

BMZ



Federal Ministry  
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# Combating Desertification

Germany's commitment under the  
United Nations Convention to Combat  
Desertification



# What is desertification?

**Drylands cover more than one third of the Earth's surface. They provide the habitat and livelihood base for a large part of the world's population. One billion people live in the rural areas of drylands alone. These people are facing immense challenges, as their livelihoods are now at risk.**

**Desertification** is more than the formation of deserts. It refers rather to the **degradation of fertile soil** as a result of over-exploitation, by people and animals, of natural resources in the world's drylands. Climatic conditions and changes aggravate the situation.



Goat herd at a waterhole in Mali

Desertification is global in dimension. By now, 70 per cent of all drylands are at risk of desertification. This amounts to an area of 36 million square kilometres, equivalent to around four times the size of China. Up to one fifth of drylands is already severely damaged by desertification.



Uncontrolled livestock husbandry, as here in Argentina, damages the sward and thus leads to desertification

Excessively intensive and unsustainable uses of drylands are the **main cause of desertification**:

- management techniques are often insufficiently adapted to the sensitive ecosystems;
- national agricultural policies mainly promote monocultures and export-oriented farming, and there is often a lack of spatial planning and land tenure systems that would favour sustainable land use;
- in the face of strong population growth and mounting demand for agricultural land, traditional land management strategies and methods often prove to be no longer suitable.

Further factors drive desertification:

- lack of technical knowledge among the population;
- lack of tenure security among land users;
- unfavourable conditions in the global economy.

The **consequences of desertification** are dramatic:

- the danger of famine and natural disaster mounts;
- in a process of interplay with climate change, desertification forces people deeper into poverty;
- additional years of drought heighten people's plight due to lack of food and provoke migration and conflict.

The extent and intensity of land degradation have increased over the past 20 years. Although industrialised countries are also affected, it is the developing countries which suffer particularly from the degradation of land and resources: **the 50 least developed countries are particularly severely affected by desertification.**

Drylands cover around two thirds of the territory of these countries. Their populations are among the world's poorest, and infant mortality is highest. The very survival of 250 million people is now threatened by desertification. In Africa and Asia, some 40 per cent of the population live in areas at risk of desertification. In South America, the proportion is around 30 per cent.

In drylands, **agriculture** is the basis of the **food security** of local communities and is a key sector of the economy. It is facing immense challenges. The risk of entering a vicious circle of desertification looms large in many regions:

- Worldwide, one third of the arable area has been abandoned in the past 40 years because soil erosion has rendered it unproductive. This is joined by a further 20 million hectares of degraded land worldwide each year. Growing population numbers, dwindling agriculturally utilisable areas and the impacts of climate change are amplifying the problem.



Uncontrolled firewood extraction contributes to desertification, Mali

- Under climate change, drought – but also flooding – becomes more frequent, temperature extremes rise and water availability drops in many regions. Pressures on remaining farmland thus rise, leading ultimately to over-exploitation and thus to further degradation.
- Land degradation and desertification have negative effects on the economic development of affected countries. Moreover, the economic situation of the people is worsened by trends in world market prices for food-stuffs.

Without external assistance, this inexorably forces people to choose between migration or overgrazing, clear-cutting and over-exploitation of the last remaining natural resources.



Women often have the main responsibility for agricultural production and marketing, Guatemala

**Women** are hit particularly hard by this dynamic, as they play a key role in the rural areas of developing countries due to their many tasks in managing crops and livestock and handling the household and family. Despite their many roles, women generally rarely have rights of ownership to land, soil, trees or water and, moreover, often have only limited entitlement to join debates and take decisions. This is because in these societies decision-making power in politics, administration and family and ownership rights to land and livestock traditionally reside with the male ‘head of the family’ and are often enshrined in local customary law.

The inhabitants of drylands in developing countries already make up a large proportion of the people living in poverty worldwide. In many places the dynamics of international agricultural policy are making the situation even more critical.

Rising worldwide demand for agrofuels such as ethanol and biodiesel is a notable example. There is a real risk that the increased cultivation of energy crops will cause ever less cropland to be available for food crops in developing countries.

A further example that applies equally to developing and industrialised countries is the purchase and consumption of fruit and vegetables from drylands, such as tomatoes from Tunisia and Spain or tropical and subtropical fruit from the Jordan valley. This is a source of foreign exchange for the producer countries, but the water consumed in cultivation is no longer available to meet the needs of the local population. Over the long term, this contributes to the scarcity of water, a vital resource.

Desertification primarily affects smallholder farmers and nomadic pastoralists. Yet water scarcity and declining levels of food production also impact on the poor in the cities. Sustainable resource use would therefore also contribute greatly to improving the situation of the latter. Measures taken will, however, only have sustained success if they tackle diverse realms of life and are coordinated at both the national and international levels.

# The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification

**The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development was convened in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. The most important outcome of the conference was the adoption of the three ‘Rio conventions’: on climate protection, on biodiversity conservation and on combating desertification.**

The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) entered into force in 1996 and has been signed since then by 194 countries. These include developing, transition and industrialised countries affected by desertification, but also donor countries not affected by



Sustainable pasture management in the high mountains of Kyrgyzstan – ensuring sustainability for future generations

the problem, such as Germany. The permanent secretariat of the Convention has been located since January 1999 in Bonn, Germany, where it moved to the UN Campus in 2006.

The Convention is binding in international law. Through it, the international community commits to making sparing and sustainable use of natural resources (soil, water, biological diversity) in the regions of the world threatened by desertification. This concerns the global goal of maintaining the productivity of agriculturally utilisable land and, moreover, improving the living conditions of people, allowing for sustainable development in the affected countries and combating poverty.

Two principles are paramount in the Convention: firstly, donor countries and affected states are called upon to work together as partners and to continuously exchange their experience. Non-state actors are to be involved in such partnership with equal standing (**partnership principle**). Furthermore, the population in the affected regions is to be involved effectively in all measures (**participation principle**). This means that the UNCCD is the sole multilateral environmental agreement to explicitly underscore the special role of women in the sustainable management of natural life-support systems.

The Convention has achieved much since it entered into force: desertification is now recognised worldwide to be a problem, and approaches to solving the problem are being developed internationally and are increasingly being implemented. It is thanks to the Convention that efforts to combat desertification have been institutionally mainstreamed and put on a binding statutory basis in most countries.

To implement the Convention in practice, **National Action Programmes to combat desertification** are the key instrument. These programmes establish guidance for action in all sectors of relevance to sustainable land use (such as agriculture, forestry, water resources management, spatial planning and land tenure systems, and cross-cutting poverty reduction strategies). A total of 104 countries have now produced such National Action Programmes. In addition, subregional and regional action programmes have also been adopted. The systematic implementation of these programmes makes a key contribution to attainment of the Millennium Development Goals 1 'End Poverty' and 7 'Environmental Sustainability'.

The UNCCD is also an important instrument in efforts to mitigate climate change and adapt to its impacts. Due to their historical loss of carbon and the large areas they cover worldwide, drylands have a major potential to store carbon. Vegetation and soils bind carbon and thus remove it from the atmosphere.

Numerous approaches deployed in combating desertification also bind carbon, such as:

- afforestation,
- restoration of degraded land,
- improved pasture management,
- site-appropriate management of cropland and erosion control.

Climate change in turn affects drylands particularly severely, and sustainable land-use practices help to adapt to such change and to preserve biodiversity. In no other region are the preservation of biodiversity and ecosystem performance so tight-knit with food security and poverty reduction as in drylands. The UNCCD can thus make an important contribution to developing and implementing climate change mitigation and adaptation strategies.



Joint forest management involving local forest users and the state forest authority: in future, individual and collective lease agreements are to ensure that forest resources are conserved, developed and used sustainably, Tajikistan

# The contribution of German development policy to UNCCD implementation

Following the severe droughts in the Sahel in the 1970s and 1980s, combating desertification was made a priority of German development policy. By signing the Convention, Germany has committed to supporting its implementation. The Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) is the lead agency within the German federal government, and works closely with the UNCCD Secretariat on technical and political matters. Germany supports UNCCD implementation directly through the convention contributions it makes to the United Nations and resources it channels via the Bonn Fund to organise UNCCD-related events and conferences, and indirectly via bilateral development cooperation.



Dune stabilisation in Central Asia: communities stabilise sand dunes using desert flora and straw mats to protect their houses from sand encroachment

To support the process and provide technical advice, BMZ commissioned Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ – German Technical Cooperation) in 1999 to carry out the Convention Project to Combat Desertification (CCD Project).

Germany is one of the largest donors in this field, supporting over 1,000 projects. In the years 2008 and 2009, the German Federal government allocated almost EUR 460 million to this end. These projects are carried out by both state and non-state implementing organisations of German development cooperation. They make important contributions to combating desertification and sustainably improving the living conditions of people affected by it.

For these German development activities to have sustained success, they must tackle all levels:

- **introducing and promoting technical measures** to protect soils against erosion, establish appropriate irrigation technologies and engage in joint land-use planning;
- **creating an enabling environment**, for instance by helping people to market their goods and products. This further includes creating legal certainty in land tenure and establishing alternative sources of income;
- **involving the population** (and particularly women) in all planning and decision-making processes that concern them;
- **building capacity** among the population, state authorities and in civil society by providing education, training and advice.

**Investment in combating desertification bears fruit.**

In the Sahel, efforts undertaken by farmers, supported by national investment and development cooperation inputs, have delivered verifiable results in many places: degraded soils have been restored, broad-scale afforestation has been carried out and harvest yields have risen. For the population, this means more income and better nutrition. In environmental terms, it means that water resources are stabilised, soils are preserved and susceptibility to climatic changes is reduced. The successes achieved in cooperation have encouraged the farmers to take action of their own accord: in Niger, for instance, more than five million hectares have been planted with trees over the past 30 years, mostly by the farmers themselves.



Two women water Saxaul shrubs planted in the Karakum Desert to stabilise sand dunes, Turkmenistan

# Further information

[www.bmz.de](http://www.bmz.de)

[www.unccd.int](http://www.unccd.int)

[www.giz.de/desertification](http://www.giz.de/desertification)

[www.desertifikation.de](http://www.desertifikation.de)

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