Drylands deserve more attention

Marie José van der Werff ten Bosch, Both ENDS, IUCN Member
Emmanuel Seck, ENDA TM, IUCN Member
Noel Oettle

At UNCED in 1992, it was decided that desertification warranted increased and special attention. In May 1993, negotiations for a Convention to Combat Desertification began, resulting in its adoption in June 1994. Three months after the 50th ratification, the Convention entered into force in December 1996. The first Conference of Parties was held in Rome, in October 1997. At this moment (2008), the number of ratifications has more or less stabilized at 193 countries.

This Convention to Combat Desertification is unique in the sense that it is the first international legally binding agreement that is based on the participation of local communities. For example, the Convention states that it's National Action Programmes (NAPs) have to be developed through close co-operation between governments and local communities and their organisations. Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) also have two half-day slots available in the plenary of the Conference of Parties to discuss issues with the Parties and observers. Nevertheless, we recognise the problem that although the UNCCD is legally binding, participation on paper differs from participation in practice and there is no international court to oversee implementation of the Convention in practice.

Civil society: crucial role

It is not enough to invite CSOs to meetings to then just ask their opinion on what is already planned. Their activities should form the starting point, from which policies and action plans should be developed in close cooperation with the relevant stakeholders. Since most drylands lie in marginalised rural areas where few investments by central decision-makers and donors (both financial and political) are made, the communities themselves have been looking for their own solutions to land degradation and drought. Many of these solutions are innovative and inspiring, and deserve more attention as the largest investments in drylands still come from the communities themselves. It is the farmer that invests most in his or her own fields, assuming he or she has the tenure rights to the fields. Communities draw up their own management and delivery systems with relatively low overhead costs, and contribute through labour, materials and skills.

What is needed in drylands is to work on longer-term sustainability, and not just crisis management such as drought. This is especially true with current climate changes becoming more and more of an issue in drylands around the world. Instead of symptom treatment, we need to address the root causes so that local vulnerability can be reduced as ecosystems and social systems become more resilient. This in turn means better capacity to resist sudden changes and forces, such as events related to climate change.

Local communities know more

Local communities often rely on experience and intuition to react quickly to unexpected events thanks to their direct relation with the natural resources surrounding them. The ability of communities to cope is based partly on historical experience, and partly on survival instincts, knowledge and access to information. Local communities are also the first to recognise symptoms of crisis, since these affect their daily lives so strongly.

Local action is by definition limited in scale. But coupled with less context-specific, higher level policies and management plans, local action is a powerful and essential part of long-term natural resource management, and therefore deserves to be supported.

What do Both ENDS and ENDA TM do to encourage local action?

For Both ENDS and ENDA, partnerships with local organisations and communities are at the heart of the work in drylands. Both organisations are partners in many projects including "Drynet" (Strengthening civil society networks to address dryland degradation and poverty issues in the context of strategic development frameworks and the UNCCD). Drynet is a 3-year networking and capacity building initiative taken by 14 CSOs working in 17 countries on issues related to drylands, land degradation and civil society participation in policy development.

While the causal patterns of desertification and land degradation vary in the different countries where Drynet is active, at the same time the partners share the following points of view:

1. Dryland development/resource rehabilitation feature low on political agendas worldwide so CSOs must play a crucial role in getting dryland issues on the political and donor agendas.
2. Policy frameworks should ensure political and budgetary attention for drylands is integrated into general development processes and aid agreements.
3. The majority of dryland CSOs are strong in approaches and strategies to combat land degradation locally, but weak in linking their successes to a wider political context/players and this must change.
4. There is a need for integrating environment issues in development cooperation frameworks.
5. CSOs - and many times the administrations as well - are not aware of, and therefore unable to optimize on the interconnection between development cooperation frameworks.
6. Limited access to information for CSOs on best practices is a problem. Results from science and local successes that could inspire others stay local instead of being disseminated and used to design innovative successful projects.
7. CSOs have limited capacity in project development and management techniques to transfer ideas into feasible and bankable projects.
8. CSOs need to become structural partners in their consultations with policy makers and donors to make desired changes.
9. The understanding of different methodologies to facilitate participation in planning processes differs widely in the affected countries.
10. In most dryland regions in the world CSOs still need to network effectively to have a larger impact together on policy makers and donors.

The Drynet initiative is meant to strengthen the voice of local communities and organisations in the national and local development and planning processes, and to enable them to make necessary changes happen in their countries. Drynet does this by making relevant information better accessible, actively spreading it through newsletters, radio programmes and a website. To understand who the main players (managers, donors and policy-makers) are, we undertook an extensive survey in Drynet countries as well as in European countries, since European foreign policy and investment can have great impact on the well-being of dryland ecosystems and inhabitants. In the Drynet countries, the partners are reaching out to all actors, organising seminars for discussion and training, and for joint strategising about how to ensure that needed changes happen.

The UNCCD 10 Year Strategic Plan: an improvement?

UNCCD adopted its 10 Year Strategic Plan last year to enhance the implementation of the convention. Although it could reflect better the final aim of servicing land users in drylands, it does provide opportunities for CSOs to exert influence and raise attention to their issues of concern. The UNCCD is a very valuable instrument, and with the current reform process could become even better, given that the role and engagement of CSOs are better anchored institutionally. But it still remains an instrument, which, combined with other initiatives, will have a stronger impact than by standing alone. The people, plants and animals of the drylands deserve attention and support and can inspire policy makers and donors to take appropriate action. Initiatives such as Drynet show the way forward.

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Drylands and biodiversity

Although often neglected or unknown, the drylands of the world contain a unique richness of species and breeds, mainly due to ingenious adaptations of the flora and fauna to harsh dryland conditions. Herders in Africa graze no fewer then than 150 varieties of cattle, 60 different strains of sheep, and 50 different goats on drylands. Farmers maintain an enormous variety of seeds necessary for their subsistence. As fluctuating dry and wet periods are characteristic of drylands, adaptive variation is key for ecological sustainability. Any reduction in diversity is often irreversible.

An example: the Knersvlakte in South Africa

The Knersvlakte is an extensive dry plain in the centre of the Succulent Karoo hotspot bounded on the east by the Bokkeveld Mountains. Fields of white quartz pebbles cover the gently rolling hills of the area and are associated with unique dwarf succulent plants. This 48,500 ha. area is extremely rich, with a total of 1,324 plant species, 266 of which are Succulent Karoo endemics. Within the hotspot, this priority area has the greatest percentage of threatened endemics with 128 species being listed on the Red List.

The partners in Drynet

Both ENDS Netherlands, CAREC Kazakhstan/Uzbekistan/Kyrgyzstan/Tajikistan/Turkmenistan, CARI France, CENESTA Iran, EMG South Africa, ENDA TM Senegal/Madagascar/Morocco, Instituto Sertão/ASA network Brazil, LPP Germany, LPPS India, OLCA Chile, PROBIOMA Bolivia, TENMIYA Mauritania, SCOPE Pakistan, TEMA Turkey

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