

Forum: Environment Commission

Issue: Implementation of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification in Those Countries Experiencing Serious Drought and/or Desertification, particularly in Africa

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1. Description of the problem

The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification in Those Countries Experiencing Serious Drought and/or Desertification, particularly in Africa (UNCCD), is a convention that entered into force in 1996 and currently has been signed by 193 member nations. The convention was created to combat the effects of desertification and drought particularly in Africa.

Desertification is recognized as a major environmental, economic and social problem in the nations affected by it and the effects are felt particularly heavily in LEDCs due to already weak economical and social structures.

According to estimates by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) one quarter of the earth's land is threatened by desertification. The livelihood of over 1 billion people in more than 100 countries is also jeopardized by desertification because farming and grazing land becomes less productive. Dryland farming can contribute significantly to economic growth by serving as a base for agriculture. Yet these areas are endangered to drought. In addition to its negative economic and environmental impacts, desertification is partly responsible for population migration. Although no one knows for sure how many people have had to abandon their land when it turned to desert, it appears to be in the millions. One sixth of the population of Mali and Burkina Faso has already been displaced because of desertification. It is also a factor in the immigration of Mexicans into the United States.

2. Definition of Key Terms

Desertification

Desertification does not mean that deserts are steadily advancing or taking over neighbouring land. As defined by the UN Convention, desertification is a process of "land degradation in arid, semi-arid and dry sub-humid areas resulting from various factors, including climatic variations and human activities". Patches of degraded land may develop hundreds of kilometres from the nearest desert. But these patches can expand and join together, creating desert-like conditions. Desertification contributes to other environmental crises, such as the loss of biodiversity and global warming.

Drought

A drought is an extended period of months or years when a region notes a

deficiency in its water supply. Generally, this occurs when a region receives consistently below average precipitation. It can have a substantial impact on the ecosystem and agriculture of the affected region. Although droughts can persist for several years, even a short, intense drought can cause significant damage and harm the local economy. This global phenomenon has a widespread impact on agriculture. The United Nations estimates that an area of fertile soil the size of Ukraine is lost every year because of drought, deforestation, and climate instability.

Famine

Famine is the result of widespread shortages of food. Desertification often affects land previously used for food production.

Deforestation

Deforestation is the clearance of naturally occurring forests by the processes of humans' logging and/or burning of trees and plants in a forested area.

Deforestation occurs because of many reasons: trees or derived charcoal are used as or sold for fuel or a commodity to be used by humans, while cleared land is used by humans as pasture for livestock, plantations of commodities, and settlements. People's removal of trees without sufficient reforestation has resulted in damage to habitat, biodiversity loss and aridity. It has adverse impacts on biosequestration of atmospheric carbon dioxide. Deforested regions typically incur significant adverse soil erosion and frequently degrade into wasteland.

Land Degradation

Land degradation occurs during Desertification. It refers to a lands loss of fertility due to natural or also human causes. The main issue however is the human causes as these are the ones that can be prevented. The main reasons are overgrazing and poor agricultural land management. Both of these problems can be solved by the introduction of relevant legislation and education.

3. Background / general information

The problems of Desertification are felt the most in LEDCs. This is primarily due to the fact that the problem does not occur as often in MEDCs as there is the money and the scientific knowledge to deal with it effectively.

Problems of Desertification

Problems connected to desertification include, amongst others, famine and loss of biodiversity. These problems have a detrimental effect on LEDCs where the issue of Desertification is also more prominent. The result of a previously fertile agricultural area being consumed by the desert is that the food production in that area will fall driving prices higher. This causes poorer people to not be able to afford food and also results in job losses from the workers previously employed on land that was used for farming. Famine soon follows and the population in the area becomes reliant on outside aid for the bare necessities such as food and water. Another problem is the damage desertification does to the environment in which it occurs.

Conference of the Parties

The Conference of the Parties (COP) is essentially the body governing the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD). It regularly meets to review the implementation of the Convention, the most recent of these meetings being in Buenos Aires in Argentina from the 21st of September to the 2nd of October. The Conference of the Parties (COP) also acts to promote the Convention to other countries and strengthen cooperation between the relevant parties.

Structure of the Convention

The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification in Those Countries Experiencing Serious Drought and/or Desertification, particularly in Africa, is divided into 6 Parts. In total the Convention has 40 articles and 5 Annexes. As the entire convention is public a link to the full document can be found in the Annexes.

4. Timeline of key events

The timeline of the Convention throughout its history so far:

October 14th, 1994 UNCCD opens for signature

December 26th, 1996 UNCCD entered into force

2006 International Year of Deserts and Desertification

September 21st - October 2nd 2000 Ninth session of Conference of Parties (COP) held in Buenos Aires

5. Relevant treaties, UN resolutions and actions taken

A link to the full Convention can be found in the Appendix. There are also other resolutions pertaining to the issue that were approved at the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee For The Elaboration Of An International Convention To Combat Desertification In Those Countries Experiencing Serious Drought and/or Desertification, Particularly In Africa, in Paris during the Summer of 1994.

Resolution on urgent action for Africa (Paris 6-17 June 1994)
(Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee For The Elaboration Of An International Convention To Combat Desertification In Those Countries Experiencing Serious Drought and/or Desertification, Particularly In Africa)

Resolution on interim arrangements (Paris 6-17 June 1994)
(Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee For The Elaboration Of An International Convention To Combat Desertification In Those Countries Experiencing Serious Drought and/or Desertification, Particularly In Africa)

6. Positions of major countries involved

The Convention has a current membership of 193 countries. This is important as the global effort is essential. The problem may be hardest felt in Africa but

other major countries are also going to have problems in the future. The fact that all these 193 nations are cooperating together is encouraging and gives the Convention much hope for effective future implementation.

7. Sources

<http://www.unccd.int/convention/text/convention.php>

<http://www.un.org/ecosocdev/geninfo/sustdev/desert.htm>

<http://87.253.140.15/thimun/images/stories/pdf/2010-research-reports/Special-Conference2.pdf>