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# CIVIL SOCIETY

## STEWARDS OF THE LAND



In the last half century, civil society organizations (CSOs) have made their mark on a wide range of aspects, from democracy to development. Their great influence, however, may well yet to be tapped on the environment. Without civil society organizations we would be at a different place. But if CSOs mattered in the past, they matter even more now.

The livelihoods of 2 billion people are under direct threat from desertification/land degradation and drought. Climate change is eroding the precious life-support systems – the land and the ecosystem services we all depend on. CSOs are vital and strategic partners in efforts to improve the conditions of the most vulnerable land-dependent people. No one should be left behind. CSOs are vital and strategic in moving global decisions on land, climate change and biodiversity forward. We will not make progress if we walk alone.

Rooted in realities of societies, civil society organizations are in tune with the views and concerns of their large memberships. CSOs know the solutions that work. This is a powerful resource that must be harnessed in environmental governance at all levels, especially when considering issues of land stewardship. Land is the foundation of our life and livelihoods; it is a matter of our future security.

No other multilateral environmental agreement has provided as wide a scope for CSOs involvement in multilateral environmental governance as the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD). CSOs execute projects, influence decisions and monitor and report on government actions. Cooperation with CSOs is one of the four principles of the Convention.

Switzerland believes in the value added to the UNCCD process by CSOs. We have backed this belief with practical action and undertaken efforts to ensure the participation of CSOs. We are working in partnership with the UNCCD secretariat as it establishes a new approach to working with CSOs. And we continue to support other networks of non-governmental organizations in Africa, Asia, Europe and South America.

Together, we will find the solutions and mobilize the abilities of all the stakeholders to build a more secure future.



Martin Dahinden  
Director  
Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation

# LAND STEWARDSHIP: A SOLID FOUNDATION FOR LIFE AND LIVELIHOODS

## THE FACES OF DLDD



**Poverty:** 52% of agricultural land is moderately or severely degraded, representing a threat to food security, damning millions to live at the edge of poverty and extreme poverty.



**Security:** Studies from Africa indicate that land degradation and desertification contribute to forced migration and worsening living conditions, both for those who leave and those who remain behind.



**Environment:** Carbon sequestration is an important and immediate way to mitigate the effects of climate change, transforming CO<sub>2</sub> into a resource for food production. However, if the soils are degraded, the process cannot take place.

What, in life, is of higher value than being able to feed your family?

Yet nearly 1 billion people do not have enough food to eat. And more than 1 billion lack access to enough safe water. Most of the world's billion poor people are living directly off degrading land. How can we eliminate poverty without addressing the source of people's low income; land and its declining productivity?

Our food, water, homes and incomes are built on the land. The food, water and ecosystem services that we enjoy are closely linked to the health and productivity of the land. We are all part of a fragile ecosystem that can be compared to the structure of a house. Take away the foundation of the ecosystem, healthy soil, and you compromise the entire structure.

Soil is providing the nutrients plants need for growth and animals need for food. Land is the natural storage of our fresh water resources. And land plays an important role in regulating the earth's temperature and the concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. Its degradation threatens this foundation. Today, more than half of all agricultural land is degraded. Every ten years, the productivity of an area the size of South Africa is lost through desertification and drought alone. This is an area that could produce 200 million tons of grain.



We all have an interest in the land and in the maintenance of healthy soils. Land matters, whether our focus is pollution, climate change, endangered species, migration or agriculture. Civil society organizations (CSOs) take many forms and defend numerous interests. But we all work to improve livelihoods. Land matters whether we are trying to improve the livelihoods of humans, plants or animals. This makes civil society and civil society organizations critical stewards of the land. Whatever you are doing; you cannot take land for granted.

### The UNCCD wants to motivate everyone to achieve land-degradation neutrality

This means getting to a point where the amount of healthy and productive land resources, necessary to support vital ecosystem services, remains stable or increases. It can occur naturally or as the result of improved land management and ecosystem restoration. It means that every time, everywhere you degrade one hectare of land you have to restore the same amount.

Land is linked to food and our consumption habits. It is linked to our carbon emissions. And it is linked to our security. By pursuing land degradation neutrality, we can achieve all three goals.

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### DO YOU KNOW

that the UNCCD is one of the Rio conventions along with the Climate Change Convention and the Convention on Biological Diversity? The UNCCD is the sole international legally binding instrument that addresses the issues of desertification/land degradation and mitigating the effects of drought.



# SHAPING CONSUMPTION HABITS GLOBALLY



Land is an income-generating resource for farmers both rich and poor. Land occupies 30% of the Earth. We all depend on food grown on just 11% of this area. 500 million small-scale farms are supporting the livelihoods of over 2 billion people. For the poor, however, land means much more; it is the only means of survival. More than a billion poor people are relying wholly on land with declining productivity.

Many countries lack the means to provide for basic needs. CSOs are a critical lifeline helping many poor rural populations to improve food production and providing relief in times of need.

Investing in the 500 million small-scale farmers has a clear economic rationale. It could turn these farming families into stable and reliable food consumers of the future and create employment for the very poor. And by investing in the one billion people living on degrading land to move them towards sustainable small-scale production, we could support the livelihoods of an additional several billion people. CSOs are securing the incomes of vulnerable populations by diffusing sustainable land management on a large scale among existing and potential small-scale producers.

## Investing in people, growing economies

There are major challenges for policy and market behavior: the land-grab phenomenon; the access to water and biodiversity, the persistence of agricultural models that cannot assure food security for all; wasteful consumption patterns in the developed world; and agricultural practices that continue to degrade the land.

Private sector and civil society actors are recognizing their potential to bring about change. Improving standards and practices at every stage of the supply chain is a way to tackle poverty and empower local producers to reduce food waste.

By investing in sustainable food production, job-creation and capacity-building, CSOs show that they are critical to efforts to eradicate poverty.

CSO success in these areas is increasing their credibility and influence in global policy. Through the UNCCD for example, CSOs can influence policy decisions and monitor the success of policy implementation through the reporting process.

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## EXPERIENCE

Winner of UNDP's Equator Prize 2012, Zenab for Women in Development is an indigenous NGO working at the grassroots level in Gedaref (Sudan). Between 2005 and 2012, it has helped to establish women farmers unions in 53 communities, with a total membership base of 3,000 women. The organization provides members with training in organic agriculture, crop rotation and the use of biological fertilizers. It also provides households with gas to reduce the reliance on firewood, raises awareness on deforestation and organizes reforestation and tree planting initiatives. In addition, the NGO is changing the normative orientation of lending in the state by improving women's access to credit in order to manage their land better .

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# REDEFINING SECURITY



Unsustainable land use practices such as overgrazing, soil salinization and soil erosion are damaging fertile soils and fresh water sources, leading to the loss of soil productivity, a lack of water and food and poverty for families.

In all regions of the world people like Tukki are migrating from degraded areas. Seasonal migration, which was accepted among communities as a coping mechanism, is now turning into permanent, even forced migration. This is causing conflicts among many rural communities. Jobless and desperate young people are becoming internally displaced, forced migrants or the targets of radicalization. Conflicts which in reality are due to a breakdown in the land's productivity and society's coping mechanisms are being addressed militarily or by fences and refugee camps.

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## EXPERIENCE

Land degradation and deforestation forced Tukki to leave his family for Dakar City. This young Senegalese from a village near Tambacounda in the south of the country hoped to find employment to get the income to support his family – something that the degraded land could no longer provide. His fate is documented in the film titled, *Tukki*, the environmental footprint.

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## Empowering Households to Foster Security

By recovering the fertility of depleted soils through sustainable land use practices, families can make a decent living from the resources available from their ecosystems and avoid conflict and forced migration. Managing land sustainably contributes to human security, stability and peace.

Farmers are motivated to adopt sustainable land-management practices when land is governed the right way. To invest in the well-being of the land, farmers need to own it or at least have secure access. If tenure rights are safe and policy incentives are right, poor people can abandon land-degrading practices.



Aligning customary, tenure and investment rights can also empower women. It would enable them to gain the same access men have to credit, seeds, tools or insurance. It would improve their land productivity and income, and could increase farm production by 20 to 30% in developing countries.

Human rights, including the rights to life, health, property, food, water, development, and self-determination, are grounded in respect for human dignity and equality – including gender equality. At least 500 million people depend directly on natural resources for their immediate, daily survival. Land degradation therefore has immediate impacts on the fundamental human rights of the poorest members of the global community. It undermines the right to food due to loss of soil fertility. Decreasing food production means hunger and poverty for millions. It undermines the right to water due to dramatic declines in ground water levels as a consequence of unsustainable land management practices; it undermines the right to health and even life due to increasing poverty and conflict. Land dependent communities have tenuous ownership rights and are excluded from having their voice heard in the decision-making processes that directly impact their lives.

By influencing land use policies, bringing attention to its negative impacts and stopping policies that marginalize women, the poor and small scale farmers, CSOs deliver good governance and redefine security.

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## EXPERIENCE

The Law on Conservation of Soil and Land Management in Turkey was initiated and passed after the Turkish Foundation for Combating Soil Erosion (TEMA) collected one million signatures. As part of this law, Soil Protection Councils have been created in 59 cities. Land grabbing also poses a major threat to the rights-based approach needed to ensure good land stewardship for all productive land, for the benefit of present and future generations. And CSOs are mobilizing society against this practice already. For instance, Oxfam's<sup>1</sup> campaign, GROW, aims to raise awareness on the risks that land-grabs pose to the poorest smallholder farmers and to bring such practices under control

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1 <http://www.oxfam.org/en/grow/landgrabs>



In 2008, estimates show that there were more than 50 million hectares of land-grab deals

# TURNING THE TIDE ON CLIMATE CHANGE



When rainfall, snow, strong winds and other climatic events happen over cleared, overgrazed or poorly cultivated land, soil fertility and freshwater resources are destroyed. The more severe and far-reaching the climate events are, the more the land deteriorates. There is a higher risk of desertification and land-degradation. What happens to the land has consequences for most other resources and ecosystems – including people and plants and animals. People living in degraded areas will face extreme difficulties due to the new climatic reality. They have to find ways to adapt to new conditions to secure their livelihoods.

CSOs concerned with desertification are contributing to climate change adaptation through activities such as promoting sustainable land management among communities. Good examples showing how CSOs improve the resilience of local populations to climate change are easy to find. CSOs are leading tree planting campaigns in Kenya, fixing sand dunes in the margins of the Kubuqi Desert in China, restoring land in the Sahel or improving watershed management around the world.

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## EXPERIENCE

The Gran Chaco Americano region of Argentina is not only one of the poorest, it is also seriously degraded due to deforestation. Local communities and youth groups have reforested 3,000 hectares of abandoned arable lands using a clean development mechanism-agreed methodology. The project is now self-sustaining because it also created business opportunities. Young people are taking care of the tree-nursery and the commercialization of the products obtained from the trees is generating income for the local populations. The achievement was made possible because the Argentinean NGO GADE (Grupo ambiental para el desarrollo) prioritized the improvement of the living conditions in efforts to address climate change and land degradation.

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## Adaptation powered by the land

For these efforts to succeed, they need to be supported on a large scale. A critical role for CSOs will be integrating the issue of land in the climate change discussions. Issues such as strengthening the governance of natural resources, including land and water management, will be critical.

Desertification is a death sentence for many species of animals and plants. In order to survive, plant and animal species, including the plants we cultivate for food, are migrating. In 2011, World Wildlife Fund (WWF) estimated that desertification destroys 6000 species every year. Protecting the land and its fragile and diverse ecosystems is necessary if we want to continue benefiting from the life forms in our neighborhood and countries.

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### EXPERIENCE

Birdlife International is linking land conservation to biodiversity conservation, more specifically the endangered bird species. To address the issues of poverty and the steep decline in the number of migratory birds in Africa simultaneously, it is supporting the “Living on the Edge” project. With a focus on “the shared interests of birds and people in the Sahel”, it is promoting sustainable land use to ensure the restoration of bird habitats and improve livelihoods. Since 2011, it has implemented 12 projects in the Sahelian zone in Africa to improve the lives of both birds and humans.

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# WALKING HAND-IN-HAND INTO THE FUTURE

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## THE CSO PANEL

The CSO Panel brings together representatives from different existing networks working on desertification. The main focus during the current biennium is to strengthen the capacity of the network, expanding its representativeness at the sub-regional and national level and aiming at becoming a network of networks that can work with a unified voice in combating desertification.

Mr. Juan Luis Merega Chair of the UNCCD CSO Panel

CSO partners can play a leading role in policy processes and practice on the ground. In this regard, CSOs are an invaluable:

- reality-check for UNCCD secretariat initiatives, given their understanding of on-the-ground realities;
- amplifier of the voices of the poorest, vulnerable populations in national and international and multilateral policy processes;
- capacity-builder of grassroots organizations, be it improving millet yields in Burkina Faso or interacting with heads of state and government during the Open Dialogue sessions of the Conference of the Parties;
- partner to different stakeholders combating desertification and mitigating the effects of drought;
- fund-raiser to ensure resources reach those who need it most.

In order to foster the involvement of the CSOs, the UNCCD has established a new platform designed to magnify the work of the CSOs, build capacities, enable information exchange, establish new and innovative partnerships and influence the decision-making process.

We are joining up with initiatives to improve the livelihoods of the populations and ecosystems at risk. When we recover degrading lands, we are investing for our future, because the cost of inaction is always higher than the cost of action.



## Your representatives in the UNCCD CSO panel are:

- Mr. Emmanuel Seck representative of Africa - Environnement et développement du tiers-monde (ENDA-TM) [ssombel@yahoo.fr](mailto:ssombel@yahoo.fr)
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