

Special Feature

UNCCD in a critical phase

Poverty and a lack of funds for investments in sustainable production systems, along with population growth, conflicts and the growing influence of international markets, are increasing the pressure on natural resources in ecologically sensitive arid areas. Ten years after the enactment of the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), 1/5 of the Earth's surface and 1/3 of the world's population are directly affected by persistent desertification.

The Convention gives a high priority to combating poverty in arid areas and demands participatory implementation approaches. All people involved, from small-holder farm families and grassroots communities to civil society and national and international decision-makers, are to be involved in the efforts.

Today, however, the UNCCD is in a critical phase, and the ideal of constructive collaboration at all levels is still far from becoming reality. This judgement was also shared by the participants at an international conference on "Desertification, hunger and poverty" in Geneva. Industrialised nations whose national economies are only marginally affected by desertification accuse the governments of developing countries of insufficient implementation of measures. Directly affected developing countries, on the

other hand, deplore a lack of support from the industrialised nations, whose agendas rarely feature the UNCCD. Due to this politicisation of discussions in the UNCCD bodies, they have lost track of the importance of measures and their implementation.

This is the point at which a publication by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) enters the debate. By presenting successful projects, it aims to give more importance to local implementation. However, single locally successful projects are not enough to counter desertification at a greater scale. The influences, often external, that prevent sustainable resource use are too strong. These influences comprise, for example, climate change and economic conditions that are often disadvantageous. Furthermore, declining prices for export goods (e.g. cotton) and increasing prices for import goods (fossil energy, consumer goods, and capital goods) closely limit the affected countries' options for action.

The task of finding an effective approach to implementing the Convention in this environment, influenced by



Helplessly waiting for water. Long and intransparent decision-making processes, lack of information and financial means, and an uncertain economic future cause many grassroots initiatives to lose their impetus.

(Photo: CAMP, Kyrgyzstan)

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numerous and partly contradictory interests, is a difficult one. The conference in Geneva, as well as the SDC publication, point to the important challenges facing the signatory states, the UNCCD Secretariat, and the governments of the affected countries.

- Reliable and well-recognised organisations must join forces and increase their lobbying efforts to create the conditions necessary for sustainable development in arid areas.
 - Collaboration with related Conventions (UNFCCC, UNCBD) must be intensified in order to make use of synergies.
 - Production must be diversified at all levels in order to reduce risks and create new income opportunities, particularly in the secondary and tertiary sectors.
 - Smallholders, small enterprises and grassroots communities must be provided with information and training that enables them to make use of new political, economic and technological opportunities.
 - Civil society organisations must increasingly be involved as mediators between grassroots communities and decision-makers at the macro level.
 - The inhabitants of arid areas must be given financial support in their efforts to achieve sustainable resource use.
- The UNCCD signatory states must make their decisions accordingly and provide the necessary funds if they want to live up to their responsibilities.

SOURCES

Coping with drought. Sabine Brüscheweiler, Ernst Gabathuler. Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, 2006. 35 p. http://162.23.39.120/dezaweb/ressources/resource_en_91565.pdf

Desertification, hunger and poverty. International Conference. Geneva, Switzerland, 11–12 April 2006. www.sdc.admin.ch/index.php?navID=26466&langID=1&itemID=65102&

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Report of the Conference of the Parties on its Seventh Session, Held in Nairobi, from 17 to 28 October 2005. Convention to Combat Desertification. 78 p.

www.unccd.int/cop/officialdocs/cop7/pdf/16add1eng.pdf

Genetically modified soy leads to a dead end

Driven by a growing demand for fodder from overseas and by government incentives, large-scale cultivation of genetically modified soy is rapidly expanding in many South American countries.

The authors point out the devastating ecological and social consequences of this development: Expansion of cultivated land – and, in connection with this, the development of a large-scale transport infrastructure – leads to a loss of forests and other ecologically valuable areas. This development is reinforced by an increase in other economic activities, such as the timber and mining industries, which are attracted by the new infrastructure. Introduction of large-scale cultivation methods forces smallholders and landless people to migrate to areas that have so far not been cultivated, such as the Amazon, or to the cities. Moreover, the diversity of agricultural pro-

duction is reduced. More and more foods need to be imported, leading to an increase in prices.

According to the authors, the cultivation of herbicide-resistant soy itself is not at all sustainable: The herbicide that is to be used with the seed destroys nitrogen-fixing bacteria. Along with widespread nutrient loss due to increased soil erosion, this leads to a growing need for fertiliser. At the same time, persistent use of the same herbicide gradually leads to resistance, and partly also eliminates beneficial organisms.

SOURCE

GM soybean: Latin America's new coloniser. Miguel Altieri and Walter Pengue. In: Seedling (GRAIN). January 2006. pp 13–17. www.grain.org/seedling_files/seed-06-01-3.pdf

Water is power

“If the misery of our poor be caused not by the laws of nature, but by our institutions, great is our sin.”

Charles Darwin

Charles Darwin's words still hold true. Today we increasingly acknowledge the fact that the “water crisis” is a consequence of institutional failure at the local as well as the national and international levels. Water legislation, water policies and overall organisational conditions are the result of political negotiation processes. Idealist visions assume that all actors are equitably involved in political processes and have the same access to knowledge and information. The reality of power relations, however, is quite different. The water institutions that have emerged over the past two decades have actually aggravated inequality. The situation for poor, marginalised groups has become worse. A background paper of the 4th World Water Forum in Mexico on “Institutional Development and Political Processes” places the role of power distribution at the centre of considerations. In so doing, the paper aims to encourage in-depth discussion and contribute to combating inequality and water poverty.

The 2nd UN World Water Development Report also highlights the pivotal significance of institutional development and power-related aspects in its chapter on water governance. Following a critical analysis of current governance practices in the water sector, the report outlines necessary improvements. Important elements mentioned are the recognition of water rights, but also decentralisation of control over water.

SOURCES

Institutional Development and Political Processes. Cross-cutting Perspectives. 4th World Water Forum, Mexico City, March 2006. pp 213–240. www.worldwaterforum4.org.mx/uploads/TBL_DOCS_97_23.pdf

The Challenges of Governance. In: Water, a shared responsibility. 2nd UN World Water Development Report. UNESCO, World Water Assessment Programme. 2006. pp 42–85. www.unesco.org/water/wwap/wwdr2/table_contents.shtml

Lack of nutrients in African agriculture

Africa's food security has deteriorated significantly over the last two decades. The number of malnourished people has risen markedly due to continuous population growth.

This is what the International Center for Soil Fertility and Agricultural Development (IFDC) states in a report prepared for the "Africa Fertilizer Summit" of June 2006 in Nigeria. In most African countries, agriculture accounts for more than 25% of the gross domestic product. However, food production is constrained by fragile ecosystems, low soil fertility, and sparse use of new instruments such as mineral fertilisers and improved crop varieties. According to the authors, progressive decline of soil fertility as a result of nutrient depletion is one of the main factors causing low yields.

The authors see two major reasons for the great extent of nutrient depletion in many sub-Saharan countries: A

lack of interest on the part of farmers practising shifting cultivation in long-term soil fertility conservation, and a lack of additional plant nutrients. Wise use of mineral fertilisers, combined with the application of adapted soil conservation practices, but also the assurance of secure land rights, could improve the situation.

SOURCE

Agricultural Production and Soil Nutrient Mining in Africa. Implications for Resource Conservation and Policy Development. Summary. Julio Henao and Carlos Baanante. IFDC. March 2006. 13 p. www.rockfound.org/Library/Soil_Nutrient_Mining_in_Africa_Report.pdf

Implementation

Seed should not be distributed without due consideration

In crisis situations farmers may lose both their yields and their reserves within a short period of time. Many relief agencies respond to such situations by distributing seed to the farmers. However, seed aid is a complex issue, and careful preparation is a precondition for successful interventions.

A collection of fact sheets based on case studies in Burundi, Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, Uganda and Zimbabwe offer useful guidelines. The authors point out the importance of local grain markets as sources of seed. Relief interventions are often based on the false assumption that there is not sufficient seed available, when in reality poor farmers simply lack the means to buy it. In such cases it makes sense to distribute vouchers or cash sums that enable farmers to buy seed. In the case of direct seed distribution it is important to make sure that the seed is of good quality and

well-suited to the given local conditions. Another important consideration is to prevent negative influences of the intervention on agrobiodiversity.

Along with thematic inputs, this practice-oriented publication also provides methodological support for the preparation, implementation and evaluation of seed interventions, as well as the assessment of project proposals.

SOURCE

Seed Aid for Seed Security – Advice for Practitioners. Practice Briefs 1–10. Louise Sperling and Tom Remington with Jon M. Haugen. International Center for Tropical Agriculture and Catholic Relief Services. 2006. 51 p. www.ciat.cgiar.org/africa/practice_briefs.htm

Promotion of forest associations in China

In China, 60% of the population (765 million people) lives in rural areas. Projections state that around 300 million people are supposed to migrate from rural to urban areas over the next 15 years. Since 1985, however, companies in rural areas have facilitated local labour migration by providing a basis for more than 110 million jobs outside the agricultural sector.

Yunnan is one of the poorest and least urbanised provinces in China, but it has the largest total area of collectively owned forest in the country, which helps generate economic development in the region. To ensure that the population stays in the province and to provide them with a living, small and medium-sized forest enterprises (SMFE) must remain competitive and meet strict environmental performance requirements. This is why the government wishes to see the creation of associations which would help

position SMFEs on the global market and which would act as an intermediary between the current socialist market society and a liberalised one.

The present study also analyses sources of tension due to changes in rules and statutes which impact directly on local actors. In addition, greater collaboration with universities and with Southwest Timber, the largest wholesale market for timber products in the region, gives rise to new situations which require the various parties involved to adapt to change.

SOURCE

Emerging forest associations in Yunnan, China.
Horst Weyerhaeuser, Shao Wen and Fredrich Kahrl. ICRAF, IIED, 2006. 31 p. www.iied.org/pubs/pdf/full/13524IIED.pdf

Assessing the sustainability of agricultural production

The call for sustainable agricultural production is omnipresent. But how can sustainability in agriculture be defined? And how can it be measured?

A symposium organised by the newly founded "International Forum on Assessing Sustainability in Agriculture" (INFASA) offered an opportunity for experts from the policy sector, farmers' organisations and the scientific community to discuss these questions. Their presentations showed that a great variety of methods for assessing the sustainability of agricultural production already exists. However, successful practical application requires the use of a few easily communicable indicators that should best be defined together with the farmers.

Both politicians and private enterprises have a great interest in quantifiable sustainability indicators, as they can serve to assess the effect of political measures, as well as provide a convincing selling point. However – and this is

particularly true in the context of development cooperation – indicators should not cause additional work for farmers and stronger external influence on local communities, but support them in optimising their production systems. In the end, indicators remain nothing more than a tool. The basic precondition for sustainability is a broad, cross-sectoral perspective.

SOURCES

International Forum on Assessing Sustainability in Agriculture (INFASA): [www.iisd.org/measure/community/infasa/Symposium Presentations](http://www.iisd.org/measure/community/infasa/Symposium%20Presentations). First INFASA Symposium. Zentrum Paul Klee, Bern, Switzerland. 16 March 2006. www.iisd.org/measure/community/infasa/presentations.asp
Contact: Fritz Häni, Swiss College of Agriculture: Fritz.Haeni@shl.bfh.ch



In order to be sustainable, agriculture should broaden its thematic horizons and engage in new forms of cooperation, for example with the cultural sector. The organisers of the symposium emphasised this by holding the event at an art museum, the Zentrum Paul Klee in Berne, Switzerland, and by including a concert in the programme.

(Photo: Harald Menzi)

Reducing poverty through horticultural resources

Since the Green Revolution of the 1950s, research and agricultural resources have concentrated on the production of rice, wheat and maize. However, horticultural production has also developed, but without subsidies or any external encouragement. The fact that fruit and vegetables are essential for a well-balanced, healthy diet has progressively changed eating habits both in the North and South. The desire to consume exotic products or products that are not in season also increases demand.

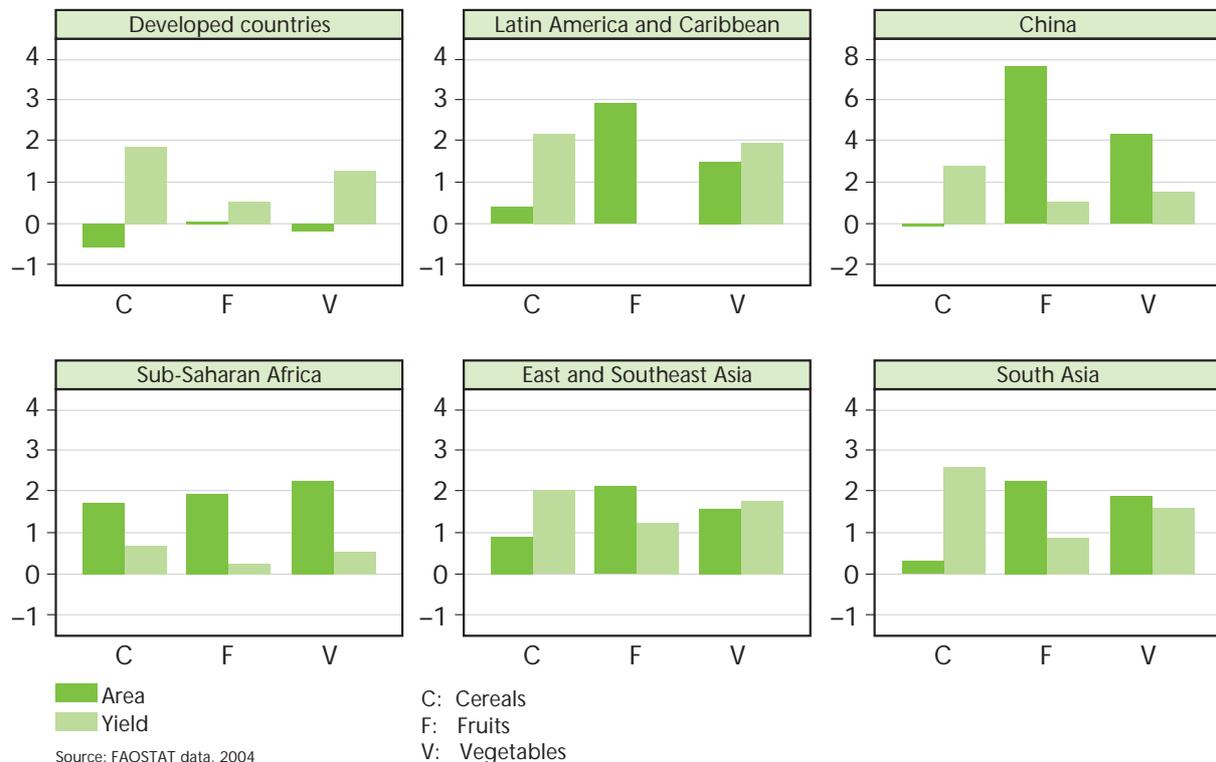
Since 2000, studies have shown the important role and great potentials of horticultural resources in terms of providing the most disadvantaged population with a living, particularly "small" farmers. In fact, the production of fruit and vegetables would be more profitable than cereals in terms of investments, growth times and cultivated surface area. Horticultural production generates jobs, as it

requires twice to four times as much labour than the production of cereal crops.

Although international agricultural research finally seems to be taking an interest in horticulture, political and financial circles still need to be convinced. There are major questions which need to be resolved, such as the influence of supermarkets in the agro-food system, the need to diversify varieties, the maintenance of stable and healthy production, as well as providing urban horticulture with a framework.

SOURCE

Horticulture for poverty alleviation. Katinka Weinberger and Thomas A. Lumpkin. World Vegetable Center, 2005. 20 p. www.avrdc.org/pdf/WP15.pdf



Average annual growth rates (%) in area and yield of food crops by region between 1961 and 2004. (Weinberger and Lumpkin. 2005. p. 5)

Conservation of biodiversity, beliefs and spirituality

Throughout the world, the conservation and use of water and land have historically always been linked to spirituality and faith. Furthermore, "sacred" natural sites are probably the most ancient form of protected habitat on our planet.

Today, sacred sites and land, which were once used according to the rules of the community's faith, are now under threat due to cultural breakdown, pressures on land and resources, not to mention poor governance. It is a tricky situation: when located outside protected zones, sacred sites are ignored and neglected by managers; when integrated in conservation zones, the sacredness and significance which they have for the indigenous population are often neglected.

In such a context, the creation of, and subsequently the respect for such protected areas is a real challenge.

While no-one disputes the need for such areas on our planet, greater attention should be given to the interests and needs of local communities, especially their relationship with sacred sites.

The present study and its recommendations (based on case studies) is a useful tool for all those who decide on and manage projects to preserve biodiversity, protected zones, reserves and natural parks.

SOURCE

Beyond belief. Nigel Dudley, Liza Higgins-Zogib, Stephanie Mansourian. WWF, 2005. 143 p.
<http://assets.panda.org/downloads/beyondbelief.pdf>



School kids observing the flora and fauna in a nature reserve. Rondevlei Education Centre, Cape Town, South Africa. (Photo: © WWF-Canon / Sandra Mbanefo Obiagio)

The time for debate is over

Global climate change is a fact. Even if humanity should prove able to halt the increase of greenhouse gas emissions, the current level of emissions will lead to a substantial warming of the atmosphere and a rise of the sea level.

This conclusion was reached by the World Resources Institute in an assessment of all scientific articles on climate change that were published by prestigious journals in 2005. The survey examined research findings relating to four areas: climate physics, the hydrological cycle, ecosystems, and technologies for mitigating climate change.

The compilation clearly shows that the consequences of

climate change are quantifiable and dramatic. A loss of 11% of arable land worldwide and heavy losses in cereal production in 65 developing countries are to be expected. The Earth's biosphere is in the process of adapting to climate change. Will humanity prove equally adaptable?

SOURCE

Climate Science 2005: Major new discoveries. Kelly Levin and Jonathan Pershing. WRI Issue Brief. World Resources Institute. 2006. 16 p.
http://pdf.wri.org/climatescience_2005.pdf

Away from agriculture: The future in the rural South

The livelihoods of rural populations in the South are changing: They are becoming more diverse and less dependent on land and agriculture. Remittances from migrants are playing an increasingly important role. The driving forces behind these changes are declining yields in small-scale farming, environmental degradation, increasing land scarcity and new, non-agricultural income opportunities. These processes have caused a "new" poverty to emerge among those who have no access to new opportunities.

A differentiated understanding of poverty and its causes makes it possible to find new answers to these existing challenges. According to the author of this research article, development can only help to reduce poverty if new priorities are set. Not only land reforms, but retraining; not only support to smallholders, but targeted migration away from agriculture and the merging of plots as a basis for agricultural enterprises must be promoted. However, this approach can only be successful if it can rely on a growing economy that provides income opportunities for the migrants.

It is probably due to constraints on length that this paper does not satisfactorily reflect the social and cultural as well as the ecological consequences of these changing situations. Migration can cause a loss of social and cultural networks and values, while market-oriented agriculture can lead to additional degradation of natural resources if the necessary overall conditions and regulations are not given.

SOURCE

Land, Farming, Livelihoods, and Poverty: Rethinking the Links in the Rural South. Jonathan Rigg. In: World Development Vol. 34 No 1. pp 180–202

Access to journal: www.elsevier.com/locate/worlddev
Order article at British Library for Development Studies: <http://blds.ids.ac.uk/blds/docdel.html> (costs involved approx. 15 US\$). Or contact: Jonathan D. Rigg (j.d.rigg@durham.ac.uk)

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