



LAND DEGRADATION AND CONFLICT

SECURING LAND AND PROPERTY RIGHTS FOR ALL

LAND DEGRADATION AND CONFLICT. DECISION MAKERS' BRIEF

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KEY MESSAGES

- Globally, 25 per cent of land is degraded because of climate-related and human-induced activities. This has a direct impact on the availability and quality of land, which adversely affects the livelihoods of farmers, pastoralists and communities.
- Land degradation and conflict are deeply intertwined, especially in fragile countries. Land degradation fuels conflict and leads to mass displacement. Conflict accelerates land degradation and jeopardises the capacity of states and communities to engage and invest in land degradation neutrality.
- Land degradation can be mitigated, prevented and, in some cases, even reversed. Addressing land degradation can promote peace, stability and socioeconomic growth.
- Achieving land degradation neutrality will require national commitment, local leadership, the active participation of communities, and the involvement of women and youth.
- Securing land rights of individuals and communities is an essential precondition to combat land degradation. It enables land rights holders to be decision makers in land degradation neutrality initiatives and fully benefit from the positive impact achieved.
- Fit-for-purpose land administration, access to justice and disputes resolution mechanisms, effective and enforceable land policies, and accompanying legislation and regulations are key enablers of land degradation neutrality actions.

Land Degradation Neutrality is the state in which the amount and quality of land resources necessary to support ecosystem functions and services to enhance food security remain stable, or increase, within specified temporal and spatial scales and ecosystems.

SUMMARY

Land degradation is the “reduction or loss of the biological or economic productivity and complexity of rain-fed cropland, irrigated cropland, or range, pasture, forest and woodlands in arid, semi-arid and dry sub-humid areas resulting from land uses or from a process or combination of processes, including processes arising from human activities and habitation patterns, such as soil erosion caused by wind or water; deterioration of the physical, chemical and biological or economic properties of soil; and long-term loss of natural vegetation” (UNCCD, 1996). Globally, degraded land represents about 25 per cent of all land (GEF Secretariat, 2022) and, if not addressed, this figure will continue to grow.

Land degradation is the result of human-induced actions, which exploit land, causing a decline in biodiversity and soil fertility. Avoiding, reducing and reversing land degradation is essential for the food security of current and future generations, for the conservation of biodiversity and the achievement of climate targets (FAO and UNCCD, 2022). Land degradation is not only a challenge for rural areas. It also puts the urban environment under pressure, which in turn contributes to degrading land in the expanding peri-urban areas.

Competition over land resources is a key driver of conflicts. Land degradation magnifies these conflicts and produces large-scale instability, posing a rising global challenge. Left unattended, land degradation and its consequences will destabilize countries and entire regions, aggravating and escalating existing conflicts and leading to mass displacements.

This brief highlights the interrelation between land degradation and conflict, its main features, and how they interplay on the ground in three countries. It summarises the insights of the Global Land Tool Network and UN-Habitat (2022) report Land Degradation and Conflict: Case Studies from the Jordan, Sudan and Niger.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LAND DEGRADATION AND LAND CONFLICT

The case studies from Jordan, Sudan and Niger show that land degradation can be the manifestation of a root cause of conflict, such as population pressure, scarce natural resources, cross-border dynamics, weak governance, dysfunctional land administration, politics of exclusion and plural legal systems. In the presence of root causes of conflict, land degradation can be a trigger or a contributing factor that ignites violence, particularly in situations of mass displacement and migration, food insecurity and competition over land use by different groups.

Conflict significantly raises the pace of land degradation. Instability and insecurity push communities into increased armed violence,

destroy crops and pastures and damage irrigation systems. Local residents are forced to cut woods for shelter and cooking and to undertake other practices to ensure their immediate survival rather than long-term sustainability. Communities in conflict feel insecure and unable or unwilling to carry out the necessary measures to preserve and protect land from degradation.

Conflict also constrains the actions of institutions and limits access to financial and other resources required to address, mitigate and prevent land degradation. Political and social tensions can side-line this issue as low priority, even as under-resourced and weak institutions struggle to implement actions.

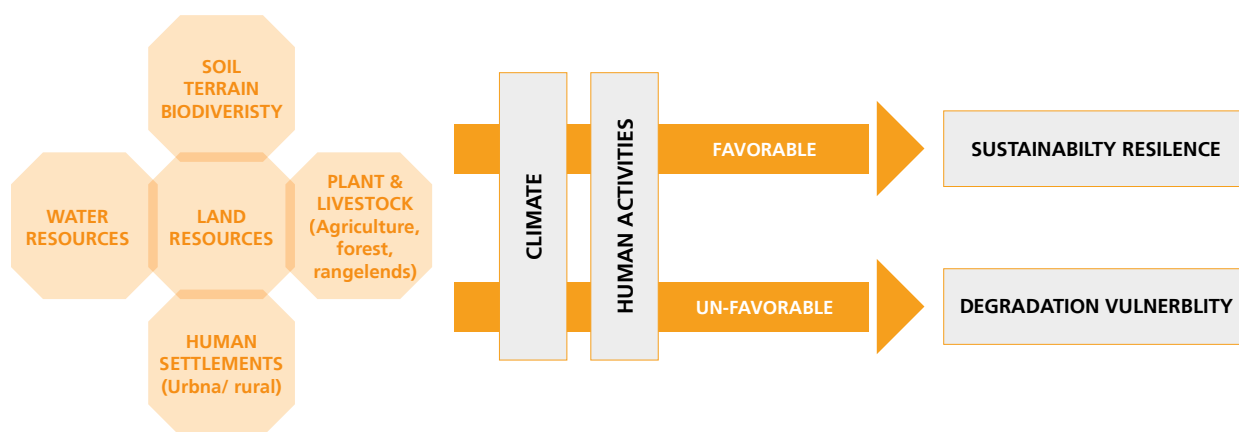


Figure 1: Sustainable Soil/Land Management for Climate-Smart Agriculture
Source: FAO, Climate-smart Agriculture Sourcebook, Module B.7

CONCLUSIONS

Avoiding, reducing and reversing land degradation is essential for the food security of current and future generations, for the conservation of biodiversity and the achievement of climate targets. In the current context of increased competition over land resources, rising food insecurity and inequalities and combating land degradation can prevent and mitigate conflict and mass displacement, which can potentially destabilize countries and entire regions.

Land degradation can be managed, mitigated and reversed with appropriate commitments. Securing land rights of individuals and communities is vital to combat land degradation. All legitimate tenure rights should be recognized, recorded and protected by the State, in line with the continuum of land rights approach. This would enable all the land rights holders – individuals and communities – to engage in and contribute to land degradation neutrality initiatives as decision-makers and to benefit from the positive impact achieved (FAO and UNCCD, 2022). It would also contribute to a more sustainable use of land and reduction of conflicts over its ownership or use.

Land degradation and conflict are deeply intertwined, especially in fragile countries. Land degradation fuels conflict. Conflict accelerates land degradation and jeopardizes the capacity of States and communities to engage and invest in land degradation neutrality. At times, land degradation is the manifestation of deeper root causes of conflict. In the presence of root causes of



Figure 2: How lack of access to water contributes to degradation of dryland: on the left, Alfalfa irrigated with sprinkler, on the right dry land in Azraq, Jordan.
Source: François Molle/IRD (2013).

conflict, land degradation can be the trigger factor of conflicts and violence. Undertaking a root cause analysis of the conflict triggered by land degradation can help structure land degradation neutrality actions.

Good land governance and functioning land management systems are crucial for the protection of land rights. They create an enabling environment for land degradation neutrality and are indispensable for the resolution of land conflicts and the sustainable use of land resources.

Conflict-sensitive, fit-for-purpose land administration plays a key role in documenting land rights, protecting land tenure security, supporting sustainable land use and preventing or resolving land disputes – all essential elements to combat land degradation and

ensure good land governance. Fit-for-purpose land administration can also support the voluntary return of displaced people, contribute to securing women's land rights and address land-related historical injustices, which are frequent root causes of conflict, therefore constituting a critical component of peacebuilding (Augustinus and Tempra, 2021).

Enhancing access to justice and strengthening multiple disputes resolution mechanisms that may co-exist on the ground can mitigate land-related conflicts and address some of the causes of land degradation. These include the lack of investment in sustainable land-use practices, the reluctance to invest in land restoration and land degradation neutrality actions, and the cutting of trees.



Figure 3: Women grinding and millet seeds in Niger.
Source: FAO/Giulio Napolitano (2013).

Effective and enforceable land policies, and accompanying legislation and regulations, are an important step for the sustainability of land degradation neutrality actions.

Sensitization and capacity development for international, national and local stakeholders on the intersection between land governance, land tenure security, land degradation and large-scale conflicts and displacement should be prioritized. The understanding of global literature at the local level and the creation of local context-specific knowledge should be encouraged and supported.

Local action to combat land degradation and related conflicts is a must. Developing the capacities and empowering local actors to lead land governance efforts should be a priority. Local authorities and communities need to work together.

National commitments should support local actions. Several global normative frameworks are in place to guide country actions on good land governance, land tenure security and land degradation neutrality: the Sustainable Development Goals, the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the Context of National Food Security and the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification, among others. The international human rights obligations underpinning the principles contained in these frameworks were also signed and ratified by most countries. Under the UNCCD, 129 countries committed to set voluntary national land degradation neutrality targets and, as of early 2022, over two thirds already have (FAO and UNCCD, 2022). Such commitments must be honoured with the leadership of national governments and the support of international funding.

Women are disproportionately affected by conflicts and are more vulnerable to the effects of land degradation, as often they directly depend on the land they farm, even if it is not registered in their name. Their marginalization in decision-making processes not only has negative consequences on their lives but also leads to decisions that do not incorporate

women's valuable experiences and undermine the sustainability of the interventions. Successful land degradation neutrality programmes require a gender-responsive approach in terms of process and outcomes. Implementation plans should be developed with the leadership and contributions of men and women alike.

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