

United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD)

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The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) is an important international treaty that discusses the pressing issue of land degradation and its associated impacts on ecosystems, human livelihoods, and global climate stability. Adopted in 1994 and entering into force in 1996, UNCCD remains the only legally binding international agreement dedicated exclusively to combating desertification, land degradation, and drought (DLDD). In this article, we are going to cover the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification, its objectives, features and outcomes.

United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD)

The UNCCD was introduced by the recommendations of the 1992 **Rio Earth Summit** (UNCED), where Agenda 21 highlighted the growing dangers of desertification and called for a global response. Adopted in Paris on 17 June 1994 and entering into force in December 1996, it was designed to provide countries with a cooperative platform to address land degradation through sustainable land management.

Unlike other Rio Conventions like the UNFCCC and CBD (biodiversity) the UNCCD was born out of the specific demand from African nations, who were very much affected by recurrent droughts and expanding desertification. At present, however, its relevance extends far beyond Africa, with regions across Asia, Latin America, and even developed countries dealing with soil erosion, declining fertility, and extreme droughts.

The principles of participation, partnership, and decentralisation form the backbone of the UNCCD. Its framework prioritises bottom-up approaches, encouraging community participation, involvement of local stakeholders, and inclusion of indigenous practices in combating land degradation.

UNCCD is not just important due to its legal force but also its holistic approach. It blends environmental protection with socio-economic development, placing affected communities at the centre of solutions. With 197 parties, the UNCCD has a near-universal membership, making it one of the most inclusive environmental agreements ever adopted. To raise awareness, the UN declared 2006 as the International Year of Deserts and Desertification.

UNCCD Objectives

The UNCCD covers many objectives that link environmental sustainability with human development. The major goals include:

- **Forging Global Partnerships:** To reverse and prevent desertification and land degradation through collective action.
- **Mitigating the Effects of Drought:** Supporting countries and communities in drought-prone regions to become resilient.
- **Poverty Reduction:** Recognising that land degradation and drought exacerbate poverty, the Convention aims to link land restoration with improved livelihoods.
- **Environmental Sustainability:** Make sure that strategies to combat desertification contribute to biodiversity conservation, water security, and food production.

UNCCD Key Features and Framework

The UNCCD is different because it provides a legally binding global framework to address desertification and drought. Its structure includes:

- **Global Framework:** Sets international goals and fosters cooperation.
- **National and Regional Action:** Obligates countries to prepare National Action Programmes (NAPs), with regional and sub-regional coordination mechanisms.
- **Reporting and Monitoring:** Countries must submit regular progress reports to the Conference of the Parties (COP).

Obligations of Member States

Parties to the UNCCD are bound by many important obligations:

1. Develop National Action Programs (NAPs) tailored to their specific ecological, social, and economic conditions.

2. Integrate Policies related to land degradation into broader development, agriculture, and water strategies.
3. Support Research and Capacity Building to understand and mitigate the causes of desertification.
4. Developed nations have to extend financial and technical aid to developing and drought-affected countries.
5. Regular Reporting to the COP on progress and challenges.

National Action Programmes (NAPs)

NAPs are the cornerstone of UNCCD implementation. Each member state designs these strategies to combat desertification at the national level. Key elements of NAPs include:

- **Land Degradation Assessments:** Identifying the scale and drivers of land loss.
- **Policy and Institutional Reforms:** Setting up frameworks for sustainable land management (SLM).
- **Sustainable Practices:** Promotes soil conservation, afforestation, efficient irrigation, and climate-smart agriculture.
- **Community Participation:** Keeps farmers, pastoralists, women, and indigenous groups central to planning and implementation.
- **Monitoring Systems:** Establishing indicators to track progress.

Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN)

A major conceptual advance under the UNCCD is the adoption of Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN).

- LDN means achieving a balance where the loss of productive land is offset by restoration of degraded areas, keeping the total amount and quality of productive land stable or improving over time.
- Since land is finite and under increasing pressure from population growth and industrialisation, LDN offers a way to ensure sustainable use.
- Benefits includes:
 - Supports food security and ecosystem services.
 - Reduces risks of migration, poverty, and conflict over land.
 - Provides a framework for climate change mitigation through soil carbon storage.
- Over 120 countries are engaged in the LDN Target-Setting Programme, aligning their national strategies with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

COPs and Global Outcomes

- **COP14 - Delhi Declaration (2019)**
 - The Delhi Declaration discusses the urgency of land restoration and pitches improved land access, gender-sensitive initiatives, and stronger global action.
- **COP15 - Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire (2022)**
 - With the theme *"Land. Life. Legacy: From scarcity to prosperity"*, COP15 produced several landmark outcomes:
 - Global Pledge: Restoration of one billion hectares of degraded land by 2030.

- Established to shift the focus from reactive crisis management to proactive drought preparedness.
- Key Declarations:
 - *Abidjan Call* for long-term sustainability.
 - *Abidjan Declaration on Gender Equality* in land restoration.
 - *Land, Life, and Legacy Declaration* responding to the *Global Land Outlook 2* report.
- “Drought in Numbers 2022” Report: Called for prioritising drought preparedness as extreme weather events intensify globally.

UNCCD and Climate Change

Desertification and climate change are deeply interconnected:

- **Mutually Reinforcing:** Climate change accelerates desertification through rising temperatures and droughts, while desertification releases stored soil carbon, worsening climate change.
- **Complementing Global Agreements:** The UNCCD works in synergy with the Paris Agreement, as land restoration boosts carbon sequestration and resilience.
- **Sustainable Land Management (SLM):** Practices such as afforestation, agroforestry, and soil conservation help capture carbon, reduce erosion, and strengthen community resilience.
- **LDN as Climate Strategy:** Achieving LDN directly contributes to reducing greenhouse gas emissions and adapting to climate impacts.

United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification Impact

The UNCCD has environmental, socio-economic and global impact:

- Environmental Impact
 - Encouraged reforestation and sustainable agricultural practices worldwide.
 - Contributed to the protection of biodiversity and improved water security.
- Socio-Economic Impact
 - Linked land restoration with poverty reduction, as healthy land improves agricultural yields and income.
 - Strengthened local governance by promoting community participation.
- Global Governance
 - Demonstrated the importance of multi-stakeholder partnerships that combine governments, NGOs, scientific communities, and indigenous groups.
 - Established land as a central issue within sustainable development and global negotiations.

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