PROGRESS TOWARDS THE SDG LAND DEGRADATION AND RESTORATION COMMITMENTS

WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THE 2021 VNRs AND THE SDG INDICATORS' GLOBAL DATABASE?

SDG LAND MOMENTUM GROUP

KEY CONTRIBUTORS

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In 2015 we celebrated world leaders' recognition of the foundational and strategic role that sustainable land management must play to advance biodiversity conservation and climate resilience.

Six years after the SDGs were set in motion and more than a third of the way into their implementation timeframe, it is important to assess how far we have come: what have countries done to address their ambitious but critical cross-cutting commitments to combat desertification, restore degraded land and soil, and strive to achieve a land degradation-neutral world? This assessment is particularly timely given that the 2021 High Level Political Forum reviewed progress toward ***SDG 13*** on climate action and considered the integrated, indivisible, and interlinked nature of the SDGs. As such, we studied progress towards land-focused elements of reports on ***SDG 13*** as well as ***SDG 15*** to "*protect, restore, and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and half and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss.*"

There are indeed countries that have advanced their SDG land degradation and restoration commitments. Some have undertaken thoughtful planning or allocated new resources. Others have augmented or strengthened land restoration and sustainable land management practices in an inclusive way. A few have introduced ambitious reforms, established new national programs, or drafted new legislation to ensure long-term efficacy. However, our review suggests that many countries have yet to prioritize land degradation neutrality in their national development agendas and most have not undertaken significant action. Even those who have acted decisively have a long way to go before their new laws, policies and strategies are fully implemented, or their programs reach the necessary scale.

This lack of sufficient action is particularly vexing since many countries have also made similar environmental commitments to other UN frameworks: the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD). Since the commitments and reporting requirements of the SDGs overlap significantly with those of the UNFCCC and UNCCD, policy designers have mutually reinforcing incentives to advance this SDG commitment.

When environmental degradation is minimized and restoration efforts are prioritized, ecosystems can sequester and store more carbon and lessen the impact of some climate change effects. As we advance the UN Decade of Ecosystem Restoration 2021-2030, we can hope to see greater alignment and collaboration across the agencies striving for a more sustainable world.

Reaching the SDG land degradation neutrality target will require strong political commitment in all countries, backed by dedicated resources, to enact concerted, deliberate, and multi-sectorial efforts. Up to now, countries have sometimes been distracted by competing priorities or limited by lack of capacity or by the belief that environmental challenges are too complex to resolve. It is now time for governments, development partners, civil society practitioners, experts, and researchers to come together and pool their experience, expertise, resources, and institutional reach. The post-COVID-19 world we all hope for depends on whether people – everyone, everywhere – can count on robust environmental policies to bolster their food security, livelihoods, health, and climate resilience.

The highly visible and powerful platform provided by the SDGs only works if it catalyzes action. It must provide governments with incentives to act, it must offer effective advocacy levers to civil society organizations, and it must help the broad array of stakeholders working on land degradation remain strategically aligned. This requires clear and accessible information on what countries have done – what we should celebrate – as well as on what countries could and should be doing to fulfill their SDG land degradation and restoration commitments. Such reporting must come from governments, civil society, and community-based groups around the world.

The following sections provide a detailed description of the analysis we have carried out to assess what progress countries have made toward SDG15 on land degradation neutrality and the indicator that tracks this commitment, ***15.3.1***.

BACKGROUND ON SOURCES

- For the analysis that follows we have relied on the 40 publicly available **Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs)** submitted for the 2021 High Level Political Forum by Afghanistan, Angola, Antigua and Barbuda, Azerbaijan, Bhutan, Bolivia, Cabo Verde, Chad, China, Colombia, Cuba, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Denmark, Dominican Republic, Egypt, Germany, Indonesia, Iraq, Japan, Lao, Madagascar, Malaysia, Marshall Islands, Mexico, Namibia, Nicaragua, Niger, Norway, Paraguay, Qatar, San Marino, Sierra Leone, Spain, Sweden, Thailand, Tunisia, Uruguay, and Zimbabwe.

WHAT STEPS HAVE COUNTRIES TAKEN TO ADDRESS THEIR SDG LAND DEGRADATION COMMITMENTS?

While the vast majority of the VNRs included comments around land, land degradation, or land use, frequently these mentions were limited to descriptions of the country's context, history, policies, challenges, or statistics. Thus, to gauge the extent to which governments are moving toward fulfilling their SDG land degradation and restoration commitments, we screened countries' VNRs for two criteria:

- VNRs that report concrete actions such as a new or revised national strategy, legal or policy reforms, programmatic action, active policy implementation, or similar measures. Many governments described existing policies' goals or aspirational activities; however, these statements are not included below.
- VNRs that report activities that have taken place after the SDGs have been agreed upon and set in motion; that is, since 2015. Important as past actions might be, we sought recent policies or implementation activities.

SEVERAL COUNTRIES HAVE REPORTED TAKING DECISIVE ACTION ON SDG 15.3

The summaries below share countries' reported activities that adhere to the criteria described. We have made no attempt to validate the reports' claims. We want to recognize the following countries for the promising actions they report taking:

Angola

The Ministries of Agriculture and Fisheries and of Culture, Tourism and Environment are working with partners on a variety of interventions to combat land degradation with support from FAO, GEF, UNDP, and others, including projects focused on desertification, land rehabilitation, sustainable rangelands

management in agro-pastoral production systems, sustainable charcoal value chains, integrated and participatory land use plans, sustainable land and forest management capacity-building courses, and restoration of Indigenous landscapes. In 2018, actions to set national land degradation neutrality targets were also implemented.

Antigua and Barbuda
The Government developed the National Action Plan to Combat Desertification, Land Degradation and Drought, 2015-2020 to identify land degradation priorities and formulate a national implementation plan to address them. They have also completed the LDN Target Setting Programme to establish national LDN targets. Finally, the Environmental Protection and Management Act (2019) emphasizes the sustainable use and management of natural resources and ecosystems.

China
From 2016 to 2020, an additional 300,400 square kilometers of land had been put under protection from soil erosion, making the total restored areas 62,000 square kilometers. The area and intensity of soil erosion have both decreased, with the effect of protection measured up by 10-40%. Desertification has been checked across 10 million hectares, leading to a drop in both area and intensity of desertification in three consecutive monitoring periods. From 2015 to 2018, net restored land in China accounted for about one fifth of the global total, ranking first in the world.

Cuba
In 2017, Cuba's National Soil Conservation and Improvement Program began certifying land area for the conservation and improvement of soil, water, and forests, benefiting 5,380 hectares thus far.

Czech Republic
The Czech Republic has adopted a new approach to protect soil threatened by erosion to retain water and reduce flooding. Since 2020, the approach requires that soil blocks of over 30 ha may not be planted with only one crop.

A farmer must now either divide such a field and grow several plant species on it, or divide it into buffer zones with soil-beneficial crops (e.g. fodder). If they do not follow this procedure, farmers will not be entitled to major subsidies, like direct area payments or support from the Rural Development Programme. The new rules apply to approximately 2,300 agricultural holdings and 600,000 hectares of fields, about a quarter of all arable land in the Czech Republic.

Denmark
The Danish Ministry of the Environment has mapped out contaminated land sites in Denmark to develop a plan to clean up these sites. Denmark's National Forest Programme (2018) maps out challenges and opportunities in forestry and sets goals and a direction for sustainable development of forested lands. Its Climate Act (2020) breaks down the silo mentality which exists between the Paris Agreement and the SDGs to address environmental degradation and human rights challenges together.

Egypt
In 2019, Egypt participated in efforts to revive the "*green wall*" project with African nations to confront desertification across the continent.

Germany
Germany's 2035 Arable Farming Strategy sets out options for making arable farming sustainable. Priorities include: improving soil conservation and fertility, increasing crop diversity and extending crop rotation, using fertilizer more efficiently and reducing nutrient surpluses, using and developing resistant and site-adapted varieties and species, preserving and fostering farmland biodiversity, and developing climate-adapted cultivation strategies. The government is also implementing its Strategy on Agrobiodiversity, its Strategy for the Future of Organic Farming (2017) and its National Bioeconomy Strategy (2020) as well drafting an Arable Farming Strategy and a Bog Protection and Peat Reduction Strategy. Germany is the largest contributor of funding to support the UNCCD's implementation (around EUR 545 million in 2017 under the Rio marker for desertification).

Indonesia
In 2020, a presidential decree formed the Peat and Mangrove Restoration Agency (BRGM) with a peat restoration target of 1,200,000 hectares and a mangrove rehabilitation target of 600,000 hectares within four years. This decree is a continuation of efforts carried out by the Peat Restoration Agency, formed in 2016. BRGM reports restoring 778,181 hectares of peatland by December 2019.

Madagascar
Madagascar is committed to achieving LDN by 2030 in application of the general provisions of the UNCCD and the Malagasy Environment Charter, updated with voluntary national targets in 2017. Each year, the government aims to restore 400,000 hectares of land through 2025.

Paraguay
Paraguay's National Action Plan to Combat Desertification and Drought 2018-2030 aims to contribute to sustainable development of arid, semi-arid and dry sub-humid areas, prevention and reduction of land degradation, rehabilitation of degraded lands, and recovery of desertified lands.

Sierra Leone
The government (GoSL) is currently targeting degraded lands and coastal areas to minimize climate change vulnerabilities with a national planting initiative. From April 2020 to June 2021, the GoSL saw the planting of 1.2 million trees, and anticipates planting 3.8 million by June 2023. The GoSL has reviewed six existing key environmental legislations to inform the formulation and submission of six bills to parliament for their enactment into effective environmental legislations during 2019-2020.

Spain
Several LDN policies and plans are being advanced in communities and local entities: the Andalusia action plan for environmental restoration and the recovery of soils degraded by the uncontrolled waste dumping (REMAS 2020-2030 Plan); the Basque Country Biodiversity Strategy 2030 and Soil Protection Strategy 2030; the Law 6/2021, of February 17, on waste and contaminated soil in Galicia; and the 2019 law on waste and contaminated soil in the Balearic Islands.

Tunisia
Tunisia's 3rd strategy for the development and conservation of agricultural land (ACTA) is part of the national planning of natural resources by 2050. ACTA strategy themes include: agro-ecological transition towards new cropping itineraries, restoration of soil fertility, establishment of a monitoring and evaluation system, and a territorial observatory for the management of natural resources.

Uruguay
In 2015, the Law 19,335 set standards for the responsible and sustainable use and conservation of soils. In 2017, the Ministry of Livestock, Agriculture, and Fisheries (MGAP) developed a Plan for Sustainable Dairy Production that requires

- a rotation or succession of crops for dairy production that does not degrade soil due to erosion and
- a management program for chemical and organic fertilization.

Relatedly, MGAP has been executing the project Climate-Smart Livestock Production and Soil Restoration in Uruguayan Grasslands (2019-2023) to promote carbon sequestration in grassland soils and restore degraded lands through the promotion of climate-smart practices in the livestock sector.

Zimbabwe
So far, the country has received US$148.94 million from the Global Environment Facility (GEF) towards implementation of 42 projects in the area of climate change, biodiversity, and land degradation. For example, the Government is implementing a five-year GEF-funded programme to support conservation initiatives in Northwestern Zimbabwe's Hwange-Sanyati Biological Corridor.

NOT EXPLICITLY DISCUSSING TARGET 15.3

While not explicitly discussing Target 15.3, other countries reported advancing land-based solutions related to land degradation neutrality in their reporting on other SDGs related to climate action and forest resources.

Republic of Azerbaijan

Azerbaijan has joined the Bonn challenge to restore 270,000 hectares of forests on lands degraded by climate change by 2030. Its Joint Action Plan to Support Green Agriculture incorporates measures for mitigation of and adaptation to the environmental impact of agricultural activities, efficient water and land use activities, protection of biodiversity and ecosystems, and the development of organic agriculture.

Bhutan

The National REDD+ Strategy and Action Plan 2020 will contribute to Bhutan's carbon neutral pledge and support efforts to meet its NDC commitments—through strengthened forest management practices, climate smart primary production, integrated land use planning and management, and improved rural livelihoods.

Bolivia

The Program for Monitoring and Control of Deforestation and Forest Degradation implements the Forest Information and Monitoring System to provide information for the control of deforestation and degradation, with the objective of proposing actions aimed at the recovery of wooded lands.

Chad

In 2020, Chad validated its National Environmental Policy to combat: (i) the degradation of natural resources and the loss of biodiversity; (ii) climate change and environmental risks; (iii) difficulties in accessing resources and (iv) inadequate governance and resource mobilization.

Colombia

Municipalities and departments are tracking integration of climate threats into their land use plans and investing in a sustainable forest economy with support from FAO and the EU.

Democratic People's Republic of Korea

The DPRK is implementing its 2019-2030 National Disaster Reduction Strategy to address climate change's impact on agricultural production, destruction of agricultural infrastructure, and degradation of soil and water resources.

Malaysia

Thirteen coastal erosion prevention and rehabilitation projects have been implemented in critical areas in five states, using both construction of infrastructure as well as nature-based solutions, like the mangroves planting.

Nicaragua

Nicaragua's National Forestry Program (PFN 2020-2030) promotes the restoration of degraded ecosystems and the increase of forested lands.

Niger

The 3N Initiative (2016-2020) and the Integrated Food and Nutritional Insecurity Resilience Program prioritizes [among other things] environmental protection and restoration of degraded lands. Niger participates in the "*Great Green Wall*" Initiative to improve the livelihoods of communities in the Sahelo-Saharan areas through sound management of ecosystems.

Thailand

In 2020, Thailand expanded forest conservation to 116,304 square kilometers. Thailand has developed new legislation regarding the protection, recovery, and support for sustainable terrestrial ecosystems, including the National Reserved Forest Act (No.4) B.E. 2559 (2016).

While these are all promising steps, considerably more work is needed for these laws and strategies to translate into changes on the ground, for the programs to reach the scale needed and ultimately, to fulfill the goal of land restoration. Sixteen of the 40 VNRs reviewed mentioned ***some type of advancement on SDG 15***; however, many of the countries shared ambitious policies and programs, falling short of describing explicit actions taken and measurable progress made on the ground. Until VNRs focus on effective actions rather than drafted documents, the SDGs are falling short of their intended global transformation.

WHAT PROGRESS HAS BEEN MADE SO FAR?

The relevant outcome-based land degradation indicator is SDG 15.3.1, which tracks the proportion of land that is degraded over total land area in pursuance of Target 15.3 "*By 2030, combat desertification, restore degraded land and soil, including land affected by desertification, drought and floods, and strive to achieve a land degradation neutral world.*" Based on the 2021 VNRs, we conclude that:

There has been very limited uptake for this indicator.
From the 2021 VNRs, only five countries had reported on ***15.3.1***. DPRK and Spain were the only countries to share annual values for comparison purposes; however, minimal conclusions can be drawn from those data[1].
Five other countries offered data on alternative ***indicators tangential to 15.3.1***[2].
This lack of uptake is concerning for two reasons.

- Target ***15.3 subindicators*** are already part of the UNCCD country reporting mechanism, creating additional incentives for countries to track and report on activities related to desertification, land degradation, and drought for their commitments as States Parties to the UNCCD.

1 According to the VNRs, DPRK reported 9.7% in 2015, 8.1% in 2018, and 7.2% in 2019. Spain reported 18.2% for both 2015 and 2018.

2 Countries offering data on alternative indicators tangential to 15.3.1 include Cuba, Cyprus, Germany, Lao, and Uruguay.

- The UNCCD, Food and Agriculture Organization, UN Statistics Division, UN Environment, UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, and Convention on Biological Diversity have built SDG indicator metadata that allow countries to retrieve freely available national data from global and regional datasets derived from satellite imagery on land cover and land cover change, land productivity, and soil organic carbon stocks[3]. Given this global framework alignment with the UNCCD and freely available data, it is disappointing to see limited uptake for this indicator.

The numbers reported in VNRs varied, with most reporting less than 20% degraded lands.
As the outlier, Namibia reported 67.94% of the country's land classified as degraded, which presents a national environmental crisis for the government to manage.
All other VNRs reporting specific numbers fell at 20% or below: Angola reported 20% of its land as degraded, with Spain at 18.2%, Indonesia at 7.46%, and DPRK at 7.2%. These figures suggest a certain degree of optimism that the countries' land degradation is at a relatively manageable level that can be confronted with targeted policies, subsidies, and programs in the degraded geographies identified. With a smaller land area needing reform, countries with strained resources can focus their energies on specific lands that present the most potential for restoration.

Data on indicator SDG 15.3.1 in the Global SDG Indicators Database is limited to 2015.
The Global SDG Indicators Database tracks annual entries for each SDG indicator for each country. It is unclear whether the lack of information is due to the SDG database failing to update for 2016-2021 or whether not a single country has reported on 15.3.1 in the global database since 2015. Regardless, without the ability to monitor progress on ***indicator 15.3.1*** in an easy and timely fashion, the SDG platform cannot pressure countries to act.

3 Metadata for SDG 15.3.1. Updated on 2021-03-01.
https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/metadata/files/Metadata-15-03-01.pdf

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

For more information on how the Land and SDG Momentum Group is supporting SDG reporting work on land degradation and restoration, please email **info@landesa.org**

For questions or suggestions regarding this brief, please contact **rachelm@landesa.org**

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SDG LAND MOMENTUM GROUP

THE SDG LAND MOMENTUM GROUP is a coalition of civil society and multi-lateral organisations geared towards monitoring the progress of the SDG land targets and conducting advocacy to meet the same end. Currently the secretariat of the group is coordinated by the International Land Coalition Secretariat. Members of the group include Asian NGO Coalition, GLTN, Huairou Commission, IPAR, IWGIA, Land Portal, Landesa, Natural Resources Institute - University of Greenwich, Oxfam, Rights and Resources, TMG Think Tank, Transparency International and World Resources Institute.