

Towards achieving Land Degradation Neutrality: turning the concept into practice
Project evaluation: final report

This evaluation provides an overall independent assessment of the relevance, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability of the Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN) project. It makes an assessment of the extent to which the project offers 'proof of concept' for LDN - whether LDN can drive progress towards implementation of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD). It identifies lessons learned in the project and makes recommendations that may be used to improve the design and implementation of similar projects in the future.

This evaluation provides an overall independent assessment of the relevance, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability of the Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN) project. It assesses the project through the stages of design, delivery and outcomes.

The evaluation draws upon three main sources of data:

- documentation review including country reports and COP updates;
- attendance at the project's concluding meeting in Ankara, 7-8 October – an opportunity to get an overall sense of progress, particular strengths and bones of contention;
- interviews with UNCCD secretariat staff, the 'project team' and representatives of 12 out of 14 participating countries, most conducted in person on the fringes of the concluding meeting, others by skype, with some additional feedback provided in writing.

A draft version of this report was discussed with staff from the secretariat and the Global Mechanism at a meeting in Bonn on 13 November 2015. Points raised during this meeting are reflected in this final report.

This evaluation was conducted primarily to foster internal learning and to support the development of further LDN projects.

This evaluation has been commissioned by the UNCCD Evaluation Office and authored by Jeremy Smith in October-November 2015. The views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the UNCCD secretariat or the Global Mechanism.

Purpose and scope

This evaluation is *“intended to provide an overall independent assessment of the relevance, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability of the [Land Degradation Neutrality, LDN] project. As feasible, it will also look for an indication of progress toward the long-term objective of the project. The evaluation will identify and document lessons learned in the project and make recommendations that may be used to improve the design and implementation of similar projects in the future”*.¹

The evaluation makes an assessment of the project in and of itself and it gauges the extent to which the project offers 'proof of concept', that is, whether LDN can drive progress towards implementation of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD). In a context in which a new project is in preparation and more countries will embark upon the path of setting LDN targets, the evaluation lays out steps for refining project delivery to build upon strong points and mitigate weak points of the current project.

The evaluation assesses the project through the stages of design, delivery and outcomes. It reviews how far the project has enabled baseline research, identification of critical processes, target-setting and selection of pilot sites. It tests for direct outcomes relating to national planning and implementation, including whether participation in the project has been a motor for National Action Programme (NAP) alignment or improvement. Finally, the evaluation reflects upon the indirect or political outcomes of the project in terms of both the status that LDN has within national political discourse and the extent to which it mobilizes attention in international debate.

Project rationale and context

The main goal or impact of the project is *“to contribute to reaching an agreement among Parties by 2017 (COP 13) by which every country adopts its own national voluntary target to achieve land degradation neutrality, and reports to the COP every two years on implementation of the national programme and the progress made towards achieving such target”*.² The project marks a new stage in the evolution of efforts to implement the UNCCD. If implementation has been rendered difficult by a lack of political will and a lack of tangibility of goals, with the latter obstacle reinforcing the former, the Ten-year Strategy adopted in 2008 laid out a path towards a tighter common effort to mitigate desertification, land degradation and drought (DLDD). But while the Strategy gave some impetus to Convention implementation, *“no targets were set related with the achievement of results and expected impacts on the ground”* and so *“Parties are not yet in the position to assess whether or not the implementation of the Convention – including through the Strategy – has produced any impact on reducing land degradation and mitigating its effects on ecosystems, people and local economies”*.³ By offering the promise of a clear, simple target, LDN represents the next stage in narrowing down the Convention and increasing conceptual tangibility.

How far LDN is able to bring greater tangibility to the Convention is a matter of definitional clarity, demonstrable utility in practice and broad international political support. While depending on the first aspect – itself subject of an Inter-governmental Working Group established by COP11 – this project focuses on the second. From a low starting point in terms of understanding of LDN and the form that an LDN target could take, it aspires to *“demonstrate in practice that implementing this approach is not only achievable in*

1 *Evaluation of the project 'Towards achieving Land Degradation Neutrality: turning the concept into practice', Terms of reference for the evaluator, p2.*

2 *Towards achieving Land Degradation Neutrality: turning the concept into practice; Project Document, August 2014, p10.*

3 *Towards achieving Land Degradation Neutrality: turning the concept into practice; Project Document, August 2014, p5.*

the short and medium term, but will produce considerable societal and economic benefits in the short, medium and long term.”⁴

In turn, the project works to the assumption that it can help to create political momentum. The formulation of LDN targets by participating countries ahead of formal agreement of LDN's status within the Convention has been a deliberate strategy to 'push the concept along'. As such, the project's objective (outcome) – that *“a representative sample of affected country Parties translate the land degradation neutrality goal into national voluntary targets, making use of the implementation framework and the monitoring and assessment mechanisms established within the UNCCD process”⁵* – comes with a clear political intent of making a case that LDN can solve fundamental problems in Convention implementation. With its time-frame set by the need to report to the October 2015 COP which considered the status of LDN, the project could not escape – and cannot be assessed in isolation from – its political context.

The adoption of a Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) with a focus on land management⁶ widens the opening that exists for LDN and encourages efforts to improve monitoring and evaluation (M&E). At the same time, LDN's potential to tie states to tangible targets and force the UNCCD to be treated with a greater degree of seriousness makes it controversial. The concept is also contested for extending the range of the Convention beyond arid and semi-arid lands to any subject to degradation, curtailing the division between affected and developed country parties.

In this context in which the concept is contested and given too the other factors undermining Convention implementation – lack of effective cooperation between different Ministries, lack of engagement of environmental and social NGOs etc.⁷ – the potential existed for the project to achieve its technical objective without engendering sufficient political traction behind the concept. Conversely, there was a risk that the real or perceived primacy of the political goal of making the case for LDN would weaken the project's technical content. The project has instead sought a virtuous circle through which the *“science gives substance to the policy vision”⁸* and the example of participating countries increases national and international commitment to implement the Convention.

Project design and delivery

Design

The project centres on the provision of technical assistance to 14 countries in conducting baseline research, setting targets and commencing restorative actions in selected pilot sites.⁹ It has involved four elements:

1. Establishing an implementation structure at the international and national levels, including the appointment of a global Project Manager, the selection of consultants to lead the development and coordination of work plans in each country and the constitution of technical working groups drawn from different Ministries and other stakeholder groups. The project relied on the involvement of UNCCD National Focal Points (NFPs), but was also explicit about the need to look beyond them: *“governments should feel*

4 Land Degradation Neutrality Resilience At Local, National And Regional Levels, p17.

5 *Towards achieving Land Degradation Neutrality: turning the concept into practice*; Project Document, August 2014, p10.

6 SDG 15: *“Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss”*; and sub-objective 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”*; <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/?menu=1300>

7 *LDN Project Progress Report*, p4.

8 Where not otherwise referenced, quotes are taken from interviews. Respondents are not named, but distinctions are drawn between secretariat / project staff and country representatives where this does not compromise anonymity.

9 After some other expressions of interest – from Myanmar, Nicaragua et al. – fell through, the participating countries became settled as: Algeria, Armenia, Belarus, Bhutan, Chad, Chile, Costa Rica, Ethiopia, Grenada, Indonesia, Italy, Namibia, Senegal, Turkey.

free to involve in the project ministries that are not usually involved in land degradation issues, such as, for example, ministries of economy and finance, research and education, urban development, public works and infrastructure".¹⁰ Involvement in the project was also intended to go beyond government, with an aim of "establishing a structured dialogue between government, science, business and civil society communities on land degradation challenges, priorities and opportunities for immediate action".¹¹

2. Reviewing NAPs and mapping how to address any gaps in terms of analysis of LDN drivers, implementation strategies, support and investment frameworks: "[t]he initial assumption is that the revised/aligned NAP will lead to land degradation neutrality at national level; Hence, the NAP will be reviewed in consultation with the national team, with the view to identifying and eventually addressing any possible gap".¹²

3. Guiding states through the stages of data analysis, target-setting and piloting of restorative activities. In this, the project chose to work with existing, agreed progress indicators for land use cover, land productivity and soil organic carbon (SOC) stock and form a composite LDN indicator out of them. Project staff wanted to keep things simple. They were "not looking for the best set of indicators, but the minimum set that enables us to communicate in order to convince others". Using indicators that states had agreed and would anyway have to report against helped to position the project as a solution to an existing problem and not as an additional burden upon NFPs. In this, the secretariat was meeting a COP11 obligation to have tested measurement against the progress indicators by the time of COP12.

With the support of the European Union Joint Research Centre (JRC), the project provided data and methodological advice to guide participating countries in measuring against the three indicators, identifying critical causal factors and choosing areas to be made the priority of remedial actions. It did so on the basis that states were free to look beyond project datasets or employ other indicators as long as they organized their analysis to a common format.

The most conceptually straightforward of the three, the land use cover indicator is assessed through use of data from the European Space Agency (ESA) since this was publicly available at low cost. The area of land falling within each of six categories was measured at fixed points (2000, 2010) and overlain with five measures of land productivity dynamics (declining, early stages of decline, stable but stressed, stable not stressed, increasing productivity) to generate the trend in productivity of each land use type. That baseline data are themselves a trend is "a unique advantage of the project's methodology", since it signals the direction that states would take without corrective interventions.

Land productivity data are "calculated from long-term time series of remotely-sensed data on net primary productivity". A challenge to interpretation is that changes in productivity do not directly correlate with degradation or recovery.¹³

Measuring against the indicator for SOC content is problematic because there is no global dataset. Using states' own data or the Harmonized World Soil Database as a proxy, it should be possible to form a baseline, but as a static picture of SOC levels, not as a trend. The project deployed this indicator with full awareness of the limits to the data available. It retained the indicator because of "its relevance to the identification of the quality of soil and its importance to climate change", that is, with an eye to the synergies that can be

10 *Towards achieving Land Degradation Neutrality: turning the concept into practice*; Project Document, August 2014, p20-21.

11 *Land Degradation Neutrality Resilience At Local, National And Regional Levels*, p18.

12 *Inception meeting, Land Degradation Neutrality project, draft report*, p3.

13 "While the apparent loss of NPP is often associated with land degradation, it does not necessarily indicate land degradation (e.g., less intensive agriculture may decrease yields in the short-term, but improve environmental quality in the long-term), neither does an increase in NPP always indicate land improvement (e.g., overuse of fertilizers, shrub encroachment in natural grasslands)"; *Proposal for an indicator for target 15.3 Provision of metadata including annex with country example (updated 07 September 2015)*, p1.

cultivated with efforts to monitor implementation of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).

This summary analysis shows that measuring against the three indicators is not without problems even before the question of their use as a composite for LDN. The indicators *“have not been set having possible LDN targets in mind [and] their relevance to LDN goals and targets is still to be proven... How these indicators, their baseline and possible trend assessment based on existing datasets at national and local (affected areas) levels can be integrated in an overall assessment of achievements of land degradation neutrality targets is still unclear”*.¹⁴ However, the project worked to a reasonable assumption that using these indicators was the best option open to it and one at least good enough to give an indication of hotspots of degradation or restoration.

Participating states should elaborate the interpretation of data for the three indicators with an analysis of the aggravating factors behind the most important negative trends, forming targets accordingly. They should proceed to define *“Implementing strategies at the community/landscape level on a pilot basis in order to evaluate policies and practices that aim to achieve land degradation neutrality by 2030”*.¹⁵

4. Synthesising results from across the pilot countries and using overall findings as the basis for making the case for broader adoption of LDN targets. The project envisaged standardized reporting by participating countries to enable the extraction of lessons as an input to international outreach. Video case studies were intended to serve the cause of promoting both the project methodology and the concept itself. It was hoped that the systematization of national target-setting and reporting would inform *“the definition of possible options for a standard LDN index that could be potentially applied as a common metric for measuring progress towards achieving land degradation neutrality targets”*, ultimately leading to an *“International network of sites/projects under voluntary and harmonized LDN monitoring and evaluation”*.¹⁶

Delivery

Data limitations

Participants' concerns regarding data availability and validation were signalled as early as the second project meeting in March 2015.¹⁷ There is said to have been a problem of data supply and a failure to have been tougher on ensuring more timely supply of data. Delays in the generation of data meant that they reached participants only during what was for some a holiday period, contributing to delays in absorbing and responding to them.

It also seems to have been the case that guidance did not always land well where attendees at meetings which discussed issues relating to data were not those most involved in processing and analysing data.¹⁸ Particular problems related to the resolution of the land cover data generated by the project, especially in terms of the measurement of sharp transitions in land use in small island states and mountainous countries. It is acknowledged within the project team that *“using ESA for land cover was a good choice for the given time-frame, but probably not the best choice”*.¹⁹

14 *Towards achieving Land Degradation Neutrality: turning the concept into practice*; Project Document, p9.

15 *Land Degradation Neutrality Resilience At Local, National And Regional Levels*, p18.

16 *Towards achieving Land Degradation Neutrality: turning the concept into practice*; Project Document, p16, 17.

17 *Second meeting, Land Degradation Neutrality project, draft report*, p2.

18 The broader issue beyond the project's immediate control is that *“In most countries, the scientific community has produced significant information on the different forms of land degradation but the articulation between government and science is insufficient for concrete action”*; LDN Project, Progress Report, p4.

19 To some extent, the pressure of time distorted the methodology employed by the project. There is no strong sense that this has sent participating countries off in the wrong direction, however. The analysis they have undertaken is not unhelpful, but may in some cases be insufficient.

Countries experienced discrepancies in the data provided centrally when compared with that they held themselves. In Costa Rica, for example, global data showed an increase in forest cover of 0.16% while national data suggested a larger increase of 4.7%. Bhutan and Belarus, among others, also report variations in the data provided by the JRC and their own sources.

For both participating countries and the JRC, the experience of comparing datasets has been fruitful.²⁰ Some countries in this project relied on their national consultants to “deal with the global data set and any discrepancies... [The] project time-frame meant we had to go with the global data”.²¹ But there is recognition that more time ought to be allowed for a stage of iterative exchange between those holding national and global datasets to work through apparent inconsistencies. Even those countries relying on their own data needed more time to reconcile different data. In Italy, there is an outstanding need “to quantify the uncertainty” in the apparent discrepancies between data from the Corine land cover dataset and its national forest inventory before confirming targets.

Several participating states, including Armenia, argue for clearer technical guidance to have been provided to explain the data and to help them absorb and respond to it. Belarus reports having had to find technical experts to 'translate' the JRC data into something it could use. Again the suggestion is that more support could have been provided to equip participants in analysing the data or that the JRC could have made more preparatory analysis of the data itself and presented states with a fully-rounded package that more easily lent itself to the drawing of conclusions. Endorsing the same point, where there was close contact between the JRC and Ethiopia and Namibia, there was value in the identification and solving of problems of data assessment and interpretation specific to each country. Ethiopia in particular seems to be a good example of the local team running with data and advice provided from the project and deepening the analysis made of the trend in productivity of different land use types.

This suggests a conclusion that “in the next phase, the specifics of each country should be looked at carefully and more time given for this. The adjustment of indicators to suit specific realities is an important problem to be addressed”. This may also be value in formalizing the relationship between the secretariat / Global Mechanism and the JRC to specify the latter's role in support of participating countries.

Several countries essentially worked only with land cover data, which was correspondingly the focus for attention at the concluding meeting and in interviews. Some, such as Costa Rica and Grenada, did not feel comfortable developing an analysis relating to land productivity. Within the project team, it is acknowledged that “we could [have been] more clear and transparent in explaining the land productivity indicator”. More positively, in Italy, some work was already being done on this indicator, to which the project gave additional impetus.

The project has had to live with the limitations of the SOC data. The challenges of this indicator are highlighted by several project participants. In Algeria, for example, information relating to SOC stock is “virtually non-existent at national level except for a few studies of some areas [and so] the working group was unable to validate the data sent”. It is noted in the presentation given to the COP side event that this indicator is “the one that require[s] maximum priority attention for further development in connection with climate change policies”.²²

An argument is made that in small island states susceptible to natural disasters, soil clay content should be added to SOC content as an indicator of soil health; this would seem to be an area where states are

20 A useful suggestion aired at the meeting to review the draft report is for the JRC to generate a short note with its own impressions of the process of data sourcing and analysis used in this project.

21 Namibia and Bhutan for two used the data provided in part because of the shortage of time, with the latter noting that “we did see differences from our own data, but had no time to compare them with the global data”.

22 Key Messages On Indicators, Data Sourcing And Evaluation For LDN Target Setting: Lessons learnt from the LDN project: Turning the Concept into Practice by the 14 pioneer countries, COP12 Side Event on LDN, 13 October 2015, p13.

themselves free to enrich the data that they draw upon in building a picture of degradation and restoration. It may be that some central resources can be provided to support or standardize the approach taken.

Overall though, in spite of the concerns that many have, to varying degrees, with the data, it is unlikely that representatives of participating states would substantially disagree with the view of Namibia's SLM Steering Committee Chair that *“Although establishing the baseline data for target setting was and remains challenging, this process has allowed for clear target setting based on current data. The process has at the same time highlighted the urgent need for establishing national land monitoring capacities”*.²³

The pressure of time

Many of the problems of data were compounded by the limited time available to consider alternative solutions. The project appears to have been slow to get into gear. The early stages of design and approval consumed a disproportionate share of the project's time-frame. Having the Project Manager in post in May 2014 and the project document signed off in August, but not then holding the inception meeting until January 2015 compressed the time available for data analysis and target-setting given the hard deadline of the October 2015 COP. This is said to have had the effect of allowing secretariat staff to become more comfortable with the LDN concept and with the operational aspects of the project.

There was then little slack in the project time-frame to cope with the vagaries of national bureaucratic procedures which delayed the stages of signing off Memoranda of Understanding (MoU)²⁴ and constituting working groups. This meant that several participating states, such as Bhutan, were slow to get to the meat of the project. A major reorganization of Ministries in Indonesia had a significant impact on progress as the formation of implementation structures awaited the conclusion of the restructuring. Panama signed an MoU, but the absence of the NFP and the departure of a consultant led it to fall behind schedule and withdraw from the project.

The compression of core activities left some participants critical of the time allowed for discussing the technical aspects of their analysis, arguing for the need for *“more time or opportunity to go into the methodology, results and verification... More work was needed to ensure that the outcomes of this methodology can be interpreted properly”*. There is also some frustration at purported delays in clarifying the format which countries should use in developing their reports: *“we were working to a moving target as the template was changing all the time... We were waiting for the project management to decide what they needed from the project so we could adapt our data to the project format”*. This issue may have been most acute in countries using their own data.

Concern at these delivery challenges comes together in some criticism of the 'heavy-touch' approach taken to project coordination. Again though the issue is whether any other way was possible. Critically, while the representatives of some participating states are more frustrated than others with how the approach to data analysis was communicated, there was sufficient engagement in the project to avoid a major reaction. The realisation that *“the secretariat needed conclusions that could support the impression that the project is successful and that the approach should continue”* has not coalesced into cynicism towards the project. Participants have gone along with imperfections in the data and the sense of some corners being cut. Neither do the shortcomings of some outputs²⁵ nor the loss of others (the planned video output) appear significant.²⁶

23 Namibia – Land Degradation Neutrality National Report, p15.

24 Using their own data and not drawing on central resources, Chile, Turkey and Italy did not sign MoU. Given the sums available, it seems a disproportionately intense form of bureaucratic check for the other project participants to have been obliged to.

25 That *“the web platform took some time to be established and did not fulfil the potential of an interactive forum”* is not especially surprising. The evaluator has assessed many projects and networks in which some form of web platform has been used to facilitate exchange among participants / network members. These have often functioned well as tools for providing information, but almost never as fora for interactive exchange.

26 The production of information material, including the video and web portal, were budgeted at €50K, a little less than 10% of the

A necessarily 'monomodal' approach to project coordination?

In the coordination of the project, bilateral contact between participating countries and the Project Manager was the predominant organizing relationship. The two project meetings in January and March are appreciated, but beyond these moments, there was little chance to foster interaction between countries, with participants missing a stronger element of peer exchange. There may not have been much that could have been done differently, given the pressure of time, but the cultivation of transversal relationships would seem to be a priority as these countries move to the next step of implementation so that each can benefit from the lessons of others' experience in a timely manner.

The narrow base to project participation

The high premium accorded to the relationship between the Project Manager and national consultants reflected their mutual responsibility for timely delivery of the project to a high standard, but suggests a risk of a trade-off in terms of ownership of other key national stakeholders. This risk appears minimal in the short-term: the general impression from across participating countries is that NFPs have accepted the project's way of working, itself a product of countries having self-selected to join the project. But it may be that the second phase of the project can explore other models for providing support that retain the value of close, hands-on support while finding ways to institutionalize capacity to work on LDN.

While some participants – for example, Ethiopia and Grenada – included consultations with a wide range of stakeholders, others lacked time or money or considered engagement of civil society organizations (CSOs), beneficiaries and the private sector to be more appropriate to a later stage in implementation. There is some logic to this, given the project's emphasis on top-level data analysis and target-setting, but CSO and beneficiary consultation in particular would seem to be central to effective delivery of pilot interventions and, in some settings at least, is likely to be important to fostering political support for LDN. From the international perspective, lack of engagement of the private sector is considered a gap because of the increasing need to prepare mining, agro-food and other companies for the likelihood of new fiscal pressures on land management.

Outcomes

Refining the methodology

The strategy of involving countries with varied geography, size and climate has borne fruit in the exposure of problems with the use of data with small island states and mountainous countries and the extension of the scope of Convention activities to those which would not previously have been considered, as with plans to address degradation due to radioactive contamination in Belarus.

That countries had problems with data and that the project would not be able to solve them all was not unexpected. But it has encouraged a search for solutions. For the project team, there is an argument that the six land use cover categories are too broad and that more categories should be used in the next phase. Grenada judges that sourcing higher resolution data is impractical for the national level on grounds on cost and so is exploring options to do so at a regional level. For Italy, the process of data analysis was “*lengthy and difficult*”, but ultimately “*interesting and useful*”. It generated the “*surprising*” result of greater decline in humid regions than drier regions, a result which provides an important corrective to a simple narrative that the consequences of climate change play out most in arid / semi-arid lands.

Italy led the way in testing a method of deriving SOC data from land use cover data, “*demonstrating that it is possible to use an IPCC approach*” to measuring SOC content. This method is reported to be easily

project's total cost. On the one hand then, it is an issue of planning not to have delivered one of the project's outputs. At the same time, the impact of not having done so appears minimal given the course of negotiations at the COP.

transferable to other countries with their own existing data. Encouraging other states to test this approach would seem to be a priority of the second phase.²⁷

Setting targets

In a context in which NFPs were nervous about making concrete commitments and needed reminding that targets set in LDN project reports would not be binding, it is significant that participants were able to define targets. As such, the project's objective has been met, an achievement all the more laudable in terms of a baseline of low awareness of LDN. For one member of the project team, "*countries were brave to set targets and it sends a strong message that they did*".²⁸

Different countries employed different approaches to setting targets. Senegal took a top-down approach of defining a target for improving 5% of the land under degradation each year for 15 years on an assumption of stable or increasing capacity.²⁹ Turkey, by contrast, did not set a national target because it felt that project data lacked the necessary resolution for it to be able to do so. It will work from the bottom up through a gradual process of implementing remedial measures in pilot areas and building up a broader picture of land degradation by applying mid-resolution data to other areas, focusing on grasslands and croplands.

Although country reports provide some detail on the legal and institutional context for efforts to achieve LDN, only countries themselves can judge what is feasible for current and expected levels of capacity, commitment and resourcing. In this, different states are bound to operate to different levels of ambition. Bhutan, for example, was confused as to what level to pitch its LDN plan, what resources might be available and whether decision-makers could be convinced to make it a priority. It changed its level of ambition during the process of target-setting, initially going for a lower target in expectation of limited resources, but, on concluding that such a target was limiting its options, revising it upwards. It is an open question at this point whether it will prove possible for targets to attract the resources needed. There is at least a risk that countries have produced reports showing what they should do, not what they can do. As it stands, "*an issue with the reports is that they do not square the numbers. [What they propose] cannot all be paid out of state funds*". There may need to be a further phase of deepening the analysis underpinning plans and reviewing targets to ensure feasibility for given levels of resourcing. This could include setting several targets with different levels of ambition according to different possible levels of capacity and funding.

Selecting pilot sites

Hotspots for remedial measures tended to be selected according to a specific indicator – that is, to pilot steps to improve productivity or recover a particular land use. Already in Ethiopia, work on LDN in the chosen pilot areas is more comprehensive than that previously delivered through other initiatives.

In Senegal, the chosen sites include one conventional hotspot, that is, an area that is a focus of negative trends, but also one 'bright-spot' where the actions of the *Gestion des Ressources Naturelles* (GRN, Department of Natural Resources) seem to have improved the quality and productivity of the land.³⁰ The

27 The second phase should give a clear signal on the depth that SOC content is to be measured. The project argues for 30cm, but more than one participating state argued strongly that a depth of 15-20cm is more appropriate.

28 There remains a suggestion that national reports are not public for this same reason of appearing to make a commitment to LDN by a certain date, a commitment understood within the project to be non-binding but which could acquire a firmer status if more widely available. This reduces the utility of the reports as examples to others considering or which have already decided upon engaging in the next phase of the LDN project.

29 Senegal used data from the FAO Land Degradation Assessment for Dryland Areas project which it considers to be 'pessimistic' in its reading of levels of degradation. As such, 5% improvement per annum for 15 years is assumed to cover the whole area actually under degradation.

30 *Senegal – Land Degradation Neutrality National Report*, p18. There is a third site which is both hotspot and bright-spot and the possibility that new hotspots in the North-eastern and South-eastern part of the country will be added in the second phase of the project.

use of bright-spots as examples for further study in learning how to address land degradation as it plays out elsewhere in the country is an innovation which others can learn from if and when it works out as intended.

National reports

Country reports follow a clear common structure: statement of aims and objectives; description of degradation drivers; mapping of land cover trends, land productivity and SOC stock; elaboration of corrective measures and targets; NAP SWOT analysis; description of hotspot sites; list of national coordination body members; sometimes an analysis of relevant laws and regulations; and a budget. This reflects guidance that reports must follow a standard format, be brief and contain only the most essential information in line with an aim to have a set of homogeneous documents that are easy to read and serve to inspire other countries to join the 14 pioneers.³¹

The reports centre on two tables, one which plots key national data using the LDN indicators' framework and a second which summarizes negative trends, corrective measures and targets. There is an argument that this second table is a summary too far in including only the top-level negative trends and corrective measures. Itemizing a negative trend of deforestation and a corrective measure of afforestation sheds little light on the causal factors behind the trend (such as a drive for palm oil production in the example of Indonesia) and the steps that represent preconditions to fulfilling the corrective measure (different ways of controlling or de-incentivising palm oil production). This information may be described in the text of the report and / or in the NAP, but the issue is one of sharpening how the key findings are presented and how key elements to the reports (such as these tables) are designed.

The suggestion is also made, and not disputed, that country reports should include more details of the costs of inaction so as to mitigate any reaction against the scale and cost of remedial actions proposed. An argument was made at the meeting which discussed the draft report that it may stretch resources too much to require countries to conduct a heavy analysis of the costs of not aspiring to LDN. It would be hoped however that a balance can be struck by which a basic indicative figure for the costs of inaction could be generated at relative low input to help in mobilizing domestic political attention.

The project as a motor for newly aligned or improved NAPs

Review and refinement of NAPs has been an integral part of the project and one which has brought value to most participating states.

For Costa Rica and Ethiopia, involvement in the project catalysed the NAP alignment process. In the case of the former, alignment had commenced in late 2013, but lost momentum until the LDN project consultant elaborated an integrated approach to completing alignment alongside developing the LDN country report. Ethiopia used the consultation process allowed by the project to solicit input to revise its NAP. The new NAP, now aligned to the Ten-Year strategy, makes the country's first LDN action plan its lead priority; as with Costa Rica, the project has in Ethiopia solved two problems at the same time, integrating LDN while giving impetus to alignment.

In other cases, a review of the NAP led to an updated version which has LDN at its centre. Senegal describes the process of incorporating LDN targets and activities into its already aligned NAP as “*necessary double work*”. Ideally, it would have had LDN as a priority when it aligned its NAP; that the NAP is the frame for action against DLDD means that LDN has to fit within it, but it is an easy fit since it addresses some of the problems highlighted in the NAP.

31 Loosely translated from introductory text to the Chad national report: “*Le document propose une structure standard du rapport final de pays en vue de sa présentation à la COP12. Ce rapport doit être bref et doit contenir les informations essentielles. Tout compte fait le rapport pays doit constituer une série homogènes de documents susceptibles d’être lus par les délégués de service et servant de base capables d’inspirer de nouveaux pays d’associer leurs efforts globaux aux 14 pays initiateurs*”.

In Bhutan and Namibia, the LDN project report functions as an implementation strategy for part of the NAP. For the former, the LDN project has served as the means to kick-start implementation of a NAP newly aligned in 2014; for this country, *“The main objective of the LDN [project] is to operationalize the National Action Programme (NAP) to combat land degradation”*.³² The effect has been that while *“the NAP was suggestions, the LDN project brings targets”* essential to mobilizing others to implement. That Bhutan is now in a better place in regards to NAP implementation means that *“the key objective of joining the project from Bhutan's perspective has been met”*. In Namibia too, the project country report is an elaboration of a NAP outcome, adding the next level of detail in terms of targets, activities and an M&E plan.

Several participating countries (Chad, Ethiopia, Senegal) are also party to the *TerrAfrica* initiative. In Ethiopia, the LDN project has helped frame the myriad existing strategic documents and brought energy to efforts to tackle DLDD. In Senegal, setting and measuring against indicators in the LDN project is key to converting general strategies (the NAP and the *TerrAfrica* Country Investment Framework) into practical, operational, measurable plans.³³

In the case of some countries with recently aligned NAPs which implicitly or explicitly include LDN, the effect of the project has been more limited. Grenada found the stage of analysing the strengths and weaknesses of its NAP to be useful, even if it concluded that LDN would fit within its plans relatively seamlessly.³⁴ Less positively, in Armenia, the process of injecting LDN into a newly aligned NAP may prove more challenging, because opening up a process only recently concluded and working to targets that look beyond the country's fixed five-year planning cycles may prove institutionally challenging.

Where countries have loose or aspirational NAPs, laying out a tangible, quantifiable means of addressing (some of) the negative forces driving DLDD is a key advance. It may not be a major benefit in the case of a set of countries whose NAPs are likely to have been fairly solid, but it can be expected that the extent of improvement to NAPs which LDN brings will be greater in a new tranche of project participants.

Making the case for LDN

Domestic political traction

There is a mixed picture of how far the project has engendered greater political support for LDN within project states. In Armenia, the concept is still new and relatively unknown. It is suggested that a seminar or conference is needed to raise attention within government circles. Finding the data from the project *“unconvincing”* and in the consequent absence of a defensible baseline, Grenada judges that it will struggle to promote LDN domestically and within the Caribbean region.

At the other end of the spectrum, in Ethiopia, there is a groundswell of opinion in support of LDN which is a priority of a government which has recently committed to reforest 22M hectares by 2020. In Belarus, LDN is a government priority, the NAP is integrated in the National Strategy of Sustainable Social and Economic Development and it must be referenced by public agencies in design of national, sectoral and regional programs. Here the project has contributed to a process by which LDN has enabled the NAP's mainstreaming within national development agenda. In Turkey, the Ministry of Forestry is reported to be committed to scaling up analysis and rolling-out corrective measures.

32 *Bhutan – Land Degradation Neutrality National Report*, p2.

33 There is no sense among these or other project countries that LDN plans *compete* with NAPs. The pre-eminent status of NAPs should remain, with LDN plans as subsidiary components to NAPs. In turn, reporting progress against LDN targets should be a subsidiary aspect to reporting implementation of a country's NAP.

34 For Grenada, *“The project provided a great opportunity to assess the state of implementation of the Convention, which revealed a significant number of weaknesses and threats. It also revealed the deficiencies in the national strategies that are in place to prevent land degradation. The integration of the findings of the LDN Pilot into the NAP will strengthen the relevant components, thereby contributing to its effectiveness as a land degradation reduction and sustainable land management tool”*; Grenada – Land Degradation Neutrality National Report, p15.

Other project countries fall between these points. In Bhutan, the project helped to broaden engagement in LDN by enabling consultation. The concept is felt to have helped in promoting sustainable land management against – or as part of – other developmental interventions. But, as a proxy indicator of limited political support, it remains the case that *“There is a weak coordination among the stakeholders in addressing LD problems and issues”* with the UNCCD NFP having only limited influence on actors outside its parent Ministry which *“reduces its efficiency to oversee and coordinate SLM across different sectors”*.³⁵

In Namibia, poor integration with land use planning was noted in the new (November 2014) NAP as a weakness. Through the project, however, opportunities have been forged to connect a planned land use mapping exercise of the Ministry of Land to the LDN objectives of the Ministry of Environment and Tourism. From a low base, in Senegal too the project has helped to raise levels of knowledge of, and support for, LDN and to ingrain closer cross-departmental cooperation.

Strengthening the message

With LDN targets making the Convention more tangible and easier to communicate, this project *“gave space to set the target and move the Convention forward”*. The tight common approach to which the project has operated facilitates communicating LDN because all outputs use the same language and 'point in the same direction'. And participants report that it is becoming easier to engage their own governments because of the increasing cachet that LDN is acquiring as it moves towards the status of a global target.

For some countries at least, that LDN is more than a drylands issue makes it easier to sell the Convention to government stakeholders. Taking the Convention beyond drylands can have a more amorphous value of changing the dynamic between rich and poor states and allowing engagement of donors on a more equal footing, no longer as an appeal for help, but as a call for joint action against a common problem.

LDN champions

The confusions that exist within the project – about data resolution, the measurement of SOC content etc. – are less visible externally because participants were united in their advocacy endorsing the project at the COP. Even when they have not found the project as fruitful as they had hoped, participating countries have carried their role as LDN champions into the COP at a side-event and in formal fora.³⁶ Project team members are pleasantly surprised at the extent of support for the concept and for the methodology and at the strong common front which participating states presented to the COP. It is reported that the delegate from Senegal made the project the centrepiece of his presentation to the high-level session, for example.

Contribution to the COP decision on LDN

The COP adopted a Decision on LDN which *“[a]cknowledg[ed] that SDG target 15.3 addresses inter-alia the objective of the Convention and provides a basis for discussion on future actions and programmes to enhance the implementation of the UNCCD, respecting the scope of the Convention [and] that striving to achieve land degradation neutrality would significantly contribute to the three dimensions of sustainable development via the rehabilitation, restoration, conservation and sustainable management of land resources; and that this could potentially involve the development of national targets”*.³⁷ The adoption of this Decision reflected the strength of the consensus in favour of LDN. At the High-level Segment of the COP, the representative of the G-77 / China group *“underscored the need to implement the LDN target as a means to achieve other SDGs, including on food security and climate change”* while that of the African States *“emphasized the adoption of the LDN target as an opportunity for renewed commitment and partnerships under the UNCCD [and] appealed to COP 12 to align the 10-year Strategy with the LDN*

35 Bhutan – Land Degradation Neutrality National Report, p12-13.

36 See a summary of the discussion of the pilot project at the COP: www.iisd.ca/download/pdf/enb04260e.pdf, p1.

37 Text of the Decision provided by UNCCD staff member; reference to be added.

target”.³⁸ The EU were also supportive. Reiterating repeated concerns raised by Brazil and other states in the region during earlier sessions,³⁹ the representative of the GRULAC states argued that “*although it is included in the SDGs, any LDN target should be voluntary*”. Brazil persistently resisted the extension of the scope of the UNCCD to non-drylands.⁴⁰ Even at the point of adopting the decision on LDN, the representative of Brazil noted that “*negotiations on this decision were among the most difficult issues on the [Committee of the Whole]’s agenda [and] emphasized that while LDN can serve as a new tool, parties should not forget established DLDD approaches as they embark on a new path forward*”.⁴¹

The project did not create political support for LDN, which was already signalled in the adoption of SDG 15 and the prior Rio +20 summit outcome. But it helped the snowball to grow, bolstering the political case by giving substance to the concept and moving LDN beyond something which states could give purely rhetorical support to. In laying out real, albeit imperfect evidence, the project demonstrated the possibility of setting a target and the feasibility of an approach to achieving it. By succeeding as a test case of the ability of a cohort of Country Parties to measure against three progress indicators, the project has helped to change the conversation – to make it about progress more than performance indicators and to allow for a new level of detail and a greater degree of certainty about what needs to be done to what effect.

If its primary political value is as a test case of the practicality of assessing land degradation and designing remedial steps, an additional, but less clear-cut contribution may have stemmed from the simple act of getting Indonesia, a major greenhouse gas contributor through deforestation, to join the project. The relative importance of this is open to question without a counter-factual reflection. If Indonesia had not joined the project and held a neutral or hostile position towards LDN, it may have critically strengthened the case of Brazil and other LDN sceptics. But the weight of its influence either way is hard to judge outside a more forensic analysis of the dynamic around the COP Decision.

The project as catalyst for synergy with the other Rio Conventions

There is institutional recognition that LDN can provide a bridge to the UNFCCC and the Convention on Biodiversity (CBD) and help to achieve the long-frustrated goal of greater synergy between the three Rio Conventions. The UNFCCC, for example, “*has recognized that sustainable natural resource management is essential for both adaptation and mitigation*”.⁴² The challenge presented by the sheer number of sub-objectives under the SDGs also pushes the Rio Conventions towards closer cooperation in monitoring and reporting. In several states, funding imperatives are a further motor for connecting up different strategies and processes.

The project's SOC indicator leans it towards UNFCCC methodologies while contact has already been made between a CBD Expert Group and those responsible for LDN project M&E. As an additional, unforeseen outcome, the project has been used as an input to discussion of the SDGs' indicator framework.

At the country level, the project has facilitated closer cooperation between the UNCCD and UNFCCC. Linking LDN to SOC levels enabled Ethiopia to make LDN a key plank of climate change action plans while in Belarus,

38 UNCCD COP 12 Highlights: Tuesday, 20 October 2015, *Earth Negotiations Bulletin*, www.iisd.ca/download/pdf/enb04264e.pdf

39 “Brazil, Argentina and Colombia stressed that the UNCCD’s focus is on the most vulnerable areas and limited resources should not be diverted from these areas”; UNCCD COP 12 Highlights: Tuesday, 13 October 2015, *Earth Negotiations Bulletin*, www.iisd.ca/download/pdf/enb04259e.pdf, p1. “Brazil called for LDN goals that are country-driven, aspirational and voluntary, with sufficient means of implementation”; (ibid., p2). “Noting there is ‘no global target for the Convention’, Brazil called for a consensus-based definition of LDN, and opposed the ‘earmarking’ of resources for LDN reviews, considering their voluntary nature”; UNCCD COP 12 Highlights: Wednesday, 14 October 2015, *Earth Negotiations Bulletin*, www.iisd.ca/download/pdf/enb04260e.pdf, p1.

40 See, for example, UNCCD COP 12 Highlights: Friday 16 October 2015, *Earth Negotiations Bulletin*, www.iisd.ca/download/pdf/enb04262e.pdf, p1.

41 UNCCD COP 12 Highlights: Thursday 23 October 2015, *Earth Negotiations Bulletin*, www.iisd.ca/download/pdf/enb04266e.pdf, p1.

42 *Land Degradation Neutrality Resilience At Local, National And Regional Levels*, p20.

an indicator for peatlands restoration meets LDN and climate change targets. In Grenada, the project has reinforced an existing intention to move to having a single National Coordinating Body for all three Conventions.

In Italy, the composition of the project working group was critical to engendering cooperation across the Conventions. From this country, however, there is a note of caution that *“fixing desertification is not equivalent to fixing climate change”* and that the outcomes of climate change analysis cannot be simplistically applied to the design of LDN interventions. The onus is on the process of interpretation – to draw upon different sources in identifying critical processes and formulating solutions for land under stress in the near-future as well as longer-term climate scenarios.

Conclusion

The project has achieved its basic purpose of demonstrating how LDN can be applied in practice. In a context in which the project team did not have a clear view of what was possible and what shape the final outputs would take, the project has done well to conclude with a coherent set of more or less solidly based country reports.

While some participating countries moved comfortably to the stage of setting targets and selecting sites for piloting restorative actions, others struggled with issues of data, finding what was provided to them to be unsuitable and / or lacking their own. Even in these cases, however, the project brought value in the stages of interrogating the NAP and / or allowing for participatory consultations and field assessments.

As an exercise in piloting implementation of a new concept in a short time-frame, there were bound to be flaws in a necessarily 'immature' methodology that could not be applied equally seamlessly in each setting. Crucially though, the project had enough substance to encourage continuation. The challenge is to refine the methodology and create more space for adapting the approach to the specific realities of individual countries. There is more to do too to ensure that work on LDN helps to engender increased capacity to manage data, models and understanding of problems at the country-level.

Given the pressures of time, the project has been very well coordinated. It ought now to review and refine project management approaches with a view to encouraging wider engagement and ownership at national-level and adapting to the larger number of countries involved in the second phase.

In a situation in which *“probably the most important guide for the future LDN actions under the UNCCD is the level of integration of the LDN to the Convention process that the Parties can accept”*, the COP's Decision, backed up by financial commitments from the GEF and from individual states, gives strong grounds for confidence that LDN can establish itself as a central vehicle in the implementation of the Convention. The next stage will be crucial, however. Progress on LDN relies on having the courage to lay out negative trends and admit to problems in a more detailed, tangible way than the general analyses given in NAPs. States will only 'take the plunge' if they feel sure that they will get the support and funding they need to address these trends. LDN targets have to show themselves to be a means of leveraging (financial) support.

Recommendations

- In a new phase of the project, more time should be reserved for (i) the initial stage of guiding participants in the use and analysis of data provided centrally; (ii) a period of iterative exchange between those holding national and global datasets to identify the best mix of sources to use in each case; and (iii) a moment of quality control to test the plans tabled for their strength of evidence base and the realism of their targets;
- Other states should be encouraged to test the IPCC methodology for deriving SOC stock and a

central repository maintained of different countries' experience to build practice to a high common denominator;

- CSO and beneficiary consultation should be central to the design and delivery of pilot interventions. Connections should be made to broader efforts to engage CSOs in cultivating political support for LDN / Convention implementation;
- As appropriate, further analysis should be conducted to tighten the evidence base for the plans developed by participants in the current project. The targets set should be subject to further review to provide assurance that they are realistic for anticipated levels of available resources;
- Any sense of dependency on the Project Manager and national consultants should be reduced by putting stronger emphasis on institutionalizing national capacity to work on LDN and on fostering relationships between participating countries. As part of this, there may be value in exploring whether participants in this project would be willing to 'buddy up' with states joining the second round – to offer advice and help to resolve issues which they themselves have now worked through;
- Space should be reserved for reflection, perhaps one year on from COP Decision, to review whether LDN appears to be fulfilling its potential as the key that unlocks the door to serious commitment to implement the Convention.
