



DESERTIFICATION

United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification in Those Countries Experiencing Serious Drought and/or Desertification, Particularly in Africa

In force from December 26, 1996, **ratified by** 176 countries
(as of August 29, 2001)



CSE

ozone depletion

hazardous waste

prior informed consent

right to information

commission on

sustainable development

climate

biodiversity

desertification

persistent organic pollutants

forests

trade and environment

multilateral agreement

on investment

global environment facility

institutions for environment

Problem

The misuse of land and water in many parts of the world due to deforestation, agriculture, mining and urbanisation have led to large-scale land degradation in many parts of the world.

Although desertification is a local phenomenon, its occurrence can be traced to global trade and economic practices. For example, governments in poor countries encourage farmers to grow cash crops such as coffee, which generate foreign exchange to pay back national debt. But such crops also put an enormous strain on soil and water resources. If export prices of primary commodities exported by poor countries drop, there is a greater need to exploit more land. Caught in a cycle of debt and production, farmers tax the soil until it eventually loses all its nutrients and can no longer sustain agriculture.

Desertification affects 41 per cent of the total land area on earth. The world's poor are the worst hit. They depend on the soil for a livelihood but do not have the resources to reverse desertification. The livelihoods of more than 1 billion people in more than 110 countries are jeopardised. According to 1998 estimates, desertification costs the world US \$42 billion a year.

The convention

The persistence of countries from Africa, where two-thirds of the land area is either desert or dryland, led to the decision to adopt the Convention to Combat Desertification (CCD) at the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED). As of August 2001, 176 nations have ratified CCD, which entered into force on December 26, 1996. A Committee on Science and Technology (CST) serves as a permanent scientific body of the convention.

The main elements of the convention include establishment of a global legal framework, creation of a system for exchanging information on ways to combat desertification, principles that include a 'bottom-up' approach to ensure participation of local populations in combating desertification, and mobilisation of finances through bilateral and multilateral aid.

Poor subsidise the rich

The primary seed of contention between the North and the South lies in their respective perceptions of the main causes in the process of desertification. Northern countries were, and still are unwilling partners in CCD as they do not acknowledge the global roots of the problem. Instead of over-consumption by rich countries, they identify population pressures in poor countries as the cause of desertification. However, over 90 per cent of world trade in physical natural resource goods and raw materials originate from developing countries, which end up bearing the environmental cost of the extraction of natural resources.

The EU and the US have, in particular, questioned any links between desertification, trade and poverty. Since 1992, they have opposed discussions that place any obligation on them to provide assistance to Southern countries. They have resisted the use of the Global Environment Facility (GEF) as a funding



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mechanism for CCD. Southern countries have had to fight for the establishment of a 'global mechanism' (GM) that serves as the funding mechanism for the convention.

The issue of international economic policies that stimulate desertification remains unresolved, but as a result CCD is neglected by Northern governments and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). It has not yet had the chance to be implemented, due to lack of funds.



Challenges ahead

The CCD could and must play a critical role in bringing to the forefront the inequitable relationships in international trade and economic policies. But judging by the current trends, CCD will soon turn into a corpse convention if drastic measures are not opted for. It suffers from a hangover with administrative issues, as they trail from conference to conference without being resolved. Still, important issues like that of the role of the secretariat are to be resolved even after four Conferences of the Parties (CoPs). Therefore, CCD yet needs to mobilise adequate funding for programmes to control desertification. The GM, the convention's only hope for funding, so far claims that the donor countries are just not interested.

- The CCD needs to change its perspective and face, from a convention designed to help poor countries with the problem of desertification to a convention that demands the causal culprits to pay for the desertification that they cause. The right linkages between trade and land degradation have to be made. Desertification demands for strict application of the polluter pays principle, that is proper pricing of primary commodities, taking into account ecological costs.
- The 'bottom-up' approach for developing national action programmes to combat desertification must be implemented. Local governance and community empowerment are yet to become important principles guiding anti-desertification programmes in Southern countries.
- The CST needs a stronger role. Instead of being an advisory body, it has so far become a body for the documentation of facts. NAPs formulated by the affected developing countries contain an enormous amount of local region specific information. CST could play a powerful role in utilising this information, incorporating it in its own research work and thereby, coming out with policies, strategies and action plans for implementation.



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