

# United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) State of Play and Perspectives for West Africa

Dry riverbed (Source: SOS Sahel, 2013)

## Summary

### 1. Setting of the UNCCD

- 1.1. Key Concepts
- 1.2. Origins and Objective
- 1.3. Bodies
- 1.4. Groups of Parties

### 2. Workings of UNCCD

- 2.1. Obligations of the Parties
- 2.2. Strategy 2008-2018
- 2.3. Strengths and Weaknesses

### 3. Perspectives and Stakes in West Africa

- 3.1 Sustainable Land Management (SLM)
- 3.2 Innovative Financing
- 3.3. Zero Net Land Degradation Scheme
- 3.4. Strengthening the UNCCD



## Synthesis

UNCCD took effect in 1996 and was conceived of "to forge a global partnership to reverse and prevent desertification/land degradation and to mitigate the effects of drought in affected areas in order to support poverty reduction and environmental sustainability."

Bringing together at the same time countries affected in whole or in part by desertification and land degradation, and developed countries expected to support the affected countries, the UNCCD has struggled since its creation to mobilise the necessary political will and funding.

But, nearly 20 years on, the UNCCD has reset itself with the adoption of a 10-year Strategy (2008-2018) to combat land degradation and desertification.

This recent change of tack is sorely needed in West Africa, where the agricultural sector accounts for 35% of GDP and occupies a very extensive part of the working population. It is handicapped by poor soils and the encroaching desert. These phenomena are exacerbated by already very perceptible changes to the climate and powerful demographic pressures.

The key issues of UNCCD for Africa, in particular West Africa, are clear:

- Sharply increased funding for sustainable land management (SLM) is essential in order to scale up: at least 2 billion US\$ would be necessary to manage land sustainably in the 17 CILSS/CEDEAO countries ;
- The Global Mechanism should be implemented and, as underlined in the 10-year Strategy, "the sources and mechanisms of innovative funding, in particular from the private sector should be identified";
- The implementation of a scheme of Zero Net Land Degradation should be explored, which aims at compensating degraded land by an equal quantity of restored land and to achieve a balance. Indeed, this scheme would allow degraded land to be restored and contribute to combating degradation and desertification, the protection of biodiversity, reducing climate change, and improving adaptation to it, as well as, obviously, food security;
- The recent process of setting up a subsidiary body, the Science-Policy Interface (SPI), requires it to become quickly more operational and to work on strategic investment frameworks in SLM.

## Introduction

Land degradation and desertification are major constraints to economic and social development.

Inspired by that realisation, African, Latin American, and Mediterranean leaders called into being the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD).

The following pages summarise the Convention which came into effect in 1996: its objective, main bodies, present Parties and their obligations, the 10-year strategy 2008-2018, its strengths and weaknesses.

We conclude by presenting the prospects and key issues facing African countries: SLM, innovative financing, Zero Net Land Neutrality mechanism, strengthening the UNCCD.



1977: the UN Conference on Desertification (UNCOD, Nairobi) adopts a Plan of Action to combat desertification (PACD)

1991: The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) "concluded that the problem of land degradation in arid, semi-arid and dry sub-humid areas had intensified, although there were "local examples of success."" (UNCCD)

1992 (June): The Rio Conference called on the United Nations General Assembly to establish an Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee (INC) to prepare, by June 1994, a Convention to Combat Desertification, particularly in Africa." (UNCCD)

1992 (December): The UN General Assembly adopts resolution 47/188

1994 (June): The INC completes its negotiations in five sessions. The UNCCD is adopted in Paris

1996 (December): The Convention comes into force following the 50th ratification

1997 (October): The Conference of Parties (COP), the Convention's supreme body, holds its 1st session in Rome

2007 (September): At the COP8 in Madrid, the 10-year Strategic plan is adopted "to enhance the implementation of the Convention." (UNCCD)

2011 (September): At the COP10 of Changwon, South Korea, responsibility for the Global Mechanism is transferred from the IFAD to the Secretariat of the UNCCD and the network of partnerships is extended to include representatives of civil society, intergovernmental organisations, and NGOs.

2013 (October): At the COP11 in Windhoek, Namibia, the Science-Policy Interface (SPI) and the Global Mechanism are established at the Secretariat of the UNCCD in Bonn, Germany

# 1. Framework

## 1.1. Key Concepts

**Desertification:** "land degradation in arid, semi-arid, and dry sub-humid regions resulting from various factors, including climatic variations and human activities." (UNCCD)



Figure 1 - Bare glaciais in Niger (Source: Agrhymet, 2013)

**Drought:** a phenomenon which occurs when precipitation is lower than normally recorded levels, which leads to water imbalances prejudicial to production systems.



Figure 2 - Dry riverbed in Niger (Source: SOS Sahel, 2013)

## 1.2. UNCCD: Origins and Objective

UNCCD took effect in 1996 and was conceived of "to forge a global partnership to reverse and prevent desertification/land degradation and to mitigate the effects of drought in affected areas in order to support poverty reduction and environmental sustainability."

It is based on the idea that solutions to problems of desertification and drought must come from the affected populations, backed by partnerships between national and international stakeholders.

Article 7 of the Convention states: "In implementing this Convention, the Parties shall give priority to affected African country Parties, in the light of the particular situation prevailing in that region, while not neglecting affected developing country Parties in other regions."

## 1.3. Bodies of the UNCCD

The principal bodies of the UNCCD are:

**Conference of the Parties (COP):** It is the supreme decision-making body and comprises all the Parties to the Convention. The first five COPs were held annually from 1997 to 2001 and bi-annually since 2001.

**Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention (CRIC):** was established at COP5 in 2001. It is a standing subsidiary body responsible for regularly examining the implementation of the Convention.

**Committee on Science and Technology (CST):** A subsidiary body of the COP, it provides it with information and advice on scientific and technological matters relating to combating desertification and mitigating the effects of drought. The Committee meets during the ordinary sessions of the COP. It is multidisciplinary, open to the participation of all: Parties but also NGOs or intergovernmental organisations with authority in their field, such as CILSS.

**Global Mechanism (GM):** The GM is a specialised body of the UNCCD and supports developing countries on how to increase investments in sustainable land management (SLM) and to reverse, control and prevent land degradation and desertification.

UNCCD mandated the GM to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of existing financial mechanisms and supports developing countries to position SLM as an investment priority. The GM is housed by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD).

## 1.4. Principal Groups of Parties

UNCCD has 194 Parties: 193 countries and the EU. The principal groups of Parties are:

**Group of affected countries:** Countries whose lands are wholly or partially affected by desertification. All African countries are there, in particular the Sahel countries.

**Group of developed countries:** Developed countries and regional economic groupings comprised of developed countries.

In addition, the implementation of the UNCCD is brought to bear in five areas, each specified in an Annex: (1) Africa, (2) Asia, (3) Latin America and the Caribbean, (4) the Northern Mediterranean, and (5) Central and Eastern Europe.

These Annexes define the orientation and contents of the specific action plans. They thus provide a framework for coordination and regional collaboration.

## 2. Workings of the UNCCD

### 2.1. Obligations of the Parties

The principal groups of country Parties do not have the same obligations. The Convention in the affected countries Parties is implemented through National Action Plans to Combat Desertification (NAP).

The design and the implementation of these NAPs are undertaken with the participation of all concerned actors and in a spirit of partnership. In Africa, 41 States out of 53 have worked out their NAPs.

The Convention stipulates that affected countries cooperate in developing and implementing action plans on a sub-regional (SRAP) level if these questions best lend themselves to a regional approach.

Article II of Annex I - Africa - thus specifies the spheres of activity of the SRAPs in Africa, which had already been worked out by the African sub-regional organisations (UEMOA, ECOWAS/CILSS, CEEAC/COMIFAC, IGAD and SADC).

Finally, always under the terms of article II of Annex I, the African countries Parties jointly decide the procedures for developing and executing the Regional Action Plan (RAP).



Figure 3 - Cattle water hole drying up in Burkina-Faso (Source: SOS Sahel, 2013)

### 2.2. 10-year Strategy 2008-2018

In 2007 the country Parties adopted the 10-year Strategy (2008-2018) which aims at strengthening the implementation of the UNCCD.

It aims at supporting, at the national and regional level, the development and the application of policies, programmes and measures towards the prevention, control and stopping of desertification and land degradation; and to mitigate the effects of drought by means of scientific and technological excellence, public awareness raising, setting standards, advocacy and the mobilisation of resources, so as to contribute to the reduction of poverty.

### 2.3. Strengths and Weaknesses



Figure 4 - Erosion of riverbanks (Source: SOS Sahel, 2013)

Among UNCCD's strengths are:

- The regionalisation of the Convention. This enables countries in the same region to jointly develop initiatives based on common realities in order to combat land degradation;
- 10-year Strategy (2008-2018) to combat desertification effectively, particularly using public-private partnerships;
- The role played by the UNCCD as a pivot between the UNCBD and the UNFCCC. Indeed, there is an obvious relationship between sustainable land management, the protection of biodiversity, and the struggle against climate change (especially in light of the role of soils in carbon sequestration).

Amongst UNCCD's weaknesses, there is primarily the means of financing its actions. Indeed, essential funding of the UNCCD is currently derived from the group of developed countries Parties, whose financial commitments are increasingly not respected.

Combating land degradation and desertification generally do not show immediate and economically measurable benefits. This does not make it easy to mobilise funding for the group of countries of Annex I and in the private sector (in contrast to what occurs under the Kyoto Protocol, where the private sector finds it advantageous to generate and exchange "carbon credits" resulting from mitigation projects).



Figure 5 - Semi-arid landscape in the Sahel (Source: SOS Sahel, 2013)

## Desertification, degradation

### Key dates for Africa

*Early 1970s: The drought in sub-Saharan Africa causes the deaths of more than 200,000 people and a million animals*

*September 1973: The Permanent Interstates Committee to Combat Drought in the Sahel (CILSS) is established by nine countries of the Sahel*

*August-September 2002: At the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, South Africa, the participating governments asked the Global Environment Facility (GEF) to become the financial mechanism of the Convention*

*October 2002: At the 2<sup>nd</sup> Assembly of the GEF in Beijing, China, it is decided that land degradation become the 5<sup>th</sup> field of intervention and it is proposed that the GEF become the financial mechanism of the Convention*

*August-September 2002: In Havana, Cuba, the COP6 designates the GEF as the Convention's financial mechanism and approves the CRIC2 recommendations to improve implementation of the Convention*

*2006: International Year of Deserts and Desertification*

*2007 (September): At the COP8 in Madrid, Spain the 10-year Strategic Plan (2008-2018) is adopted aimed at strengthening implementation of the Convention*

*2011 (September): On the sidelines of the General Assembly meeting a High-Level Meeting is held on desertification, land degradation and drought.*

## Short Bibliography

MEDD Niger (2006), National Programme of Action for Climate Change Adaptation

ECOWAS/CILSS (1999). Sub-regional action program to fight against desertification in West Africa and Chad

United Nations (1994): United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification

International Institute for Sustainable Development - IISD (1997-2013). Minutes of COP1 to COP11

### Authors:

Jean-Michel Kuela, SOS Sahel  
[jean-michel.kuela@sossahel.org](mailto:jean-michel.kuela@sossahel.org)

Salifou Ouedraogo, SOS Sahel  
[salifou.ouedraogo@sossahel.org](mailto:salifou.ouedraogo@sossahel.org)

Olivier Bouyer, SalvaTerra  
[o.bouyer@salvaterra.fr](mailto:o.bouyer@salvaterra.fr)



[www.sossahel.org](http://www.sossahel.org)



[www.salvaterra.fr](http://www.salvaterra.fr)

## 3. Perspectives and Stakes for West Africa

Africa is listed in Annex I of the Convention and is subject to powerful demographic forces. It is confronted with several stakes, the principal ones of which are:

### 3.1. Sustainable Land Management (SLM)

Land degradation proceeds, as the UNCCD underlined in its conclusions of April 2013 in Bonn. Whereas in the mid-1990s, 110 countries confronted this problem, today there are 168 countries which must endure soil impoverishment which exposes them to food insecurity.

The issues: episodes of drought, climate change, the intensive use of arable lands, and poor water reserve management.

Funding and actions must change scale: the costs of restoration of degraded land in the CILSS/ECOWAS countries are estimated at nearly 100 million US\$ per country. Funding should be increased sharply: at least 2 billion US\$ would be necessary to sustainably manage the lands of the 17 CILSS/CEDEAO countries (Source: conclusions of the workshop of the climate negotiators for the CILSS/ECOWAS area, Ouagadougou – October 2013).

### 3.2. Innovative Financing

As we have seen, the decisions taken by the COP are not always matched by financial commitments. The traditional sources of financing are decreasing in a context of world financial crisis and are insufficient given the extent of the needs.

This is why the 10-year strategy (2008-2017) of the UNCCD specifically invites stakeholders to seek and explore "Innovative sources of finance and financing mechanisms" to combat desertification and land degradation, in particular "from the private sector, market-based mechanisms, trade, foundations, and civil society organisations" (Outcome 5.4, The Strategy).

This same call for innovative financing was also launched within the Framework Convention on Climate Change: funding for the climate is stagnating at a few billion dollars per year when it is clear that 100 billion US\$ per year would be needed till 2020. But whether under the Climate Convention or the Desertification Convention, it is illusory to count on private financing if the States themselves, in particular the developed countries, do not lead by example by augmenting public funding.

### 3.3. Zero Net Land Degradation Neutrality Scheme

The Convention today comprises 194 countries, of which 169 are said to be affected by land degradation. Desertification and land degradation confront the affected populations of these countries with two options (BARBUT, 2014):

- Stay and fight: fight against land degradation and climate change to limit poverty and hunger;
- Flee: mass migration with the attendant risk of accentuating global imbalances. 4 million ha of new land per year is estimated to be required to meet world food needs. This is often met at the expense of forests.

The zero net land degradation neutrality scheme would aim at supporting populations to take the first option: by setting a global commitment to restore an area of land equal to that of degraded land, States would create an offset market. They could reassign their rights and obligations to private actors, just as in the market for carbon rights (*ibid*).

Indeed, under the right conditions this mechanism would allow degraded land to be restored and would contribute to combating degradation and desertification, to protecting biodiversity, reducing climate change and improving adaptation to it, as well as, obviously, food security (*ibid*).



Figure 3 - Neem hedge to restore the soil in Niger  
(Source: Agrhymet, 2014)

### 3.4. Strengthening the UNCCD

Would involve:

- Increasing the operability of the Science-Policy Interface (SPI) in order to allow scientists to better communicate the results of their work to the legislators;
- Speedily elaborating and implementing a Strategic Investment Framework for Sustainable Land Management (SIF-SLM) and setting up an integrated and systematic approach to the cross-cutting challenges of SLM.