that this unique chance to halt and reverse desertification is seized.

Countries should sign the Convention and move as speedily as possible to ratifying it. Even before ratification, affected countries can begin to put it into practice, on the basis of the resolution on urgent action for Africa. Usually the first step will be to designate or create a national co-ordinating body. This will act as a catalyst for preparing, implementing and evaluating the national action programme.

This national focal point should work out what institutional arrangements will be needed to implement the programme of action, what it will cost, and what the nation can spend. It should start a broad and thorough process of consultation both with its own nation's citizens and with donor countries and international organisations. It should ensure full participation by the people of the drylands and non-governmental organisations in assessing the strengths and weaknesses both of past and current programmes, and of the strategies proposed for implementing the new ones. And it should organise a national forum to formalise this interactive process and lead to setting up a consultative group with donors that would conclude partnership agreements.

Donor countries, in the meantime, are urged to mobilise resources and rearrange priorities so as to play their part in these partnerships and provide the substantial, timely and predictable finance that is needed. And, under the resolution for urgent action for Africa, Parties are invited to set up partnership agreements and prepare national and sub-regional action programmes without waiting for the treaty to come into force.

Encouraging signs of practical action emerged even as the Convention was signed in October 1994, when many African nations, other affected countries, and donors outlined practical steps that they were already taking to implement its provisions. If this can be continued there is real hope of at last tackling the age-old problem of desertification on an adequate scale. For it will only be beaten by action on the ground that is truly down to earth.