



# General Assembly

Distr.: General  
27 July 2020

Original: English

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## Seventy-fifth session

Item 18 (e) of the provisional agenda\*

**Sustainable development: implementation of the  
United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification  
in Those Countries Experiencing Serious Drought  
and/or Desertification, Particularly in Africa**

## **Implementation of the United Nations Decade for Deserts and the Fight against Desertification (2010–2020)**

### **Report of the Secretary-General**

#### *Summary*

The General Assembly, in its resolution [62/195](#), declared 2010–2020 the United Nations Decade for Deserts and the Fight against Desertification. At the sixty-ninth session of the Assembly, the Secretary-General presented a report on the activities and special events carried out in the first half of the Decade ([A/69/311](#)) by the secretariat of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification in Those Countries Experiencing Serious Drought and/or Desertification, Particularly in Africa, together with five collaborating partners: United Nations Environment Programme; United Nations Development Programme; International Fund for Agricultural Development; Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations; and the Department of Public Information (now the Department of Global Communications).

The present report, which is prepared pursuant to resolution [69/221](#), focuses on the achievements of the Decade in relation to its stated aim: raising awareness of the causes of and solutions to ongoing land degradation and desertification in the framework of the 10-year strategic plan and framework to enhance implementation of the Convention (2008–2018), adopted at the eighth session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification in Those Countries Experiencing Serious Drought and/or Desertification, particularly in Africa. It also highlights the collaborating partners and concludes with observations and recommendations for action that could amplify these achievements and implementation of the United Nations Decade on Ecosystem Restoration (2021–2030).

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\* [A/75/150](#).



## **I. Introduction**

1. The present report is submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution [69/221](#), in which the Assembly requested the Secretary-General to submit at its seventy-fifth session a report on the implementation of the United Nations Decade for Deserts and the Fight against Desertification (2010–2020).

## **II. Background**

2. Deeply concerned about the deteriorating situation of desertification in all regions, particularly in Africa, and its far-reaching implications for the achievement of internationally agreed development goals, including the Millennium Development Goals, in particular eradicating poverty, and taking into account the success of the 2006 International Year of Deserts and Desertification in raising awareness regarding desertification, land degradation and drought, the General Assembly, by its resolution [62/195](#), declared the decade 2010–2020 as the United Nations Decade for Deserts and the Fight against Desertification.

3. Pursuant to General Assembly resolution [64/201](#), the Assembly designated the secretariat of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification as the focal point for the Decade, in collaboration with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and other relevant bodies of the United Nations, including the Department of Public Information of the Secretariat (now the Department of Global Communications).

4. The present report focuses on the achievement of the stated aim of the Decade: raising awareness of the causes of and solutions to ongoing land degradation and desertification in the framework of the 10-year strategic plan and framework to enhance implementation of the Convention (2008–2018), adopted at the eighth session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification in Those Countries Experiencing Serious Drought and/or Desertification, particularly in Africa. It also highlights the key partners and some of the special events that enabled these achievements.

## **III. Actions undertaken by the secretariat of the Convention and its partners**

5. The United Nations Decade for Deserts and the Fight against Desertification (2010–2020) was launched on 16 August 2010 in Fortaleza, Brazil, at the Second International Conference of Climate, Variability, Sustainability and Development, held as part of the preparations for the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development held in 2012. The event brought attention to and increased interest in the intergovernmental efforts and emerging research and science initiatives on desertification and drought.

6. Regional launches of the Decade were also organized: in Nairobi, for the African region, on 16 August 2010; in Seoul, for the Asia-Pacific region, on 12 August 2010; in Denver, United States of America, for the North America region, on 11 and 12 November 2010; and in London, for the European region, on 16 December 2010. Special joint observances of the Decade and the United Nations Decade on Biodiversity (2011–2020) also took place in Havana and in Addis Ababa. Further, special observance events took place in Windhoek, in Ankara, and in Changwon, Republic of Korea, during sessions of the Conference of the Parties, and during

observances of the World Day to Combat Desertification and Drought. A closing event for the Decade, scheduled to be held at United Nations Headquarters on 9 June 2020, was postponed to later in the year owing to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic.

7. The activities and observance events were carried out with the guidance and/or involvement of the inter-agency task force established by the secretariat of the Convention in 2011. The task force consisted of representatives from the Department of Global Communications (formerly the Department of Public Information), the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), IFAD, UNDP, UNEP, the Global Environment Facility (GEF), the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN), the secretariats of the Convention on Biological Diversity and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, the World Bank TerrAfrica Initiative and the World Meteorological Organization (WMO).

8. The focus of the campaigns varied in terms of targets, themes and activities. For instance, the thematic focus was forests in 2010, biodiversity and drylands in 2011, the green economy in 2012, drought and water scarcity in 2013 and ecosystem-based adaptation in 2014. These campaigns often took place in the run-up to the World Day to Combat Desertification and Drought, held on 17 June each year, as synergistic outreach efforts. The target groups included policymakers and decision makers, advocates, activists and non-governmental organizations. The promotional materials included posters, brochures, monographs, policy briefs, human-interest stories, case studies and films. Events included gender days, film and music festivals and competitions.

9. Information on these activities was reported to the biennial sessions of the Conference of the Parties, which enabled it to take informed decisions on the public outreach and awareness-raising activities while also guiding and monitoring them.

#### **IV. Achievements and observations**

10. During the first half of the Decade, the inter-agency task force, largely informed by the 2005 *Millennium Ecosystems Assessment* report and issues of interest to the secretariat of the Convention and its parties, focused on raising awareness around eight thematic areas: food insecurity and hunger; water stress; climate change; biodiversity loss; deforestation; extreme poverty; gender inequality; and forced environmental migration.

11. In the second half of the Decade, the campaigns of the inter-agency task force focused on amplifying outreach during observances of the World Day to Combat Desertification and Drought, the publication of communication products accessible to policymakers and the general public, especially products featuring women and young people, and awareness-raising with regard to gender equality. The partnership approach to the global observance proved to be especially successful in maximizing available resources.

12. To increase outreach among youth, the secretariat of the Convention has been working with the Trust for Sustainable Living, a global education charity based in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Land degradation neutrality has become a major area of focus in the charity's international schools essay competition, in the context of Sustainable Development Goal 15, on life on land. The secretariat is continuing this collaboration in 2020. Furthermore, since 2015, the secretariat has progressively been developing its engagement with young people.

13. In 2015, the Conference of the Parties requested the secretariat to identify inspiring human-interest stories and testimonies from sustainable land management

projects, for promotion and dissemination, in order to build public awareness and support for efforts to combat desertification, land degradation and drought by maximizing the expertise and strengths of the inter-agency task force.

14. The task force provided financial and various forms of in-kind support for these awareness-raising activities. The team produced five publications, one film and two short videos with financial support from the World Bank TerrAfrica Initiative. The films were disseminated for screening, at no cost, to raise awareness during the celebrations of the World Day to Combat Desertification and Drought. The over 100 high-quality pictures of land restoration in Africa and Asia produced are featured in many publications focused on desertification, land degradation and drought and for awareness-raising activities.

15. The secretariat of the Convention, in collaboration with GEF, IFAD, IUCN, the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), UNDP and the World Bank TerrAfrica Initiative, has published two books to raise awareness primarily among land users. One book focuses on the benefits of degraded land that is rehabilitated using sustainable land management practices. The publication is complemented by short videos and a film demonstrating how the benefits at the household level contribute to the global public good. The second book has human-interest stories and highlights the benefits of sustainable land and water management for human security. Its key themes are climate change adaptation, the halting of forced migration, poverty eradication and wealth creation. The human-interest stories were submitted by parties and the field activities and testimonies came from projects and activities carried out by the inter-agency task force. The publications were distributed by partners via online platforms and during major global conferences.

16. As part of the outreach to educational institutions, practitioners and policymakers, the secretariat of the Convention, in partnership with Tudor Rose, a publishing house in the United Kingdom, also published two books. *Living Land* is a fully illustrated 200-page book documenting global efforts to combat desertification. It was launched at the twelfth session of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention and distributed at the twenty-first session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change held in Paris in 2015. *A Better World*, an educational publication spotlighting actions and commitments to Sustainable Development Goal 15, received over 3,000 hits within five hours of its launch in 2018, and over 48,000 hits by the end of 2019. It was the most successful publication in the series as of that date. It was also the most downloaded publication of the secretariat of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification in 2019. All 9,000 hard copies of the book have been distributed.

17. Following the adoption at the eleventh session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification of the Namib Declaration on a Stronger United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification for a Land Degradation Neutral World, which includes a strong call to empower women in sustainable land management, the UNDP Global Policy Centre on Resilient Ecosystems and Desertification commissioned three studies on inequality and inclusive growth. The inter-agency task force invited two intergovernmental organizations with gender expertise to support their activities in four areas:

- (a) Raising awareness of the adverse effects of gender inequality on land use and management;
- (b) Mobilizing new partners to support women's empowerment in the Convention;
- (c) Sharing the achievements of the Convention in other forums governing multilateral environmental agreements;

(d) Providing technical advice on gender to the secretariat of the Convention.

18. To leverage their expertise, the secretariat of the Convention worked with the inter-agency task force members in smaller teams or in direct partnerships, consistent with their organizational mandates and interests. During the Decade, the task force was particularly effective and efficient at deepening public outreach through social and mainstream media, supplying case studies and human-interest stories for advocacy, supporting the organization of the global observance events for the World Day to Combat Desertification and Drought and advancing gender equality and land rights in the work of the parties to the Convention.

19. The launch of the Decade created visibility for the Convention. As momentum from other developments in the work of the secretariat of the Convention grew, the impact of the Decade's awareness-raising activities increased.

20. For instance, at the start of the campaign, the activities undertaken by the secretariat of the Convention were guided by four strategic objectives in the 10-year strategic plan. In 2018, the Conference of the Parties adopted a new strategic framework that included an additional objective and additional expected outputs for each strategic objective, reflecting the increased understanding of the causes of desertification, land degradation and drought, their impacts and the solutions to deal with them. Among the expected outcomes are the empowerment and participation of women and youth in decision-making. This outcome can be traced to the awareness-raising work and development of the gender action plan initiated with the support and leadership of the inter-agency task force. It also created space for consideration of the issue of land rights, and action to be taken in that regard.

21. Significant progress has been made under the Convention in other areas of work during the Decade, as highlighted in the six major areas below.

## **A. Advances in the science on desertification, land degradation and drought**

22. Perhaps the development during the Decade with the greatest impact was the remarkable expansion of the body of scientific knowledge about the drivers, processes and impacts of desertification, land degradation and drought. Considerable technical progress was achieved in developing solutions to these challenges – solutions that are both grounded in science and have the potential to be scaled up and out – but perhaps most noteworthy are the strengthened links in science, policy and practice in ways that have empowered countries to take effective action.

23. Central to these achievements was the establishment by the Conference of the Parties of the Science-Policy Interface and the increased production and dissemination of major communications and scientific reports in response to emerging issues of concern to States parties. These outputs provided new and credible data, information and facts that enabled the production of more effective communication products.

24. One of its most notable impacts was the development of the Scientific Conceptual Framework for Land Degradation Neutrality,<sup>1</sup> which elaborates on target 15.3 of the Sustainable Development Goals regarding the achievement of land degradation neutrality. The framework provides a practical approach to achieve this target that was endorsed by the States parties to the Convention in 2017. It offers

<sup>1</sup> See Barron J. Orr and others, *Scientific Conceptual Framework for Land Degradation Neutrality: A Report of the Science-Policy Interface* (United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification, Bonn, Germany, 2017).

synergies between the Convention to Combat Desertification, the Convention on Biological Diversity and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, leading to integrated land use planning, integrated landscape management and smart design, and optimizing the co-location of food, energy and nature interventions.<sup>2</sup>

25. More recent developments in knowledge have increased global understanding and reinforced the importance of actions to slow and reverse desertification and land degradation for greater success in addressing the pressing challenges of climate change, biodiversity loss and, now, zoonosis.

26. In the special report issued in 2019 by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), *Climate Change and Land*, it is stated that actions to sequester carbon in the soil are essential in achieving the two most preferred climate change actions: the Paris Agreement target of limiting global temperature increase to below 2 degrees Celsius and the more ambitious target of keeping it below 1.5 degrees.

27. The report documents, with high confidence, that policies promoting land degradation neutrality, which are contained in target 15.3 of the Goals, can also enhance food security, human well-being and climate change adaptation and mitigation.<sup>3</sup>

28. The third edition of the *World Atlas of Desertification*, which is a publication of the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission, also had a great impact, as did the first edition of *Global Land Outlook*, the flagship publication of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification, which was issued in 2017. This aforementioned IPCC report and the two most recent reports on land degradation and restoration, published by the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, drew upon the work of the *Atlas*.

29. These reports take a fresh look at land degradation. They show that when issues that signal global change coincide (for example, poverty, food insecurity and water scarcity), they may lead to land transformations that can cause degradation of the land resource. The reports also found that global telecoupled and dynamic human consumption patterns precipitate interaction of these issues and their impact at the local level. These studies identify areas of concern where multiple lines of evidence converge that suggest potential problems, so that they might be confirmed, and also suggest actions to reverse, arrest or adapt to them.

30. These reports provided new and fresh entry points to communicate and raise awareness, more concrete data and facts, and a new understanding of the changing drivers of land degradation. The Scientific Conceptual Framework for Land Degradation Neutrality, for instance, provided the backdrop and framing for the hugely popular educational book *A Better World*,<sup>4</sup> whose focus is on what land degradation means and how it is being applied by different actors at different levels in different regions.

<sup>2</sup> See “Supporting the global response to the COVID-19 pandemic: land-based solutions for healthy people and a healthy planet” (United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification, Bonn, Germany, 2019).

<sup>3</sup> See key messages B.1.3, B.4.4, C.1.1 and C.1.3 in *Climate Change and Land: An IPCC Special Report on Climate Change, Desertification, Land Degradation, Sustainable Land Management, Food Security, and Greenhouse Gas Fluxes in Terrestrial Ecosystems – Summary for Policymakers*, Valérie Masson-Delmotte and others, eds. (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> Sean Nicklin, “Life on land: an introduction to Goal 15”, in *A Better World*, vol. 4 (Tudor Rose, 2018).

## B. Land degradation neutrality

31. Sustainable Development Goal 15 promotes life on land. Target 15.3 of the Goals reads: “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”. Achieving land degradation neutrality means that countries do not degrade more land than they are recovering.<sup>5</sup> As the custodian agency for indicator 15.3.1 of the Goals (“Proportion of land that is degraded over total land area”), the secretariat of the Convention is responsible for monitoring progress towards achieving target 15.3.

32. The research and awareness raised about the costs of action and inaction on desertification and land degradation by the inter-agency task force members, among other actors, in the lead-up to the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development in 2012 persuaded Member States of the importance of setting this target.

33. At the twelfth session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification, in 2015, it was decided to integrate indicator 15.3.1 of the Goals in the implementation of the Convention. Striving to achieve target 15.3 of the Goals has become a strong vehicle for driving the implementation of the Convention. By its decision 3/COP.12, the Conference of the Parties invited the parties to the Convention to formulate voluntary targets to achieve land degradation neutrality.

34. In response to this request and based on the lessons learned from a pilot phase, the Global Mechanism of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification launched the Land Degradation Neutrality Target Setting Programme. A total of 123 countries have committed to setting their national targets under the programme. With support from multiple international partners,<sup>6</sup> which include some members of the inter-agency task force, the Convention has helped countries to define their national land degradation neutrality baselines and establish national targets and associated measures in that regard. It has also enabled them to identify potential transformative projects and programmes with a view to achieving land degradation neutrality by 2030. At the time of writing, more than 101 countries have validated their national land degradation neutrality targets and, of these, 63 countries have officially adopted them. An ongoing internal assessment of the land earmarked for improvement by 80 of the 101 States parties suggests that over 400 million hectares are available for rehabilitation and restoration.

35. The inter-agency task force played a significant role in making this new concept of land degradation neutrality known. The task force members have also inspired actions to restore land in processes beyond the Convention through initiatives such as the Bonn Challenge and the nationally determined contributions to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. The internal assessment undertaken by the secretariat of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification of all these restoration initiatives, when corrected for overlaps, shows a potential to recover between 750 and 900 million hectares of degraded land globally. This is a significant achievement considering that over 2 billion hectares of land are degraded globally, and a lot of land is needed to meet the future global food demand.

<sup>5</sup> Reference from the Scientific Conceptual Framework for Land Degradation Neutrality.

<sup>6</sup> France, Germany, Luxembourg, Republic of Korea, Spain, Trinidad and Tobago, Turkey, European Space Agency, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), Global Environment Facility (GEF), International Soil Reference and Information Centre, International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources, Joint Research Centre of the European Commission, Soil Leadership Academy, United Nations Development Programme, United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and World Resources Institute.

## C. Promoting gender equality

36. During the Decade, significant progress was also made in raising awareness about the importance of gender-responsiveness when identifying the causes of and solutions to desertification, land degradation and drought.

37. Following a series of gender days organized by the inter-agency task force on the margins of sessions of the Conference of the Parties, the Windhoek Initiative on Women's Empowerment was adopted in 2013. With the leadership of the Government of Namibia and technical input from UNDP, IUCN, the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women) and the Science-Policy Interface, the secretariat of the Convention organized additional awareness-raising events and a workshop on gender to facilitate exchanges and knowledge-sharing on this subject among the stakeholders in the context of implementation of the Convention. The three studies on inequality and inclusive growth, commissioned jointly by the secretariat of the Convention and the UNDP Global Policy Centre on Resilient Ecosystems and Desertification, have increased understanding, particularly with respect to gender and land rights.<sup>7</sup>

38. Subsequently, the parties to the Convention developed and agreed on the gender action plan to support gender responsiveness in the implementation of the 2018–2030 Strategic Framework of the Convention.<sup>8</sup> As a result, gender equality and women's empowerment are integrated as cross-cutting priorities in all areas of work under the Convention. Civil society organizations also took up the issue of governance, focusing specifically on land rights. Working with civil society and harnessing expertise from the Science-Policy Interface, the Conference of the Parties, at its fourteenth session, held in 2019, adopted decision 12/COP.14 on responsible land tenure to strengthen women's land rights in the context of activities provided for by the Convention on the ground.

39. The Strategic Framework of the Convention mandates all stakeholders and partners to consider the need for gender-responsive policies and measures; to strive for the full and effective participation of both men and women in planning, decision-making and implementation at all levels; and to enhance the empowerment of women, girls and youth in the affected areas.

40. The gender action plan serves as the basis for the implementation of gender-related activities under the Convention involving its key partners, particularly IUCN, the UNDP Global Policy Centre on Resilient Ecosystems and Desertification, UNDP, UNEP and UN-Women. The gender action plan is a key analytical tool among the GEF policy tools for assessing the gender-responsiveness of a country and of the partner projects submitted to finance the implementation of the Convention.

41. During the Decade, the GEF gender partnership developed a massive open online course on gender and the environment. By April 2020, over 11,000 trainees had taken the complementary online gender course, which was developed in partnership with several United Nations and other intergovernmental partners and is hosted by the United Nations Institute for Training and Research. Over 1,900 certificates have been issued for the additional module on gender and land degradation developed in collaboration with some members of the inter-agency task force, GEF and the GEF Small Grants Programme.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> See three thematic studies available at [www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/librarypage/poverty-reduction/empowerment-of-dryland-women.html](http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/librarypage/poverty-reduction/empowerment-of-dryland-women.html).

<sup>8</sup> See [www.unccd.int/sites/default/files/documents/2018-01/GAP%20ENG%20%20low%20res\\_0.pdf](http://www.unccd.int/sites/default/files/documents/2018-01/GAP%20ENG%20%20low%20res_0.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> Data provided by the GEF Small Grants Programme on 14 July 2020.

42. The priority of the secretariat of the Convention and its partners in supporting parties is to increase the share of women who benefit from the implementation of land degradation neutrality transformative programmes and projects, and drought and risk mitigation efforts. The members of the inter-agency task force supported the secretariat of the Convention in mobilizing expertise and capacities from partners in the United Nations family for the establishment of a gender help desk to support gender mainstreaming in the Convention's programmes on land degradation neutrality and drought. Over 300 participants have been trained through technical workshops on gender responsiveness.

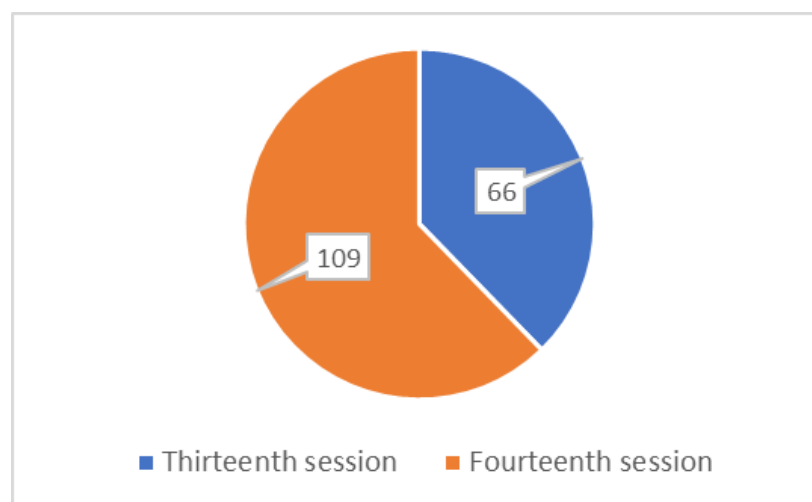
43. The new partners have also helped to develop tools, such as checklists, guiding papers and manuals, to support the work on the ground. As of July 2020, all newly developed and validated national drought plans contain references to gender.<sup>10</sup>

44. A quantitative analysis of the final report of the Conference of the Parties on its fourteenth session shows that the proportion of Convention decisions that included reference to gender reached a new peak.<sup>11</sup>

45. This represents an increase of 65.2 per cent compared with the thirteenth session of the Conference of the Parties (see figure 1). The same trend is observed in the number of decisions that included a reference to gender. At the thirteenth session, 22 per cent of the decisions addressed gender issues. Of the decisions from the fourteenth session, 42.4 per cent included a gender perspective, an increase of 75 per cent compared with the previous session (see figure 2).

Figure 1

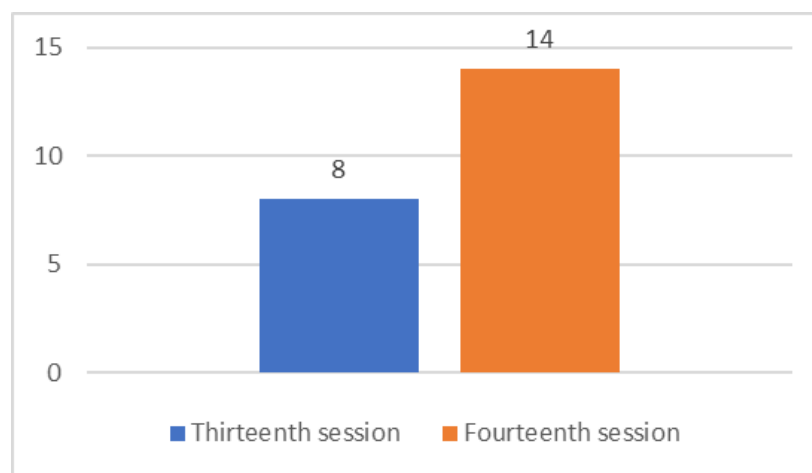
**Number of references to gender in the final reports of the Conference of the Parties**



<sup>10</sup> Quantitative analysis of all 19 national drought plans. Plans were examined for evidence of the incorporation of a gender perspective, as determined by the presence of the following keywords: gender, women and girls. See <https://knowledge.unccd.int/drought-toolbox/page/drought-planning>.

<sup>11</sup> For this quantitative analysis, the final reports of Conference of the Parties on its thirteenth and fourteenth session were examined for evidence of the incorporation of a gender perspective, as determined by the presence of the following keywords: gender, women, women's and girls. Documents containing at least one occurrence of a keyword were considered to include a gender perspective. See ICCD/COP(13)/21/Add.1, ICCD/COP(13)/21 and ICCD/COP(14)/23/Add.1.

Figure 2  
Number of decisions in which gender or women are mentioned



46. The programmatic work on gender carried out by the inter-agency task force and its partners also inspired the secretariat of the Convention to enrol in the United Nations System-wide Action Plan on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women.

47. Making gender equality a reality is vital for success in the work of the secretariat of the Convention. Nevertheless, gaps in gender data and the lack of trend data make it difficult to monitor progress for women and girls. Without timely and reliable information about gender equality and the status of women, it is impossible to know whether women and girls are benefiting from the measures taken to implement the Convention, the gender action plan or even the Sustainable Development Goals. However, mainstreaming gender in national statistical strategies and prioritizing data collection can reduce gender data scarcity and gaps.

#### **D. Monitoring and assessment of desertification, land degradation and drought**

48. During the Decade, there was significant progress in the monitoring and assessment of desertification, land degradation and drought. The lack of scientifically sound and practical methodologies for monitoring land degradation was identified very early on as a major constraint to the implementation of the Convention. This was partly due to the lack of agreed definitions, the multiple dimensions of land degradation and its high dependency on local circumstances, difficulties in defining the indicators chosen to represent it and the paucity of data.

49. This has changed rapidly in the second half of the Decade due to the momentum generated by the adoption of the Goals, in particular target 15.3 and indicator 15.3.1. The secretariat of the Convention identified and mobilized the technical expertise required and available from Earth observation methods, data and tools to monitor land degradation. The secretariat also enabled national uptake of these tools. As a result, in less than three years, indicator 15.3.1 has been upgraded from tier 3 to tier 1,<sup>12</sup> the highest level of classification in the global indicator framework for the Goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

<sup>12</sup> See “tier classification criteria/definitions”, available at <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/iaeg-sdgs/tier-classification/>.

50. Drawing on the technical expertise of its Science-Policy Interface and the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organization, the secretariat of the Convention developed a methodology to monitor land degradation that is now internationally established. The Scientific Conceptual Framework for Land Degradation Neutrality has brought clarity to:

(a) The three essential indicators of land degradation and desertification;

(b) The aggregation rules needed to estimate land degradation. The Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organization also developed the accompanying Good Practice Guidance for indicator 15.3.1 of the Goals<sup>13</sup> and its three subindicators.

51. Still, many countries lacked data, had difficulty accessing Earth observation data sources or could not produce their own data sets. The secretariat of the Convention worked in partnership with relevant organizations to facilitate these processes, including the European Space Agency, the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission, the International Soil Reference and Information Centre and Conservation International.

52. The first global assessment of land degradation based on national reports submitted by 127 States parties was carried out in January 2019.<sup>14</sup> This change was transformational. With a large number of countries able to determine the status of land degradation, an agreement was reached that 2015 will serve as the baseline for assessing progress towards the achievement of indicator 15.3.1.

53. These country data, along with regional and global aggregates, have been submitted to the Statistics Division and are guiding policy decisions. As noted in the *Sustainable Development Goals Report 2019*, 20 per cent of the Earth's total land area was degraded between 2000 and 2015, resulting in a significant loss of services essential to human well-being and directly having an impact on the lives of over 1 billion people.

54. As a follow-up to the Decade, it is important to continue to assess data on land degradation neutrality in partnership with entities such as the Group on Earth Observations Land Degradation Neutrality Initiative. Such data could be monitored during the United Nations Decade on Ecosystem Restoration.

## E. Mitigating the impacts of drought

55. The Decade highlighted the importance of policy interventions to mitigate the impacts of drought on communities and ecosystems. The hydrological and socioeconomic impacts of drought affect agriculture and other sectors of the economy over the long term. Land degradation and desertification, in turn, exacerbate the hydrological and socioeconomic vulnerability and exposure of agriculture, ecosystems and human populations to future droughts. In its resolution 72/220, the General Assembly specifically called upon parties to the Convention “to enhance and support the preparation of drought preparedness policies on, inter alia, early warning systems, vulnerability and risk assessment, as well as drought risk mitigation measures”.

56. Very early on in the Decade, the inter-agency task force organized a discussion on this topic in the face of climate change, but actions to mitigate drought truly gained

<sup>13</sup> [https://prais.unccd.int/sites/default/files/helper\\_documents/4-GPG\\_15.3.1\\_EN.pdf](https://prais.unccd.int/sites/default/files/helper_documents/4-GPG_15.3.1_EN.pdf).

<sup>14</sup> [https://www.unccd.int/sites/default/files/sessions/documents/2019-03/ICCD\\_CRIC%2817%29\\_2-1822319E.pdf](https://www.unccd.int/sites/default/files/sessions/documents/2019-03/ICCD_CRIC%2817%29_2-1822319E.pdf).

momentum starting in 2013 following the High-level Meeting on National Drought Policy organized in collaboration with FAO and WMO.

57. Since then, parties to the Convention have made mitigating the effects of drought a strategic objective in the 2018–2030 Strategic Framework of the Convention. In this regard, they have prioritized the implementation of a drought initiative whose primary focus is addressing a critical gap in the existing international cooperation and global responses to drought, namely responding too late to drought. The drought initiative focuses on:

- (a) Drought preparedness systems;
- (b) Regional efforts to reduce drought vulnerability and risk;
- (c) Development of a toolbox to boost the resilience of people and ecosystems to drought;
- (d) Supporting countries to develop and implement national drought management policies as well as establishing and strengthening comprehensive drought monitoring, preparedness and early warning systems.

58. The purpose of the national drought plans is to ensure drought preparedness systems are in place in the countries most prone to drought. At least 73 countries have expressed an interest in preparing and/or strengthening their national drought plans. Of these, 33 countries had completed their national drought plans by February 2020. National experts are supporting the development of the national drought plans and facilitating relevant stakeholder consultations, data collection and analyses on the ground.

59. To facilitate this work, a drought toolbox that contains a range of effective technical and policy options was developed with partners.<sup>15</sup>

60. Last year, the parties to the Convention established an intergovernmental working group on effective policy and implementation measures for addressing drought within the remit of the work of the secretariat of the Convention. The findings and recommendations of the intergovernmental working group will be considered by parties at their Conference session in 2021. Under the Convention two pilot projects are also being conducted on how to manage regional droughts: one in the countries of the South African Development Community and the other in five Central Asian countries.

61. Raising awareness about the impact of drought on development, and also about the policy options and implementation measures available to address drought, will be vital in the light of the projected future impacts of droughts associated with climate change.

## F. Global action on sand and dust storms

62. In the second half of Decade, increased attention was also paid to the issue of sand and dust storms, owing to new trends in their source and destination areas. Progress on this issue benefited from a broad range of partners, among them States and intergovernmental organizations.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> FAO, the Global Water Partnership, the Joint Research Centre of the European Union, the National Drought Mitigation Center of the University of Nebraska (United States of America), the UNEP-DHI Partnership and the World Meteorological Organization (WMO).

<sup>16</sup> These include FAO, UNEP, the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women), the World Health Organization (WHO) and WMO.

63. At least 151 Member States (77 per cent of the States parties to the Convention) are affected directly by sand and dust storms, of which 45 (23 per cent) are classified as sand and dust storm source areas.<sup>17</sup> Sand and dust storms typically originate in arid, semi-arid and dry subhumid areas, but their impacts are frequently felt outside drylands. This is because of the long-range transportation of dust, which is raising significant environmental, economic and societal concerns, including concerns related to health.

64. Starting in 2015, a focus of the secretariat of the Convention has been on building the capacities of countries to address and become resilient to the negative impacts of sand and dust storms. This approach is guided by precautionary disaster risk reduction principles and a comprehensive policy advocacy framework.

65. The ultimate goal of policy and planning for sand and dust storms is to reduce societal vulnerability to this recurrent hazard. The actions taken are expected to enhance the resilience of affected countries and harness their capacities.

66. However, as with other issues related to desertification, land degradation and drought, the science was limited. In 2016 UNEP, WMO and the secretariat of the Convention collaborated in publishing the *Global Assessment of Sand and Dust Storms*, in response to resolution General Assembly resolution 70/195. In addition, work is under way with partners on a sand and dust storms compendium that will provide information and guidance on assessing and addressing the risks posed by sand and dust storms, a global sand and dust storm source base map and a related toolbox.<sup>18</sup>

67. These tools, approaches and methodology frameworks are being tested and validated through pilot projects being carried out at the national and regional levels.

68. These efforts have benefited from ongoing initiatives guided by the resolutions of the General Assembly on combating sand and dust storms, specifically resolutions 70/195, 71/219, 72/225, 73/237 and 74/226.

69. A better understanding of sand and dust storms, with up-to-date information about them, remains critical during implementation. Assessments and mapping of sand and dust storm sources, risks and vulnerabilities, as well as their economic and health impacts, are essential for progress. This information will be needed to improve early warning systems and impact mitigation strategies, including anthropogenic source mitigation and health advisories.

70. Ultimately, coordination and cooperation among relevant United Nations agencies and diverse stakeholders will be essential for the implementation of sand and dust storm-related plans, policies and initiatives at the national and regional levels, with partnerships that ensure the engagement of policymakers and decision makers, government authorities, experts, the scientific community, the private sector, civil society organizations and local communities. Awareness-raising about this issue, particularly for communities in the source and destination areas, is also needed.

## V. Observations and recommendations

71. The United Nations Decade for Deserts and the Fight against Desertification (2010–2020) provided a vital framework for partnerships and coordinated actions to raise awareness about the causes of and solutions to desertification, land degradation and drought. In this regard, significant progress was achieved.

<sup>17</sup> Nick Middleton and Utchang Kang, “Sand and dust storms: impact mitigation”, *Sustainability*, 9(6), 1053 (2017).

<sup>18</sup> The partners include FAO, UNEP, WHO, WMO and other United Nations agencies.

72. The Decade increased the visibility of issues such as desertification in drylands, the impacts of drought and the importance of dry forests and of gender mainstreaming in the implementation of the Convention. The campaign reached out to scientists, policymakers, environmental activists and civil society organizations and showcased actions on the ground through books, pictures and films. Most of this progress can be attributed to three factors.

73. The first factor was the designation of the Decade, which brought heightened visibility and ensured a sustained focus on the issue of desertification and drought. The second factor was the framing of the mandate and its association with a specific agency, which galvanized action from a broad range of stakeholders in support of the Convention. The third factor was the growing evidence of the social, economic and environmental costs of failing to combat desertification, land degradation and drought.

74. The following are some of the most significant developments during the Decade:

- (a) The adoption of target 15.3 of the Sustainable Development Goals on achieving land degradation neutrality;
- (b) An increased commitment to rehabilitate and restore degrading land, including the adoption of voluntary national targets by parties to the Convention;
- (c) The development of scientific methodologies to assess and monitor land degradation as well as land management tools and technologies to rehabilitate and restore it;
- (d) Increased action on critical policy issues, particularly drought mitigation, gender equality, land rights and sand and dust storms;
- (e) The increased role of science in: (i) the work of the secretariat of the Convention in developing the methodologies to design and implement land degradation neutrality, integrating gender and land rights and building national capacities within the drought initiative; and (ii) promoting global awareness on the significance of good land stewardship in addressing social, economic and environmental challenges at all levels, including extreme poverty, climate change and biodiversity loss.

75. The importance of healthy land for a sustainable future has become more and more evident. With over 750 million hectares of land pledged globally for rehabilitation and/or restoration and the necessary assessment and monitoring tools in place, the opportunity to build a healthier and more resilient future cannot be overemphasized, but this is a limited window of opportunity in the light of climate change, biodiversity loss and other global threats.

76. The United Nations Decade on Ecosystem Restoration, starting in 2021, will build upon the progress made during the United Nations Decade for Deserts and the Fight against Desertification and trigger increased attention and investment in existing initiatives, projects and programmes that contribute to economic recovery, sustainable livelihoods and long-term resilience, such as those committed under the land degradation neutrality targets. In the light of the large-scale restoration activities planned under the Convention, Member States may wish to invite the national focal points for the United Nations Decade on Ecosystem Restoration to work in close collaboration with the secretariat of the Convention to enhance learning, leverage resources and increase coordinated actions for increased efficiency and impact on the ground.

77. Investing in national statistical capacity to produce quality and timely gender statistics, particularly in developing countries, is central not only for accountability

in the success and/or failure of action. It is also vital in taking corrective measures where interventions become counterproductive. Member States may wish to encourage collaboration among all stakeholders, including relevant United Nations entities, gender equality advocates and other civil society groups, not just as data users and producers but also as advocates, to support the collection, disaggregation and harmonization of gender data in activities related to target 15.3 of the Goals on land degradation neutrality.

78. Member States may wish to call on the international community, including the private sector, foundations, multilateral institutions and funds, Member States and all stakeholders, to provide the countries that have set their land degradation neutrality targets and their land-related restoration targets with the human, financial and technological resources and capacities required to achieve these targets well before the end of the United Nations Decade on Ecosystem Restoration.

79. Also considering the multidimensional nature of sand and dust storms, Member States may wish to reaffirm that mitigating the drivers and impacts of sand and dust storms constitutes an important area of international cooperation and encourage the secretariat of Convention, within its mandates and resources, to continue providing capacity-building for combating sand and dust storms and supporting the implementation of national, regional, and global actions of the affected countries.

80. On the occasion of the World Day to Combat Desertification and Drought, held on 17 June 2020, the Secretary-General called for “a new contract for nature” through international action and solidarity, and for the scaling up of “land restoration and nature-based solutions for climate action and the benefit of future generations”. Member States may also wish to consider exploring the adoption of a new “contract for nature”, one that is founded on the recognition that the long-term resilience and well-being of humanity depend on the health and integrity of nature. Its aim should be to consolidate shared values and the lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic in order to build back better and foster a culture of healthy engagement with nature and a sense of responsibility to future generations.

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