



Distr.
LIMITED
30 July 2016
ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)

REPORT

“LAND DEGRADATION NEUTRALITY IN THE ARAB REGION – PREPARING FOR SDG IMPLEMENTATION” – ESCWA celebrates World Day to Combat Desertification 2016

20 June 2016

UN ESCWA, Committee Room II, B1 Level, Beirut, Lebanon

Summary

On the occasion of the 2016 World Day to Combat Desertification, ESCWA organized a web-conference during which regional and international experts were able to discuss and exchange views on the issue of Land Degradation Neutrality in the context of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals. More than 25 regional experts representing national ministries, regional and international organizations, academia and research institutions from Jordan, Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Oman, Sudan, Tunisia and UAE among others participated in the web-conference.

Speakers and participants highlighted the urgency to act, since land degradation is affecting large land areas in the Arab region, where 73% of the productive land is already degraded. To prevent further degradation and desertification, investments in research and regional coordination of initiatives as well as political will, among others, are necessary to start working towards Land Degradation Neutrality. UNCCD is leading the work to support countries of the region through the Land Degradation Neutrality Target Setting Programme, and is encouraging more countries to participate in the initiative. The ensuing discussions highlighted the importance of funding, political will, inclusion of all stakeholders and furthering capacity building at national and regional level in order to move towards Land Degradation Neutrality.

INTRODUCTION

1. Desertification and land degradation strongly affect the Arab Region. About 73% of the productive land in the Arab Region is degraded, with more than 30% being severely to very severely degraded. As such, there is a need to work towards land degradation neutrality, which aims to maintain and increase the amount of healthy and productive land resources, in line with national development priorities.
2. Responding to these concerns, The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) held a web-conference as part of the international celebrations to mark the World Day to Combat Desertification and Drought on 17 June of each year. The web-conference aimed to raise awareness on the importance and urgency of addressing the problem of land degradation, as well as discussing the modalities for measuring land degradation and desertification and identifying indicators of land degradation neutrality.

I. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

3. The event was the first web-conference held on the issue of land degradation neutrality. It allowed contacts and coordination between national and international actors on land degradation, including UNCCD, the League of Arab States and Ministries from countries in the Arab Region.
4. The web-conference highlighted the challenges faced by the region concerning land degradation and overviewed requirements and efforts to be exerted by countries in order to move toward land degradation neutrality. The role of the UNCCD in promoting land degradation neutrality was also highlighted.
5. A fact sheet prepared by ESCWA was shared with participants before the conference. Participants provided input to the fact sheet and ESCWA will finalize and disseminate it following the web-conference.

II. SUMMARY OF DISCUSSIONS

6. Ms. Reem Nejdawi, Chief of the ESCWA Food and Environment Policies Section, welcomed participants to the celebration of the 2016 World Day to Combat Desertification and indicated the cross-border nature of land degradation, which calls for regional cooperation on the subject.
7. Mr. Fidele Byiringiro, Economic Affairs Officer at ESCWA, highlighted that about 92% of the land area in the Arab Region is hyper-arid and that about 73% of the productive land of the region is degraded, and noted that since it is a dry land area, land degradation translates into desertification. In addition, he noted that countries in the region suffer from high and rising water and land scarcity and that according to FAO data, as of 2012, hotspots of vegetation degradation affect about 500,000 km², which is about the size of Yemen, whereas the bright spots cover only approximately 1% of the land. He concluded by calling on the region to act by applying sustainable practices.
8. Ms. Johanna von Toggenburg, Associate Expert at ESCWA, explained the development of the concept of Land Degradation Neutrality, which started with the establishment of the United National Convention to Combat Desertification. She explained that land degradation refers to any reduction or loss in the biological or economic productive capacity of the land caused notably by human activities, and which could be exacerbated by natural processes, and magnified by the impacts of climate change and biodiversity loss. She also noted that Land degradation neutrality, as defined by the Land Degradation Neutrality Intergovernmental Working Group, refers to a world where the amount of healthy and productive land resources necessary to support ecosystem services remains stable or increases. She highlighted as well that Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 15 entitled “Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss” focuses on land

degradation and particularly Target 3 of SDG 15, which calls to ensure that “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”. Other SDGs might be directly or indirectly related to land degradation also through reference to agriculture, climate change, water use and resource use efficiency or the need for clean technologies.

9. Dr. Talal Darwish, former Director and currently Project Manager at the National Centre for Remote Sensing (CNRS) in Lebanon, presented a few projects in Lebanon that aim to gather and issue detailed data on drought. Areas with crops such as wheat, barley and potato are mapped through remote sensing, to update drought maps. The project, carried out in cooperation with GIZ and ACSAD is operating in Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco. He noted that land degradation is harmful to the environment and interacts directly with food security, integrated water resource management, sustainable land management and climate change. Land degradation could be controlled, for example, by increasing that organic matter content of soils, which could also constitute a source of soil fertility, contribute to reducing erosion and ensure higher water retention capacity. Governments should therefore encourage further research on soil and the implementation of land use planning.

10. Dr. Darwish highlighted also the importance of data collection and the use of technology for decision-making. Greater harmonization of efforts to produce data is necessary, which would help model future scenarios. Capacity building and empowering farmers, practitioners, consumers and decision makers is needed in order to help guide decision-making. He also underlined that annual loss due to land degradation in Lebanon exceeds \$150 million, whereas investment in soil and land research amounted only to \$16 million. Finally, he noted that desertification does not stop at the border. Therefore, he called on UN institutions as well as the League of Arab States to help support and solve the problem of land degradation.

11. Ms. Sabine Sakr, Associate Program Officer and focal point for Arab countries at UNCCD, presented the activities driving Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN) at the international level. Following the adoption of LDN as a guidance principle at the COP 2015 in Ankara, UNCCD launched the LDN Target Setting Programme, which offers technical guidance on how to assess the level of land degradation, define national baselines and establish measures and targets to achieve land degradation neutrality by 2030. She also shared with the participants the progress made by the program at the regional level. Twelve countries from the Arab Region expressed interest and form part of the initiative. A first inception workshop for Africa was held in May 2016 and Egypt, Morocco, Mauritania, Sudan and Tunisia participated. In the coming months, UNCCD is planning a workshop for Asian countries as well as a workshop for countries that joined after the inception workshops for their regions. The UNCCD is also encouraging other Arab countries to join the initiative. A technical guide in Arabic is already available and special workshops in Arabic will likely take place in the future.

12. Mr. Al Hashmi, UAE Focal point for UNCCD, highlighted the high cost of research and implementation of land degradation neutrality when compared to other subjects and conventions. Remote sensing and data gathering and monitoring are important and innovative tools, but require additional expertise while cooperation between desertification experts and remote sensing experts is not straightforward. The implementation of the Convention on Biological Diversity was highly motivational through its national reporting, monitoring and follow-up and could serve as a good example.

13. Mr. Talal Darwish agreed that conducting research should be a priority. Lebanon for instance spends ten million dollars on research a year including public and private funding. In contrast, the impacts of land degradation on health and the economy are much larger. In order to provide healthy living conditions, Lebanon should therefore invest more into research on land degradation. With software readily available online, decision makers can use research and remote sensing knowledge as a powerful tool for policies given there is sufficient political will. The cooperation of all sectors including the private sector was necessary to ensure an integrated response.

14. Mr. Wadid Erian, Senior Advisor on Climate Change Adaptation and Disaster Risk Reduction at the League of Arab States, announced that the League of Arab States is planning a project to support

Land Degradation Neutrality in the region and that the Arab Geographical Information Room holds data for several countries.

15. Ms. Dalal Siddiq, UNESCO Chair at the Future University in Sudan, emphasized on the need to take into consideration the knowledge of indigenous communities and local stakeholders.

16. The meeting concluded that further emphasis should be shed on the land degradation combating policies in the region and the need for further actions at regional level. The participants thanked ESCWA for the initiative.

III. ORGANISATION OF WORK

A. VENUE AND DATE

17. ESCWA's web-conference to celebrate the World Day to Combat Desertification 2016, addressing to topic of "Land Degradation Neutrality in the Arab Region – preparing for SDG implementation" took place on Monday 20 June 2016 at 1–2:15 p.m. at ESCWA in Beirut, Lebanon.

B. AGENDA

18. The agenda of the meeting is included as Annex II below.

C. PARTICIPANTS

19. The meeting was attended by 23 invited experts from the League of Arab States (LAS), responsible Ministries from Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, UAE, Universities in the United Kingdom, Sudan and Lebanon, and research centers such as the International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas (ICARDA) together with 7 ESCWA staff members. The list of participants is included as Annex I.

E. DOCUMENTS AND PRESENTATIONS

20. Participants were provided with the presentations as well as the draft fact sheet on Land Degradation Neutrality.

Annex I: LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

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Annex II: AGENDA

ESCWA celebrates World Day to Combat Desertification 2016

Land Degradation Neutrality in the Arab Region – Preparing for SDG implementation

Web-conference, Monday, 20 June 2016, 1pm-2.15pm Beirut time (UTC+02:00)

UN ESCWA, Committee Room II, B1 Level, Beirut, Lebanon

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| 13.00 – 13.25 | Welcome by Mrs. Reem Nejdawi , UN ESCWA Summary of the ESCWA Factsheet <i>Land degradation neutrality in the Arab Region – preparing for SDG implementation</i> by Mr. Fidele Byiringiro and Mrs. Johanna von Toggenburg |
| 13.25 – 13.35 | Intervention by Mr. Talal Darwish , National Centre for Remote Sensing in Lebanon |
| 13.35—13.45 | Intervention by Ms. Sabine Sakr , Associate Programme Officer, United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification |
| 13.45– 14.15 | Discussion |