PROGRESS TOWARDS THE SDG LAND DEGRADATION AND RESTORATION COMMITMENTS

WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THE 2020 VNRS AND THE SDG INDICATORS' GLOBAL DATABASE?

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In 2015 we celebrated world leaders' recognition of the foundational and strategic role that sustainable land management must play to advance biodiversity conservation and climate resilience.

Five years after the SDGs were set in motion and a third of the way into their implementation timeframe, it is important to assess how far we have come: what have countries done to address their ambitious but critical cross-cutting commitments to combat desertification, restore degraded land and soil, including land affected by desertification, drought and floods, and strive to achieve a land degradation-neutral world? This assessment is particularly timely given that the 2020 High Level Political Forum reviewed progress toward SDGs 1, 2, 5 and 15 all dealing directly with land and land governance. In particular, we studied progress towards SDG 15 to "*protect, restore, and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and half and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss.*"

There are indeed countries that have advanced their SDG land degradation and restoration commitments. Some have undertaken thoughtful planning or allocated new resources. Others have augmented or strengthened land restoration and sustainable land management practices in an inclusive way. A few have introduced ambitious reforms, established new national programs, or drafted new legislation to ensure long-term efficacy. However, our review suggests that most countries have yet to prioritize land degradation neutrality in their national development agendas and most have not undertaken significant action. Even those who have acted decisively have a long way to go before their new laws, policies and strategies are fully implemented, or their programs reach the necessary scale.

This lack of sufficient action is particularly vexing since many countries have also made similar environmental commitments to other UN frameworks: the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD). In fact, several countries mentioned in their Voluntary National Reviews actions driven by their commitments to the UNFCCC and UNCCD — see for example the VNRs of India, Kyrgyzstan, Morocco, Mozambique, Nepal, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, and Seychelles.

Since the commitments and reporting requirements of the SDGs overlap significantly with those of the UNFCCC and UNCCD, policy designers have mutually reinforcing incentives to advance this SDG commitment. When environmental degradation is minimized and restoration efforts are prioritized, ecosystems can sequester and store more carbon and lessen the impact of some climate change effects. The UN Decade of Ecosystem Restoration 2021-2030 strategy highlights the importance of securing land tenure, we can hope to see greater alignment and collaboration across the agencies striving for a more sustainable world.

Reaching the SDG land degradation neutrality target will require strong political commitment in all countries, backed by dedicated resources, to enact concerted, deliberate, and multi-sectorial efforts. Up to now, countries have sometimes been distracted by other competing priorities, especially under a pandemic, limited by lack of capacity or by the belief that environmental challenges are too complex to resolve. It is now time for governments, development partners, civil society practitioners, experts, and researchers to come together and pool their experience, expertise, resources, and institutional reach. The post-COVID-19 world we all hope for depends on whether people – everyone, everywhere – can count on robust environmental policies to bolster their food security, livelihoods, health, and climate resilience.

Finally, the highly visible and powerful platform provided by the SDGs only works if it catalyzes action. It must provide governments with incentives to act, it must offer effective advocacy levers to civil society organizations, and it must help the broad array of stakeholders working on land degradation remain strategically aligned. This requires clear and accessible information on what countries have done – what we should celebrate – as well as on what countries could and should be doing to fulfill their SDG land degradation and restoration commitments. Such reporting must come from governments, civil society, and community-based groups around the world.

The following sections provide a detailed description of the analysis we have carried out to assess what progress countries have made toward SDG15 on land degradation neutrality and the indicator that tracks this commitment, 15.3.1.

BACKGROUND ON SOURCES

For the analysis that follows we have relied on two sources of publicly available information in August 2020:

■ 42 of the 47 **Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs)** submitted for the 2020 High Level Political Forum by Argentina, Armenia, Austria, Bangladesh, Benin, Brunei Darussalam, Bulgaria, Burundi, Comoros, Congo (DRC), Costa Rica, Ecuador, Estonia, Finland, Gambia, Georgia, Honduras, India, Kenya, Kyrgyzstan, Liberia, Malawi, Micronesia, Morocco, Mozambique, Nepal, Niger, Nigeria, Panama, Papua New Guinea, Peru, R. of Moldova, R. of North Macedonia, Samoa, Seychelles, Slovenia, Solomon Islands, Trinidad & Tobago, Uganda, Ukraine, Uzbekistan and Zambia.[1]

■ The **Global SDG Indicators Database**, which contains annual entries for each SDG indicator for each country. At the time of this writing, the information reviewed in the database goes until August 2020.

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1 Due to resource constraints, our review was limited to countries who had reports available in English, French or Spanish and therefore does not include the VNRs submitted by Libya, Russia, or Syria. We have not reviewed VNRs from Barbados and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines who appear to have submitted one but whose VNRs have not been posted on the SDG site. Website of the SDG High Level Political Forum: https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/hlpf

WHAT STEPS HAVE COUNTRIES TAKEN TO ADDRESS THEIR SDG LAND DEGRADATION COMMITMENTS?

While the vast majority of the VNRs included comments around land, land degradation, or land use, frequently these mentions were limited to descriptions of the country's context, history, policies, or challenges. Thus, to gauge the extent to which governments are moving toward fulfilling their SDG land degradation and restoration commitments, we screened countries' VNRs for two criteria:

■ VNRs that report concrete actions such as a new or revised national strategy, legal or policy reforms, programmatic action, active policy implementation, or similar measures. Many governments described existing policies' goals or aspirational activities; however, these statements are not included below.

■ VNRs that report activities that have taken place after the SDGs have been agreed upon and set in motion; that is, within the past five years. Important as past actions might be, we sought recent policies or implementation activities.

Several countries have reported taking decisive action to advance SDG 15.3. The summaries below share countries' reported activities that adhere to the criteria described but have not been validated by this research. In particular, we want to recognize the following countries for the promising actions they report taking:

Armenia

The government is implementing a land degradation neutrality project in Ararat Valley. Launched in 2018, the project includes drip irrigation, bio humus utilization, and hedgerow planting to protect the fields. In 2019, the state budget allotted 424 million AMD for the first time for afforestation and reforestation activities. In 2019, the government reforested 2,448 hectares.

Bangladesh
To prepare baseline 15.3.1 data, the Department of Environment is leading sustainable land management initiatives and coordinating several stakeholder organizations for data gathering. The government has developed a land cover map and is collecting secondary data for soil analysis.

Benin
The government has developed and adopted a policy note on land degradation neutrality and has started implementing the largest forestry project in West Africa to restore its forests. The area of restored forests has increased from 43 hectares in 2016 to 229 hectares in 2018.

Bulgaria
The government has a 2014-2020 National Action Program for Sustainable Land Management and Combating Desertification as well as a National Strategy and Strategic Plan for the Development of the Forestry Sector that aligns with international guidance. The Environmental Executive Agency conducts annual monitoring on land at risk of degradation.

Ecuador
The government has engaged in several ongoing projects, including:

- "*Implementation of Sustainable Land Management Practices and Capacity Building in Communities Affected by Degradation,*" implemented by FAO to improve the capacity of local communities for the sustainable management of the land, through good agricultural practices, efficient water use and reforestation processes.

- "*Climate Smart Livestock Project*" to reduce soil degradation, promote the capacity to adapt to climate change, and control greenhouse gas emissions from livestock through the implementation of clean technologies and creation of environmentally friendly productive practices.

- "*Integrated Management for the Fight Against Desertification, Land Degradation and Adaptation to Climate Change*" to prevent soil desertification.

Given the information provided, the magnitude and stage of these projects are unclear.

Estonia
As of 2019, the government has restored 7,600 hectares of open marshes and 5,000 hectares of semi-natural communities. It is also working on restoring 13,000 additional hectares of open marshes and 4,500 additional hectares of semi-natural communities. The area of managed semi-natural communities has increased to 35,600 hectares through various agricultural subsidies.

Honduras
The Honduras Bosques 2030 Restoration Strategy aims to restore one million hectares. As of 2019, 53,623 hectares of forest have been restored.

Kenya
In 2015, the government adopted a National Solid Waste Management Strategy. It also has a ban on logging and extraction of timber in public and community forests and is implementing a strategy to achieve 10% tree cover by 2022.

Kyrgyzstan
In 2016, the government amended and expanded the Law of the Kyrgyz Republic on Pastures to optimize activities of pasture user associations and their executive bodies (harvest committees) and to strengthen the role of local authorities and public organizations in improving pasture management. The government also developed national voluntary goals for land degradation neutrality.

Liberia
The government has set a high-level national target to increase the proportion of environmentally protected areas by 30% by 2030. In line with this effort, the government has launched two national parks – Gola National Park (2016) and Grebo-Krahn National Protected Area (2017) – thereby increasing the total hectares of protected areas and national parks to 411,000 acres. It has also planted 21,800 trees on 50 acres of degraded land in Lofa County to combat the spread of desert from the Guinean Savanna Belt.

Morocco

The government has undertaken several programs/actions:

- It adapted its National Action Plan to Combat Desertification to specific zonal features, leading to the identification of eight homogeneous zones.

- It operationalized its monitoring system and created of two Technical Centers for Desertification Monitoring.

- Between 2015-2019, the government supported:
  - Watershed management and erosion controls for 800,000 hectares.
  - Prevention of silting on continental and coastal areas for more than 41,000 hectares.
  - Rangeland development programs and the regulation of transhumant flows to promote conditions for planting and maintaining fodder shrubs on more than 650,000 hectares.

Niger

The government has reclaimed land (77,595 ha in 2016, 95,566 ha in 2017, 145,106 ha in 2018 and 200,138 ha in 2019) but that is not enough to offset the loss of cropland that continues to be of about 100,000 hectares/year. To reverse that trend the government has an annual target of reclaiming 213,000 hectares/year. In 2018, Niger committed to the following by 2030: achieving land degradation neutrality, reducing degraded areas from 9% to 5%, and increasing plant cover from 17% to 19%.

Papua New Guinea

The government has adopted and is implementing a land use policy to meet the treaty obligations under the UNCCD Agenda 21 to guide the planned allocation, development, management and best use of land and land resources. The government is also implementing its National REDD+ Strategy (2017) to strengthen sustainable land management.

Samoa

The government supports two significant projects:

- A two million tree planting campaign with programs for ecological restoration and water catchment.

- With funding from UNCCD-GEF, the Strengthening Multi- Sectoral Management of Critical Landscape project supports restoration and rehabilitation initiatives using sustainable land management practices throughout the country targeting local community farmers. The efforts include financial support to community-based tree planting programs, biodiversity assessments and restoration of degraded land areas.

Seychelles

In May 2018, the Republic of Seychelles validated its commitment to land degradation neutrality under the UNCCD and as part of the SDGs for 2030. In October 2019, the government embarked on an FAO-funded project to establish a comprehensive national policy and legal framework for forestry, which will include sustainable forest resources management, innovation, and review of existing laws that guide management of forests.

While these are all promising steps, considerably more work is needed for these laws and strategies to translate into changes on the ground, for the programs to reach the scale needed and ultimately, to fulfill the goal of land restoration.

Among the VNRs reviewed, there are several more that report taking land-related actions. Unfortunately, based on the narrative they submitted we are unable to determine whether those actions were taken after 2015 or whether they have served to advance the SDG land commitments of land degradation neutrality and land restoration. These countries include Argentina, Austria, Burundi, Comoros, Costa Rica, Democratic Republic of Congo, Finland, Gambia, Georgia, India, Malawi, Mozambique, Nepal, Peru, Republic of Macedonia, and Republic of Moldova.

WHAT PROGRESS HAS BEEN MADE SO FAR?

The relevant outcome-based land degradation indicator is SDG 15.3.1, which tracks the proportion of land that is degraded over total land area in pursuance of Target 15.3 "*By 2030, combat desertification, restore degraded land and soil, including land affected by desertification, drought and floods, and strive to achieve a land degradation neutral world.*" Based on the 2020 VNRs and the SDG Indicators database, we conclude that:

There has been very limited uptake for this indicator. In the period 2015-2019, there is limited data and as of August 2020, only seven countries had reported on 15.3.1. Kenya and Niger are the only countries reporting annual values for SDG 15.3.1; however, minimal conclusions can be drawn from those data.[2] We acknowledge that most countries do not have these national data, but governments can benefit from global efforts to promote data accessibility and analysis. Because target 15.3 subindicators are already part of the UNCCD country reporting mechanism, the UNCCD, Food and Agriculture Organization, and partners are building capacity in more than 60 countries for implementing and monitoring SDG target 15.3. In the absence of national data, Earth observation and geospatial information represent the next best way to measure land degradation and restoration over large geographical areas even though significant challenges remain.[3] For land cover and land cover change, most countries have quantitative data and mapping capacities which are derived primarily from satellite imagery. For land productivity, data for large geographical areas can be derived using Earth observation.

2   Kenya reported 11.4% in 2017, 2018, and 2019. Niger reported 7% in 2016, 7.09% in 2017, 7.18% in 2018, and 7.26% in 2019.

3   Metadata for SDG 15. Updated on 28 March 2016.
     https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/files/metadata-compilation/Metadata-Goal-15.pdf

The numbers reported varied widely, with Benin reporting that 41.2% of the country's land is classified as degraded, to Morocco at the other extreme, where only 5.35% of the land is considered degraded. The figures submitted by the other five countries are: India 27.8%, Kenya 11.4%, Niger 7.26%, Georgia 6.1%, and Seychelles -15.4%.[4] Additionally, Moldova reported that "*according to unofficial information from environmental civil society organizations, degraded land accounts for about 30% of the country's area.*"

4   The meaning underpinning the Seychelles report of a negative value is unclear.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT G⬤ALS

For more information on how the Land and SDG Momentum Group is supporting SDG reporting work on land degradation and restoration, please emai **info@landesa.org**

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THE SDG LAND MOMENTUM GROUP is a coalition of civil society and multi-lateral organisations geared towards monitoring the progress of the SDG land targets and conducting advocacy to meet the same end. Currently the secretariat of the group is coordinated by the International Land Coalition Secretariat. Members of the group include, Asian NGO Coalition, GLTN, Huairou Commission, IPAR, IWGIA, Land Portal, Landesa, Natural Resources Institute - University of Greenwich, Oxfam, Rights and Resources, TMG Think Tank, Transparency International, World Resources Institute.