

THE UNITED NATIONS CONVENTION TO COMBAT DESERTIFICATION (UNCCD)

AN OVERVIEW - BY MICHAEL ANDREW

Background Information

The need for global and national assessment of land degradation was recognized early in the 1970s, by the International Community. Land degradation was recognized and is still been viewed as a major economic, social and environmental problem of concern to many countries in all regions of the world. In 1977, the United Nations Conference of Desertification (UNCOD) adopted a Plan of Action to Combat Desertification (PACD). In 1991, the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) assessed the PACD, and reported that the problem of desertification (land degradation) worldwide had intensified. In 1992, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) which was held in Rio de Janeiro, considered three major environmental issues; Biodiversity and conservation of biological resources, Climate Change and Desertification (Land degradation).

At the 1992 conference, the UNCED agreed to support a new, integrated approach to the problem emphasizing action to promote sustainable development at the community level. In 1994, the Convention to Combat Desertification (CCD) was adopted in Paris, and St. Lucia acceded to the convention on July 2nd 1997. As of December 2001, there were some 181 Country Parties to this vitally important convention.

Objective of the Convention

The main objective of the convention is to combat desertification (land degradation) and mitigate the effects of drought in countries experiencing serious drought and/ or desertification, particularly in Africa, through effective action at all levels, supported by international cooperation and partnership arrangements, in the framework of an integrated approach which is consistent with Agenda 21, with a view to contributing to the achievement of sustainable development in affected areas.

Achieving this objective will involve long-term integrated strategies that focus simultaneously, in affected areas, on improved productivity of land, and the rehabilitation, conservation and sustainable management of land and water resources, leading to improved living conditions, in particular at the community level.

Over View of the Convention to Combat Desertification

Desertification means land degradation in arid, semi-arid and dry sub-humid areas resulting from various factors, including climate variation and human activities.

Land Degradation means reduction or loss, in arid, semi-arid and dry sub-humid areas, of the biological or economic productivity and complexity of rain-fed cropland, irrigated cropland, or range, pasture, forest and woodlands resulting from land uses or from a process or combination of processes, including processes arising from human activities and habitation patterns, such as:

- i. Soil erosion caused by wind and / or water;
- ii. Deterioration of physical, chemical and biological or economic properties of soil; and
- iii. Long-term loss of natural vegetation.

Desertification is a process of land degradation, which starts with the loss of vegetation cover and ends with the destruction of the soil's fertility and its transformation into barren desert. The main causes of desertification results from a combination of climate effects (mostly high temperatures and low rainfall) and human activities (such as bush burning, over grazing and bad farming practices, e.g. slash and burn farming).

The consequences of desertification (land degradation) are listed as follows:

- **Reduction in the land's resilience to natural climate variability** – soil, vegetation, freshwater supplies and other dry-land resources tend to be resilient. However, when land is degraded, this resilience is greatly weakened. This has both physical and socio-economic consequences.
- **Reduction in soil productivity** – exposed and eroded topsoil can be washed away by rainstorms causing the soil's physical structure and bio-chemical composition to change for the worse. If the water table rises due to inadequate drainage and poor irrigation practices, the soil can become waterlogged, and salts may build up. When soil is trampled and compacted by cattle, it can lose its ability to support plant growth and to hold moisture, resulting in increased evaporation and surface run-off.
- **Vegetation becomes damaged** – the lost of vegetation cover is both a consequence and a cause of land degradation. Loose can sandblast plants, bury them, or leave their roots dangerously exposed. When pastures are overgrazed by too many animals or forests removed indiscriminately, biodiversity and biological resources such as, edible plant species and medicinal plants may be lost, allowing inedible species to invade.
- **Some of the consequences are borne by people living outside the immediately affected area** – degraded lands may cause downstream flooding, reduced water

quality, sedimentation in rivers and lakes, and siltation of reservoirs and navigation channels. Wind-blown dust can also worsen health problems, including eye infections, respiratory illnesses, and allergies.

- **Food production is undermined** – desertification (land degradation) is considered a major global environmental issue largely because of the link between dry-land degradation and food production. A nutritionally adequate diet for the world's growing population implies tripling food production over the next 50 years. This will be difficult to achieve even under favourable circumstances. If desertification is not stopped and reversed, food yields in many affected areas will decline. Malnutrition, starvation, and ultimately famine may result.
- **Desertification contributed to famine** – famine typically occurs in areas that also suffer from poverty, civil unrest, or war. Drought and desertification often trigger a crisis, which is then made worse by poor food distribution and the inability to buy what is available.
- **Desertification has enormous social costs** – the environmental resources in and around rural or local communities come under severe pressure when land degradation occurs at an alarming rate. This causes movement of people and conflicts, and also causes the loss of cultural identity further undermining social stability.
- **Desertification is a huge drain on economic resources** – there is little detailed data on the economic losses resulting from desertification (land degradation). However, there is a strong belief that the depletion of natural resources and the indirect economic and social costs suffered outside the affected areas, including the influx of environmental degradation and losses to the national food production, may be much greater than expected.

UNCCD – The St. Lucian Context

St. Lucia produced its first national report to the Secretariat of United Nations Convention To Combat Desertification (UNCCD) in April 2000. The information for the preparation of the report was obtained through a national consultation in which several stakeholders were present to make their contribution towards the final preparation of the document. The report provided a status on the issue of land degradation in the country and also identified a participatory mechanism for involving partners in the development of the National Action Programme (NAP). Some of the major environmental issues as it related to land degradation include:

- Deforestation;
- Solid and liquid waste; Unplanned development;
- Natural disasters;
- Squatting for housing and agriculture.

There are several underlying factors that contribute to those issues. These can be classified into four (4) categories: Physical, Socio-Economic, Cultural and Educational (St. Lucia National Report on the Convention To Combat Desertification, April 2000).

Physical:

- The island is mountainous with very young and highly erosive soil. In some places, the sub-soil is composed of allophane clay minerals that can induce landslides.
- The short distance between the heartland and the coast does not allow for corrections to be made to redress environmental shortcomings.
- Absence of zoning and land use legislation.

Socio-Economic:

- Lopsided urban development
- Farming intrusion in areas not suited for agriculture
- Inappropriate agricultural practices
- Environmental laws and regulations in some cases are in place but they are not always enforced.
- Not enough resources allocated to implement planned activities
- Land tenure and succession

Cultural:

- Slash and burn
- Cultivating up and down slopes
- Mono cropping systems

Educational:

- There is a general lack of public awareness to the environmental issues.
- In critical areas, the stakeholders are not adequately informed and mechanisms are not put in place to facilitate their participation and involvement.

In June 2001 the MAFF held its second major UNCCD activity, the National Awareness Seminar (NAS). The aim of the NAS was to seek broad representation within groups to allow for new ideas to emerge in the development of the NAP. The main outputs of the NAS was the development of a framework to lead into the development of the NAP; the identification of urgent problem areas in the country and what is required to address these areas (Report on National Awareness Seminar, June 2001).

Recently, the MAFF has completed the second national report to the Convention to Combat Desertification (CCD). This report outlined the country's achievements to date since the submission of the first national report.

The problem of land degradation in St. Lucia is still a major issue and requires urgent attention by all partners, agencies and persons involved in the use and/ or management of this fragile and scarce resource. Combating land degradation is a matter of addressing human poverty as well as preserving the environment. Land degradation undermines the land's productivity as it degrades critical resources such as, fertile topsoil, vegetation cover and healthy crops.

As we celebrate World Desertification Day on June 17th and bearing in mind the chosen theme for the event, "**Land Degradation,**" it is critical that all stakeholders urgently cooperate to halt and reverse the ravages of land degradation in St. Lucia. The global area affected by land degradation is increasing at an alarming rate and although the serious environmental and social consequences have been recognized for some time, the issue has not received the level of international attention that it warrants.

The Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries urges for a more integrated approach to the management and development of the island's land resource base to ensure that our life on St. Lucia, 238 square miles (616 sq. km.) of Planet Earth, will always be of the highest quality.

LAND DEGRADATION WAITS FOR NO MAN !!!