

Evaluation of the effectiveness of national action programmes to implement the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification

The focus of this evaluation is *“the effectiveness of the NAPs as tools for policy change”*.¹ It is not a technical assessment of national action programmes (NAPs), but an evaluation directed at the political context in which NAPs sit. It operates to the premise that there is a virtuous circle between the dual roles of NAPs as both a practical framework for action and a driver of political will with *“the achievement of the NAP objectives deriv[ing] from the interaction between the policy environment and the improved land management at concrete (community) level. It may be further assumed that policy change is a prerequisite for improved land management”*.² With the reporting of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) indicating that this virtuous circle is broken, the focus of the evaluation is on the political dimension to it: the blockages to desertification/land degradation and drought being taken seriously at the national level and, more positively, the reasons behind examples of stronger political will to take effective action, including cases where NAPs may not have been a prominent part of the structures and measures employed.³ The evaluation draws conclusions relating to how NAPs are conceived and designed and how they are supported by the secretariat of the UNCCD.

1 Evaluation of the effectiveness of national action programmes to implement the UNCCD, Terms of reference for the evaluator, p2.

2 *Ibid.*, p2.

3 The evaluation should *“consider the role of the NAP in placing land degradation/drought issues in the national policy agenda, in developing related policies/policy tools, and in implementing/maintaining these policies. ‘Keywords’ include political awareness, political will, public awareness and constituency building/networking”*; Evaluation of the effectiveness of national action programmes to implement the UNCCD, Terms of reference for the evaluator, p2.

The evaluation does not follow the conventional categories of evaluation employed by the Development Assistance Committee of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.⁴ This reflects that the areas of focus in an advocacy evaluation – political decision-making and the factors driving policy and practice change – cannot easily be reduced to simple chains of cause and effect or linear progressions of outputs, outcomes and impact.⁵ The evaluation is based on different people's opinions of the seriousness of political commitments taken by states. Its value lies not in individual opinions being proved to be correct (or not), but in the collective picture which these opinions form and the process of reflection upon them.

The evaluation has involved an extensive review of documentation, including various national, sub-regional and regional action programmes, strategy papers, workplans, reports and other analyses of the effectiveness of implementation.

Interviews were held – mostly by phone or skype – with 31 people closely involved in NAPs either from the perspective of the secretariat, responsible Ministries or civil society. Some representatives of civil society organizations spoke to the circumstances in their own country only, while others had an overview of the situation in several, as did secretariat staff. More input was received from respondents engaged in one or more African states; this does not seem to represent a limiting factor since discussions were conducted at a broad level and did not tend to focus on issues specific to individual settings.

Initial summary findings were discussed with secretariat staff at a meeting in Bonn on 3 March. A presentation given at the same event by the evaluator of the parallel assessment of the Integrated Investment Framework (IIF) mechanism allowed for a useful cross-fertilization of conclusions. Feedback from the joint session is reflected in this report.

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

4 Relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability.

5 “Policy change is a challenging subject of evaluation. Public policy-making is a complex field, involving a multiplicity of actors and constantly shifting strategies and approaches. Policy change tends to evolve over a long time period and often cannot be attributed to one given actor”; *Evaluation of the effectiveness of national action programmes to implement the UNCCD, Terms of reference for the evaluator*, p2.

Context

The obligation to establish NAPs stems from Article 5 of the UNCCD, under which *“affected country Parties undertake to: [...] b) establish strategies and priorities, within the framework of sustainable development plans and/or policies, to combat desertification and mitigate the effects of drought; [and to] (e) ...provide an enabling environment by strengthening, as appropriate, relevant existing legislation and, where they do not exist, enacting new laws and establishing long-term policies and action programmes.”* NAPs are the key instrument to implement the Convention and should spell out the practical measures to be taken to overcome DLDD in specific ecosystems and the corresponding roles and responsibilities of different actors.⁶

The Convention signals that NAPs should be developed through a participatory approach involving various stakeholders, including relevant governmental offices, scientific institutions and local communities. NAPs should build on existing plans and programmes, with the preparation of a NAP *“closely interlinked with other efforts to formulate national policies for sustainable development”*.⁷

However, while the Convention invites states to develop NAPs, it does not oblige them to produce documents exclusively related to UNCCD implementation. Furthermore, the Convention limits states' obligation to elaborate *“strategies and priorities”* to those cases where *“relevant legislation, long-term policies and action programmes”* do not exist. As such, the Convention allows for a wide range of tools and approaches, including the adaptation of existing programmes and the incorporation of elements to meet the Convention within them.

Between 1997 and 2005, around eighty states prepared a NAP, but many reported problems in implementation.⁸ With an aim to enhance the implementation of the Convention, in 2007 the Parties adopted a 10-year strategic plan and framework to enhance the implementation of the Convention (2008–2018) (The Strategy) that set four strategic objectives and five operational objectives to guide the action of Convention stakeholders. Affected countries were requested to *“align their action programmes and other relevant implementation activities relating to the Convention with The Strategy by, inter alia, addressing the outcomes under the five operational objectives.”*⁹

Progress with national action programmes

The difficulties in implementing NAPs have been well-documented, including by the secretariat itself. The process is undermined by *“Shortage[s] and weakness[es] of institutional and human capacity”* and the Convention *“has not been successful in generating sizable and continuous flows of funds specifically dedicated to implementation at national level”*.¹⁰ Responsibility for NAPs is assigned to Focal Points

6 *“The purpose of national action programmes is to identify the factors contributing to desertification and practical measures necessary to combat desertification and mitigate the effects of drought. National action programmes shall specify the respective roles of government, local communities and land users and the resources available and needed”*; Article 10.

7 UNCCD Article 9. Article 10 also indicates that NAPs should *“be integrated with national policies for sustainable development”*.

8 As detailed in, for example, ICCD/CRIC(3)/2/Add.1 (January 2005), ICCD/CRIC(5)/2/Add.1 and ICCD/CRIC(5)/3/Add.1 (both December 2006).

9 ICCD/COP(8)16/Add.1, October 2007, p2.

10 ICCD/CRIC(11)/6, February 2013, p7, p8.

who, with a small proportion of exceptions, are senior technicians located within a Ministry that has a relatively low level of political power and resources (see Annex for examples from Africa). Focal Points have to balance multiple responsibilities and so may be unable to make their UNCCD role a priority. They may lack clout and access to the highest decision-makers.¹¹ In turn, few Ministers of Finance accord a high priority to DLDD; in one case, it is reported that a Minister responsible for the NAP sought advice from their UNCCD counterpart on how to mobilize resources from external sources not simply because this is a secretariat function, but because he “*knows better than to ask his own Minister of Finance*”.¹²

At a structural level, NAPs often reside outside mainstream planning and decision-making and are unable to bring about the integrated response – and the “*radical changes to national development planning processes*” – imagined in the Convention.¹³ There is “*a weak tradition of cooperation*” – or even competition – between those responsible for each of the Rio Conventions, with the respective Focal Points defending their own process instead of seeking to build overall coherence and mutual support among the processes. NAPs may add to, rather than help to address, a problem of multiple, overlapping initiatives by different Ministries and inter-governmental agencies at national and regional level.¹⁴ In this context, a heavy emphasis is placed on national coordinating mechanisms, but, according to one international observer with broad experience of NAPs, these “*tend to be owned by a single Ministry and soon become defunct*”.

The problem of a lack of integrated programming may be of greater importance than absolute levels of resources with some civil society activists arguing that “*We have the money, but need to spend it more strategically... [Responsibility for] land is scattered across too many Ministries*”.

The Convention is felt to be “*demanding of States in terms of the preparation of plans and the drafting of implementing legislation... there is a disparity between what exists in national legislation and what is expected [of states] in the Convention*”. This contributes to an imbalance in the allocation of human and

11 Several civil society respondents describe being very close to their national Focal Point, suggesting a commonality of interests and a shared weakness in advocating towards more powerful Ministries.

12 Where not otherwise referenced, quotes are taken from interviews. Interviewees are not named, but distinctions are drawn between national or international and between governmental or civil society respondents. The purpose of using quotes is illustrative; the point being made should not stand or fall on an awareness of who may have made it.

13 UNCCD Africa Annex, Article 8, for example, “*emphasize[s] integrated local development programmes*” and “*integration of strategies for poverty eradication into efforts to combat desertification*”. The reference to “*radical changes*” is from ICCD/CRIC(11)/6, February 2013, p11.

14 In the ECOWAS Sub-regional Action Programme, for example, it is noted that there are “*more than 40 subregional institutions working in the area of natural resources management and rural development*”, September 2013, p30. Sub-regional Action Programmes (SRAPs) conceived as a means to bring synergy and efficiencies across states have typically struggled to fulfil this remit. SRAPs are poorly resourced, insufficiently anchored in existing inter-governmental structures and lack ownership. The Guiding Principles of the Maghreb SRAP, for example, represent a good summary of what has been lacking in laying out the need to “*(i) address sub-regional shared concerns included in the NAPs and generate rapid and tangible impact; (ii) consolidate and upscale the achievements of the previous SRAP and build on existing institutions rather than creating new ones; (iii) take advantages of the synergies between the three Rio environmental Conventions; and (iv) complement on-going initiatives relevant to sustainable management of natural resources; (v) have a federating role for concerted and common positioning of the Maghreb sub-region vis à vis global challenges and concerns; and (vi) be conducive to joint implementation by the UMA countries and generate sub-regional catalytic financing to leverage co-financing by development partners*”; *Sub-regional Action Programme to Combat Desertification [in] the Maghreb; 2011-2020*, p17-18.

financial resources, with disproportionate attention directed at planning and reporting compared with implementation itself. Civil society organisation (CSO) respondents describe participating in drawn-out planning processes – not only for a NAP itself, but also for related policy initiatives – and then either running out of energy to track implementation or interpreting the pace of progress as a sign that implementation is not likely to be meaningful.

The material for this evaluation suggests that NAPs have not succeeded in presenting sustainable land management as something which underwrites social and economic development and brings important benefits to societies.¹⁵ They are understood as a solution to a problem conceived in too narrow a way, one treated separately from socio-economic development or key political issues such as water, migration or security. Drylands may be subject to pejorative stereotypes and those who live and work on them may be assumed to be 'primitive' or 'unscientific' in their approach to land management and agriculture.¹⁶ There may, by consequence, be an undue preference for technology-heavy solutions, a 'magic bullet' which may actually exacerbate the problems it is intended to address. Or DLDD may be understood in environmental terms and / or as a consequence of temporary or extreme climatic conditions, with the effect that governments see it as a non-permanent phenomenon which does not warrant a long-term commitment.

For some states, ratification of the Convention may be driven by a desire to demonstrate active international participation by having signed an international agreement rather than by a serious intent to employ its terms to good effect on the ground. Signing a Convention and making a rhetorical commitment to act upon it are simple, instant and cheap, while the effects of DLDD and the efforts needed to address it are complex and long-term. NAPs can be viewed as an obligation to be fulfilled and as a process associated with the UNCCD secretariat which is not something owned by states themselves.

NAPs may also be seen as *“an opportunity to mobilize external resources”*¹⁷, the NAP *“as a resource mobilization instrument rather than a strategic framework to help address structural policy”*.¹⁸ With the level of priority accorded to them noted by national-level respondents to be proportional to the resources which can be accessed for them, NAPs tend to hit a low ceiling of resource constraints. The result is that NAPs often seem to exist on paper only, a step taken in theory, but never fully applied.

The adoption of The Strategy had something of a revitalizing effect which carried over to the round of meetings held to advise states in aligning their NAPs with the Strategic Plan. Alignment meetings were a trigger for fresh involvement of (governmental and civil society) stakeholders who may have let the Convention drift off their agenda. Newly aligned NAPs show improvements in terms of the quality of systems of identification of biophysical and socio-economic drivers of DLDD, for example.¹⁹ However,

15 As intended in the Comprehensive Communications Strategy; ICCD/COP(9)/4/Add.2, July 2009; p5.

16 The association of the Convention with Africa may also be a hindrance to generating political traction in non-African states.

17 ECOWAS Sub-regional Action Programme, September 2013, p32.

18 ICCD/CRIC(11)/6, February 2013, p7.

19 ICCD/CRIC(13)/8 (draft input to the Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention, Thirteenth session, Bonn, March 2015), p3.

these benefits are offset by a “*lack of clarity among many countries on the nature, purpose and benefit of NAP alignment*” and by concern that “*too much emphasis is placed on alignment rather than on practical implementation*”.²⁰

Progress with alignment has been slow – by the end of 2012, almost half-way through the period covered by The Strategy, only 11 countries had aligned their NAP to The Strategy. It is expected that 80% of state parties will have aligned NAPs by the end of 2015, but this may constitute something of a pyrrhic outcome since “*Currently, the main concern is that less than 60 per cent of NAPs are actually being implemented*”.²¹

Political support for addressing desertification/land degradation and drought

While actual or perceived issues with NAP design and delivery have a draining effect on levels of commitment to the process, the broader political context for tackling DLDD at a national level may be more positive than an analysis of implementation would suggest. Noting the multiple priorities which developing countries are juggling, one secretariat staff member argues that “*if you take this into consideration, the gap between rhetoric and practice is understandable. So don't confuse lack of action for lack of commitment*”. If lack of action is not necessarily a signal of bad will, cases where commitments have not got beyond the rhetorical still offer something that advocates for the Convention can work with and look to harness further. The gap between rhetoric and reality is an entry point that can be probed and exposed. And there are both opportunities and threats in the scenario, said to be common to many states, that the issues subject to the Convention have little traction in policy-making terms yet remain politically important and sensitive.

The picture reported from one Asian country is likely to be fairly typical: “*the land and environment protection are [a] priority on the agenda of government and there is a good policy on land... The government has taken several steps for addressing these problems... Several decisions have been taken in the cabinet to prevent deforestation and land use changes. Social afforestation is also very good in the country, however the country need[s] technical and financial support from international organization and developed parties. Then again, the internal support is not enough...*”.²² This is, at the least, not a bad starting point for advocacy.

More favourably still, there is said to be “*strong political commitment*” to deal with DLDD in numerous African states. In some, commitment has taken tangible form in the creation of institutions with overarching responsibility for desertification or in the amendment of regulations relating to ownership

20 ICCD/CRIC(11)/6, February 2013, p8, p7. National-level respondents express some cynicism that they will be obliged to engage in a process to develop a new overall strategy and then align their own plans to it soon after the current process of alignment is completed.

21 ICCD/CRIC(13)/3 (draft input to the Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention, Thirteenth session, Bonn, March 2015), p12. This leaves open to question how much progress there has been made since an earlier analysis that “*states may well have signed the Convention and translated it into domestic law, but do not draw any material implications from this fact*”; *The Rio Conventions' Poor Little Sister*; Dr. Anneke Trux & Dr. Reinhard Bodemeyer, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ, German Technical Cooperation), Agriculture & Rural Development 1/2007, p22.

22 *Report of the Sub-regional Workshop on the Alignment of National Action Programme for UNCCD country Parties of the Northeast, Southeast and South Asia sub-regions*, March 2013, p6.

of trees and land to enable farmers to revive historic practices of sustainable land management. Political commitment can also be evidenced in NAPs having Parliamentary approval.

Across all regions, key causal factors behind commitment to tackle DLDD are the basic severity of the problem and its socio-economic consequences. In one Latin American country, for example, *“productivity in the rural sector is a very sensitive issue [because] 70 % of the total international trade is composed by agricultural commodities”*. In another country in the same region, the persistence and severity of drought has meant that *“efficient water use and soil conservation in drylands is a very important issue in the country”*. More generally, DLDD is taken seriously *“when a government sees that land degradation has consequences for social and economic stability [and] where there is strong dependency on the rural economy”*.

Regional meetings have asserted the need to connect NAPs to developmental as well as environmental objectives and argued that *“The Ministry of Finance should be involved at the initiation phase of the NAP”*.²³ This chimes with the advice from a civil society activist in one Asian country that it is very important to *“present good drylands management as something which is good business”*.

Sometimes it takes a catastrophe to concentrate minds. In one CEE country, *“radioactive, chemical and biological contamination of the soil and land is recognized as a threat to national economic security”*. In another country which runs a significant afforestation programme, there may be a sense of aspiring to regional leadership in a certain field, but even here, the economic costs and benefits are key.

There are cases where NAPs have succeeded in becoming an integral part of wider programming. In one African state, the NAP has been incorporated within poverty reduction plans and the centrality of combating land degradation to agricultural policy is a mantra from the President down. More common though, are cases of land reclamation which are part of government policy without being part of a NAP. This creates a situation in which *“There is little evidence of widespread commitment to support post-alignment NAP implementation per se”*, but nonetheless *“significant activities at affected country Party level to combat desertification, land degradation and drought [that] are diffused among policies and actors, and so are not readily attributed to the NAP process.”*²⁴

States which accord a high priority to land issues may pay little heed to the Convention as a policy-making instrument because they frame the issue in different ways than they imagine the Convention to frame it. Or they may not see the Convention as bringing much value to their policy-making response. In one Latin American country, a Law for Soils Protection and Water Conservation passed in 2009 is an expression of political movement. But the UNCCD has not been a major part of the policy response since it is narrowly associated with desertification which the country concerned does not see itself as suffering from. In another state in the same region, the President has committed to *“recover about 100,000 hectares of degraded soil over the next 20 years, with an investment of nearly \$US 250M”*.²⁵ In

23 *Subregional capacity building workshop on the NAP/IFs alignment process in the East African sub-region*, December 2013, p8.

24 ICCD/CRIC(11)/6, February 2013, p13, p12.

25 Statement of President Bachelet of Chile to the UN Climate Summit, September 2014.

this case, a civil society representative describes the NAP as “*a back-up to cope with the situation*”, a framework that has underwritten some political progress, but did not create it: it served as an argument, a prompt to the creation of a framework for the commitments which the country had chosen to undertake.

The idea for a Great Green Wall across the Sahara and the Sahel represents a tangible form of cooperation among states in Africa, one whose scope is set by states themselves and which goes beyond that of the UNCCD, although there is an argument that its creation was catalysed by NAPs. Both the Great Green Wall and another African initiative on land, TerrAfrica, have drawn criticism from some interviewees in terms of process, but their significance lies in them being initiatives of states themselves, a set of projects and mechanisms in which important political capital has been invested.

The status of the UNCCD

That the UNCCD occupies a weak position towards the other Rio Conventions is said to be a product of its difficult birth as a result of bargaining between states in negotiations at the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development that adopted the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Convention on Biodiversity (CBD). It is stigmatized as a Convention for 'affected' countries only, its status at international level that of the 'poor little sister' of the UNFCCC as well as the CBD. One national-level respondent describes how “*people are mesmerised by the CBD and the UNFCCC [while] the UNCCD is the least discussed Convention*”. In some cases, this distinction is formalized in laws and institutional structures, with the CBD and UNFCCC having their own designated Office or Department established under a law which goes beyond basic ratification while the UNCCD has no equivalent law creating its own structure. Or, as in one Asian country, a National Desertification Committee is in place, but is inactive, unlike the equivalent Committees for the CBD and the UNFCCC.

The UNCCD is also said to be subordinated to other sectors such as agriculture, water and energy.²⁶ This subordination takes physical form in the Ministry to which NAPs are assigned, often with the effect that “*implementation of the NAP is still seen as something separate from the rest of the countries' development agenda and competes with these for already very limited resources*”.²⁷ In theory, NAPs should function as a multi-sectoral instrument, but since in practice they are imported into government structures organized along sectoral lines,²⁸ the space that they can reserve for themselves is limited.

26 “*Most NAPs have been able to capture the broad technical aspects of desertification/land degradation and certain strategic elements, but programmatic approaches in other areas, such as agriculture, water and forest management, with more direct tangible, short-term benefit, have attracted greater political support at the country-level*”; ICCD/CRIC(11)/6, February 2013, p12. Likewise, the ECOWAS SRAP notes that “*to combine the economic development needs and sustainable environmental management, there is a need to actively consider all the environmental aspects both in poverty alleviation strategies (socio-economic aspects) and in sectoral policies and strategies having an impact on the environment... Unfortunately, it may be difficult to achieve this in the short term in the absence of a consensual and official reference and/or a national and/or subregional leadership*”; p31.

27 *Report on workshop to build capacity for NAP alignment in the SADC subregion*, February 2013, p4.

28 Drawing the criticism that “*It is a platitude in organizational theory that administrations tend to adapt new tasks to their own structures rather than the other way round. Why in the world should the UNCCD be immune from this phenomenon?*”; The Rio Conventions' poor little sister; Dr. Anneke Trux & Dr. Reinhard Bodemeyer, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ, German Technical Cooperation), Agriculture & Rural Development 1/2007, p24.

Though the UNCCD may be affected states' own Convention, most of the funding available for international cooperation in relevant areas targets other priorities, notably climate change. Some respondents judge that access to funding requires framing land degradation in terms of adaptation to climate change. The result is projects which contribute to the UNCCD as much as the UNFCCC, but in a sub-optimal way, since coordination is imperfect and synergies are insufficiently capitalized upon. This is a problem subject to many efforts to resolve²⁹, but without success since *“synergistic efforts are losing momentum [and] the progress of affected country Parties in establishing adequate mechanisms in this regard is very modest, as is the interest shown by development partners in supporting internal processes”*³⁰ – a case of a political problem irresolvable at a technical level.

From vicious to virtuous circle

This brief analysis of the technical and political status of the Convention points to a situation resembling a vicious circle in which there is *“insufficient evidence of the impact of NAPs on core development concerns, such as poverty alleviation and food and water security to galvanize the support of serious political will and policymakers in general”*³¹ and a *“contradiction between the priorities of the environment and the fight against desertification in the speech[es] of policymakers and the proportion of national resources allocated to [them]”*.³²

| | Current reality: a vicious circle | Ideal world: the virtuous circle |
|-------------------|--|---|
| Technical aspects | Inefficient, poorly-resourced process; | Efficient, well-resourced process; |
| | Focused on outputs more than outcomes; | Focused on outcomes more than outputs, tied to results not processes; |
| | Supported by technocratic, role-proscribed secretariat; | Supported by a secretariat that combines technical expertise with political intelligence and clout; |
| Political aspects | Low status at national level: under a Ministry of limited influence and resources; | High status and profile at national level, with personal backing from Head of State and / or hosted in a high-ranking Ministry; |
| | Subordinate position <i>vis à vis</i> UNFCCC and the CBD; | Equal status with UNFCCC and the CBD, with effective joint programming; |
| | Low buy-in and rhetorical support only at regional and international fora; | A favourable international political context; |

29 *“Some participants stated that the discussions on synergies [with other Rio Conventions] have been taking place for almost 20 years but little has so far been achieved. They were therefore of the view that there needs to be a re-think as regards this question as the process might not be going in the right direction”, Subregional capacity-building workshop on the NAP/IFS alignment process in the East African sub-region, December 2013, p5. It is arguable that integration is easier in terms of planning than in terms of law: one international commentator argues that each Convention is complex in its own right and that what may make sense in planning terms is hard to apply because of the legal specificities of each.*

30 ICCD/CRIC(13)/3, p12.

31 ICCD/CRIC(11)/6, February 2013, p8.

32 ECOWAS Sub-regional Action Programme, September 2013, p31.

| | | |
|--|--|--|
| | Relative lack of interest from donors; | High priority of donors; |
| | Limited organic CSO demand, little interest of international NGOs; | National and international CSO coalitions act as a positive pressure for effective implementation; |
| | Low recognition among wider public audiences. | Growing currency among wider public audiences. |

In aiming for political will and effective implementation to be mutually reinforcing, interventions can be conceived at both a technical and a political level. At a technical level, this is a matter of refining the offer made to, and the demands made of, states, including by focusing plans on clear goals and reporting on outcomes. At a political level, cultivating a virtuous circle is a matter of both stimulating 'demand' for effective action on DLDD – making DLDD as a priority, defending and elevating the status of the Convention and those tasked at national and international level with its implementation – and engaging with the 'supply' of political commitment on DLDD – working with what states themselves make into priorities and seeking to refine the content of states' own initiatives. In this, the point is not to lose the technical side of things, but to add more of a political dimension to the core secretariat strength of technical expertise, noting too that technical assistance is a means to secure political commitment as well to design and deliver a plan: making a better case for the plan being taken seriously as well as making a better plan.³³

Focus and targets

International commentators hone in on a problem of the Convention being “*more about monitoring, reporting and awareness-raising without actual targets, so this undermines the seriousness with which it is taken*”, deriving from this a need to develop real targets and foster substantive discussion on outcomes and impact. One commentator notes that while the alignment process has usefully reminded states of the key elements of The Strategy, “*the key is to identify opportunities and set targets*”. One Focal Point refers specifically to the lack of targets and indicators as one of the main obstacles to effective implementation of the NAP for which he is responsible. There is already an intent to focus on things that can be delivered which, in theory, should lead more quickly to positive results, strengthening the case for further action. Feedback from the national level highlights the importance of targets in concentrating governments' minds, with one official reporting the importance of his government being “*regularly reminded of the targets and indicators against which its activities are being assessed*”.

There is a commitment to sharpen monitoring and evaluation (M&E), although it is suggested that the Performance Review and Assessment of Implementation System (PRAIS) used to measure against The Strategy is being applied somewhat in parallel to the monitoring of NAPs; or rather, PRAIS measures NAPs only when NAPs are aligned to The Strategy. This may represent something of a missed

33 Along similar lines, the IIF evaluation argues that “*in some countries, providing technical support for project development, M&E and working at a higher political level may be more important than / needed than IIFs*”; presentation of Charlotte Valliant to the UNCCD secretariat, 3 March 2015.

opportunity: the NAP alignment process and the PRAIS process “could have been melded: in the process of discovering what states are doing, there could be questions about what changes need to be made to NAPs to fit in with the Strategy”.³⁴ Instead, it is “not obvious that reporting and NAP alignment as processes would be somehow mutually evolving or learning from the outcomes of the other one”.

M&E systems record outputs, outcomes and impact and interrogate the connections at each stage: whether outputs lead to outcomes, whether outcomes lead to impact. In an ideal scenario, programmes would be perpetually refined in the light of M&E feedback, all within a framework of clear, agreed goals and following a principle of being tight on strategy and loose on implementation.³⁵ If there has been a tendency to focus monitoring and evaluation on outputs and their direct effects, greater emphasis should be put on outcomes and impacts³⁶ and on the use made of M&E findings.

With many states delivering activities related to DLDD outside of NAPs, Convention reporting does not generate a full picture of Convention-relevant actions. This M&E challenge is irresolvable in isolation from the broader issue of the delivery of different activities under different initiatives and Ministries. But clarity of goals and focusing M&E on outcomes – and analysis to work back from outcomes to determine which activities and outputs were decisive – would sharpen the utility of M&E.

Clearer goals, better monitored are central to what several commentators refer to as “giving the Convention more teeth”. When monitoring and reporting reveal a lack of action, the implication is that these teeth need to be bared. When talking of “tightening up the process”, one activist has in mind clear plans, efficient funding mechanisms and 'enforcement' by the secretariat. In referring to the need for the secretariat to “follow up on the things that governments say they are doing”, another civil society respondent may capture the tone better: the secretariat can chivvy away at states which commit but do not deliver, reflecting back to them the gap between words and action. Ideally, CSOs would be in a position to say the things that the secretariat cannot say or employ a tone which the secretariat would not, for example, in 'naming-and-shaming' states which promise much, but do not deliver.

Addressing the silo mentality

The weak status of the Convention may lead to a context in which – at both the national and international levels – action towards the Convention turns inwards to avoid more sensitive issues of politics. The cycle of planning, delivery and reporting can generate its own momentum and become an

34 A point elaborated upon in the comment that “Both PRAIS and NAP alignment processes have been relatively lengthy and demanding, with lots of detailed work and difficult procedures. A more coordinated approach could have helped both the workload and the consistency of content. Instead of building the demanding alignment guidelines, that process could have been done in a pragmatic manner by first clarifying through the reporting process what are the main needs in the NAPs to meet the strategy objectives, and then preparing the alignment process / support accordingly”.

35 A similar conclusion is reached in the evaluation of the IIF mechanism, which asserts the importance of the IIF being a living document updated regularly; presentation of Charlotte Valliant to UNCCD secretariat, 3 March 2015.

36 Another analogy from the public health sector points to the need to assess not only the 'disease' (DLDD), but also the risk factors conducive to it taking root and hence the impact of interventions in reducing risk factors as being central to sustainable outcomes; cf. *Land health surveillance and response: A framework for evidence-informed land management*; Keith D. Shepherd, Gemma Shepherd, Markus G. Walsh; *Agricultural Systems* 132 (2015) 93–106.

end in itself, something suggested in the criticism that *“the focus should be better land management, not supporting governments to go through a process”*. Respondents following this line of argument describe alignment to have been *“a process done for its own sake”*, with a distinction drawn between *“giving people at national and international level new challenges and trainings to reshape a plan on paper”* and *“asking the questions ‘what are the opportunities in the country?’, ‘what are the capacities in the country?’, ‘where can we get to in ten years?’”* While this distinction is no doubt a caricature not reflective of the good intentions behind the alignment process, and while the limits on what may be possible are not to be belittled, the point is to reflect upon the meaning of one of the operational objectives of The Strategy – *To actively influence relevant international, national and local processes and actors in adequately addressing desertification/land degradation and drought-related issues* – in order to move towards a more effective form of engagement which confronts the relative marginality of NAPs in wider programming.

This is not straightforward if *“the secretariat is very process-driven... It is a bureaucrat”*. There is a lesson in the influence which funding instruments – those of the Global Mechanism, but also of TerrAfrica, for example – bring to bear.³⁷ A conclusion elaborated in the evaluation of the Integrated Investment Framework mechanism,³⁸ the function of *“helping states to self-explore their needs”* makes engagement with states more concrete, draws in other national stakeholders and ties political commitment to real activities. For the secretariat, it is a question of being a politician as much as a bureaucrat, moving out of the silo and becoming a more active advocate for the Convention within the limits of its role, what a secretariat staff member refers to as having *“more encouragement from the country level to do more work on political commitment... The secretariat should pay more attention to political commitment at the national level”*.

The elusive goal of integration

Reflecting that their sphere of operation is inherently closer to the ground and perhaps too that the constraints faced by the UNCCD are most acute at the national level, national civil society activists strongly vocalise demand for integrated programming, arguing that *“it is not the NAP for any of the three Conventions which will solve the problem. If you compare UNCCD and UNFCCC, the problems they deal with and the approach they use are the same, only the name [of the Focal Point] and the civil servants they report to are different... At the local level, people do not see the difference and do not think in terms of this Convention or that. At the local level, people see everything as closely related”*. Some of these respondents argue for a more advanced integration of various national frameworks and even for producing a single overarching sustainable development plan with reporting against the different Conventions a secondary concern.

Others balk at the potential costs of integration, notably the risk of losing the specific benefits of each Convention. These respondents argue for the UNCCD to stand up for itself and not submerge itself

37 Although not always in a way linked to NAPs: *“The IFS approach facilitated by the GM is only occasionally supporting NAP alignment”*; ICCD/CRIC(12)/3, September 2013, p28.

38 The assessment of the IIF mechanism notes that it functions effectively as an advocacy tool and acts as a motor for a more coherent, cross-sectoral approach; presentation of Charlotte Valliant to UNCCD secretariat, 3 March 2015.

within a climate change agenda, noting that even if the attention accorded to DLDD increases, that given to climate change is likely to increase even more so. It appears to be those operating at the international sphere who tend to make these arguments, perhaps as a reflection of a greater inclination to dwell on the details of content and to preserve the specificities of the Convention.³⁹

This need not be an either / or question. The increasing currency of the concept of Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN) may bring a tighter strategic underpinning to integration⁴⁰ or the overall process of establishing new sustainable development goals which currently includes a goal on LDN may itself be a spur to progress. In engaging with these policy processes, those engaged with the UNCCD should focus on defending their issue of DLDD, with the crux being to defend issues not structures and mechanisms.

Mobilizing support for action on DLDD – the role of the secretariat

A. Donors

Development partners are said to have little interest in supporting UNCCD implementation and even less in the mechanics of the alignment process.⁴¹ Ultimately a question of the Convention's limited agenda-setting power, the effect is that *“states say they are committed to tackling land degradation, but when it comes to negotiations with donors, we see land degradation is not on the agenda”*. Donor governments are described as *“decisively skewing”* the international political agenda towards the UNFCCC and the CBD, significantly lowering the chances of UNCCD implementation receiving international assistance. This skew is self-perpetuating if affected states interact with donors by *“saying what they expect [donors] want to hear”*.

As such, seeking to boost political commitment on DLDD by influencing donors to influence the governments of affected states has to confront donors' claim that they will not support an issue which states do not prioritize in their own plans. Developing countries need to assert sustainable land management as being at the heart of their development programmes in and of itself, as well as something which is central to addressing climate change.⁴² In seeking funding for integrated programmes which give a prominent place to sustainable land management, the challenge is to keep things concrete and to focus on the results of synergistic programming rather than the process of organizing synergy.⁴³

39 The point that it is at the national level where the calls for integration are strongest and that the concern to preserve the specifics of each Convention is greatest at the international level is not one that can be made from a scientific basis, given the number of interviewees involved.

40 *“The SDGs and the post-2015 development agenda can help promote land-based action. With regard to the sustainable management of land resources, the shared strategic goals of the Rio conventions present a unique opportunity to leverage synergies, increase efficiency and avoid duplication in national implementation and reporting processes. By using common indicators and/or monitoring and evaluation frameworks, the Rio conventions and their financial mechanisms, such as the GEF, would be in a position to better assess and compare the effectiveness of land management policies and practices in meeting their common goals”* (emphasis added); ICCD/CRIC(13)/8; p9.

41 *“Potential partners have multiple options for investment and most of them do not seem to fully recognize the potential of the NAP or the added value of alignment”*; ICCD/CRIC(11)/6, February 2013, p13.

42 This can be supported by messages which connect to matters which are high on the donor agenda, such as the links between land degradation and (forced) migration.

43 Reflecting again the signal in the secretariat's own reporting that *“the interest shown by development partners in supporting internal processes [i.e. to synergize activities on the three Rio Conventions] ... is very modest”*; ICCD/CRIC(11)/6, February

There may also be scope for mobilizing an alliance of countries for which effective mitigation will involve land use policy change to argue a united case for the centrality of addressing DLDD in climate change strategies. The secretariat can play a supporting role in this, representing and endorsing the interests of those states for which land degradation is a more immediate challenge than climate change.

B. Parliamentarians

Parliamentarians have, in many if not all settings, the potential to fulfil a catalyzing and championing function at national level, alongside an institutional responsibility of legal and financial oversight. Committed Parliamentarians, especially those who can expect to serve more than one term, can help overcome short-termism in policy-making. Their engagement depends on effective articulation of demand for action from those affected or concerned by DLDD and on the existence of structures allowing them to connect to policy debate at national and international levels.

Parliamentarians from most severely affected areas may self-select as champions, but others can be mobilized through advocacy hinged on the voting clout of rural constituencies and on the local impact of sustainable land management versus DLDD. The secretariat's activities to engage Parliamentarians in global exchanges on DLDD are helpful in improving understanding of, and building political commitment to, the issue at national level, with involvement in Round Tables at UNCCD COPs helping to foster ownership in the issues which Parliamentarians take back to domestic debates. But there is further to go to inspire and enable the involvement of Parliamentarians. As an example of approaches to more intensely involve Parliamentarians, the UNCCD could look to the strategy of the UN Development Programme (UNDP) in partnering with the Climate Parliament to efficiently access the country level.⁴⁴

C. CSOs

The mobilization of CSOs to create domestic demand for serious action on DLDD provides a sustainable strategy to raising national interest and commitment. CSOs can press governments to act in first instance and then serve as watchdogs monitoring implementation. The commitment to the involvement of CSOs laid out in the Convention has translated into NAP design processes which draw upon CSO input. There was also an explicit intent in The Strategy to improve procedures and funding so as to facilitate CSO participation at both the national and international levels.⁴⁵ However, CSOs active in rural development and agriculture may have little interaction with the Convention. Their focus is more on practical instruments for action than NAPs. They are as likely as states themselves to focus on

2013, p12.

44 UNDP partners with Climate Parliament in the Parliamentary Action for Renewable Energy project which aims to “*build regional networks of Members of Parliament and national cross-party parliamentary groups in ten priority countries (Bangladesh, Congo-Brazzaville, India, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Senegal, South Africa, Tanzania and Tunisia) to promote renewable energy*”; http://www.undp.org/content/brussels/en/home/partnerships_initiatives/results/UNDP-EU-parliamentary-action-renewable-energy.html

45 The Strategy ascribes to the secretariat the core function to “*develop revised procedures for the participation of CSOs in UNCCD meetings and processes, including clear selection criteria and a mechanism to ensure a balance of participants from different regions...; develop stronger mechanisms to support a CSO network [and] advocate for more support and channels grants to facilitate CSO participation in UNCCD meetings and processes*”; p19.

climate since this is where the funding is. International commentators and secretariat staff alike report a gap in terms of advocacy at the national level: *“we have not seen advocacy directed at the Ministry of Finance for more funds for land degradation [even though] if CSOs are well-organized and they show cases in favour of funding land degradation activities, maybe this would lead to more budget [being made available]”*.

There appears to be something of a disconnect between CSOs active on the ground and those present at COPs. The representative of one CSO which is engaged with the Convention reports *“trying to show [other CSOs] that working on water or biodiversity is working on desertification”*, but these UNCCD champions alone are not able to shape domestic civil society agenda. It is also arguable that *“if political interest increased, the issues would attract other campaigners”*.

Mobilizing civil society voice for action on DLDD cannot be separated from broader efforts to raise the political status of the issues: CSO engagement cannot be stimulated in a vacuum or from above. The secretariat can help CSOs understand how the Convention works and provide case studies of how CSOs have used and engaged with other Conventions, but without presuming to 'impose' an agenda on them. It needs a certain amount of groundwork to orientate CSOs if the comment of one African civil society activist that *“for us to be able to do something on sustainable land management, we would need to organize ourselves, identify strong CSOs with relevant capacity and organize a platform”* holds true of others whose attention has been, by a mixture of choice and necessity, directed at other areas.⁴⁶

As with Parliamentarians, multipliers are critical. The secretariat can look to work through powerful national CSO actors, engaging those who set the tone for others. In turn, it can seek to foster regional networks of CSOs able to deliver complementary advocacy at the sub-regional, regional and international levels. In a context in which an SDG may raise the profile of land degradation and help to address the lack of a clear objective and narrative around which to mobilize national and international CSOs, there may be scope to re-engage international CSOs which have an agenda-setting influence over their own wide-reaching formal and informal networks.

Comparing influencing channels⁴⁷

| | Resource-intensity | Time needed to bear fruit | Sustainability | Potential secretariat role |
|------------------|--------------------|---------------------------|----------------|----------------------------|
| Donors | M | M | L | Direct advocacy |
| Parliamentarians | H | M | M | Catalyzing and supporting |

46 There is, of course, a range of levels of existing interest and commitment among CSOs to work on DLDD, usually a product of the extent of DLDD, as well as of broader questions of capacity. Where CSOs are active and organized in various local and national coalitions, there is a good base for involvement in UNCCD implementation. In other cases, 'demand' to work on DLDD would have to be created through promoting the importance of the issues in a way analogous to the selling of the Convention to states.

47 The grades of low (L), medium (M) and high (H) are imagined relative to each other, rather than as an indication of the absolute level of effort involved.

| | | | | |
|------|---|---|---|--|
| | | | | Parliamentarian networks |
| CSOs | H | H | H | Catalyzing and supporting CSO networks |

Selling the Convention

Mobilizing effective action from key decision-makers – the Minister of Finance, Prime Minister and / or President – depends on asserting DLDD as a priority in and of itself and as something central to other priorities. It has to be presented as something with economic and political value, with both benefits of action and costs of inaction.

The UNCCD Comprehensive Communications Strategy (CCS) has the aim of mobilizing *“the political clout [that the Convention] needs to reach its objectives; making the Convention known will facilitate the involvement of crucial actors; highlighting the importance of the Convention may enhance resource mobilization and donor relations at all levels; [and] clarifying the objectives of the Convention could advance the political drive needed to ensure its success”*.⁴⁸ But it seems rather broad in scope and tends towards generic communication aimed at multiple target audiences. Reporting against the CCS is focused on outputs – the number of information events held, for example – and estimates of exposure to outputs.

On the one hand, the design and delivery of the CCS reflect the umbrella function of the secretariat. On the other hand, the imperative to create demand for action on DLDD relies on a stronger focus and sense of urgency. Publications developed in 2014 have this forceful, emotive, 'scandal-creating' rhetoric in their reference to *“exploding needs”, “waste(d) land: lost capital”*⁴⁹, *“things cannot stay the same”* and *“worldwide impacts: no immunity”*⁵⁰, among others. Land degradation neutrality and sustainable land management are positioned as solutions both at an existential level – *“a future in harmony with nature”* – and in terms of here-and-now socio-economic value: *“increas[ed] yields, enhanc[ed] resource flows”*⁵¹ and sustainable land management as a *“natural insurance policy”*.⁵²

These last quotes point to the need for the case to be made in terms of more than the value to land quality itself. Land is not reclaimed for its own sake, but to enable a new use. It is essential to be able to quantify the benefits of preventing degradation or of rehabilitating land and to present a business model for interventions which have both environmental and socio-economic benefits such that Ministers *“see land as an issue which can unlock other development priorities”*.

The CCS has linked DLDD to other global challenges including poverty eradication and asserted the need to be *“proactive in conveying the relevance of the Convention to major challenges, where appropriate, and to alter and influence perceptions and prejudices pertaining to drylands, turning what*

48 ICCD/COP(9)/4/Add.2, July 2009, p30-1.

49 *The Land in Numbers*; UNCCD 2014, p4, p6.

50 *Land-Based Adaptation and Resilience: powered by nature*; UNCCD 2014, p2, p3.

51 *The Land in Numbers*; UNCCD 2014, p8, p10.

52 *Land-Based Adaptation and Resilience: powered by nature*; UNCCD 2014, p12.

appears to be a liability into an asset".⁵³ But secretariat staff recognize a gap in making the economic case, with one noting that *"what is lacking is an evaluation of the cost of rehabilitation compared to the benefit to be gained from reclaimed land. [Advocates of the Convention] need to make the case centred on the economic importance of sustainable land management to the Ministry of Finance in particular"*.⁵⁴ The lack of an economic imperative to act may create a false picture of political commitment: states may well like to act, but do not see the cost-benefit.⁵⁵

If international materials already seek to tie DLDD to economic costs and benefits, the question is how to relay these messages to the national level in a way tailored to specific socio-economic and political contexts. The key challenge to overcome seems to be that *"if you talk only about land degradation, you won't get very far"*. At the same time, messages of cross-sectoral costs and benefits may be hard for governments to swallow since they may demand rethinking the basis of the agricultural sector and / or policies concerning land use and ownership.

The Economics of Land Degradation (ELD) initiative⁵⁶ designed to generate information on the economic value of land represents one source of solid data which the secretariat can draw upon in disseminating proof of the economic costs of DLDD and the economic benefits of sustainable land management to underpin interventions which make sense from multiple perspectives. Similar to the effect of the Stern Review of the Economics of Climate Change, this sort of information base would support reframing the importance of the Convention and jump-starting national-level action.⁵⁷

Chasing as well as creating political will

Finding state champions is largely a case of meeting states where they are, channelling their pre-existing commitments in the right direction rather than trying to create commitment to NAPs *per se*. As one national-level respondent puts it, the key is to *"align your interests with those of states. It is easier when you find a space in which you can work locally. If there is no such space, it is difficult even if the issue is important"*.

Linking NAPs up with initiatives that carry a higher degree of political support, such as, for example, TerrAfrica, can be a means of attracting greater commitment to tackling DLDD. Even if such links come with additional conditionalities, the benefits of being in the financial and political 'mainstream' are likely to outweigh the value of the alternative approach of developing a stand-alone NAP.

53 ICCD/COP(9)/4/Add.2, July 2009, p5.

54 In spite of recognition that *"Government decision makers both in affected and developed countries need to perceive SLM as a cost-effective and efficient element of solving major global challenges"*; ICCD/COP(9)/4/Add.2, July 2009, p9.

55 Economic analysis may not smoothly translate into a strong case for sustainable land management interventions and in some cases may lead states to undertake other forms of action, but the general point still holds that clear cost-benefit analysis will help make the case for states to act decisively on DLDD.

56 The Economics of Land Degradation Initiative *"aims to make economics of land degradation an integral part of policy strategies and decision making by increasing the political and public awareness of the costs and benefits of land and land-based ecosystems"*; <http://eld-initiative.org/index.php?id=116>

57 While an SDG may be the key to capturing donors' attention, the economic case is critical to the governments of affected states.

It makes sense too to conceive of NAPs – and SRAPs and RAPs – as complements to other initiatives. With the African Great Green Wall tending towards large-scale interventions, the function of “*counterbalancing [it] by smaller local and regional reforestation initiatives [and] proving that sustainable land management can work without a big initiative*”, is one that NAPs could take up. The Great Green Wall can also be a positive feedback on NAPs and SRAPs, giving the latter something tangible to base cooperation on.

Changing the game?

Selling the Convention would be easier if the Convention acquired greater international cachet. Momentum is building around LDN as the “*content specification*” to The Strategy, a means of taking the strategic objectives to the next level of precision and measurability. Its formalization as a target of an SDG⁵⁸ – to be confirmed later in 2015 – would help to make the Convention more practical, engendering greater confidence that progress is possible. If NAPs have been an end in themselves, they have the chance to reposition themselves as a means to the end of LDN: “*the idea is that countries concentrate on a real issue not a process. At the national level, the talk will be of LDN, not NAPs and of getting momentum around an issue not a process*”. Knowing that they have to report on an SDG target should mean that states feel more pressure to deliver and that donors would be more inclined to support them.

Although not binding, an SDG target relating to LDN can represent the global goal that the UNCCD has missed and help to mobilize attention in a way comparable to the rallying effect on the UNFCCC of a narrative of a 2 degree cap on temperature increases. Achieving an LDN target in the SDGs would raise the profile of DLDD and help the UNCCD better position itself *vis à vis* the two other Rio Conventions. A simple narrative centred on LDN can help to sell the Convention at the international level and to revive the interest of international NGOs.

Within the secretariat, LDN is felt to have had a reinvigorating effect and is “*expected to be more successful than previous and current efforts to effectively draw the attention of people and the international community to the significance of healthy land and soil to human beings and to the risks brought about by land degradation*”.⁵⁹

However, it is also recognized that there is work to do to elaborate the concept of LDN and that a lot would depend on the support structures put in place to meet the target. For now, the note to strike is one of cautious optimism: a voluntary SDG target might not by itself dramatically elevate DLDD to the status of global priority, but it would improve its position and give a stronger base for advocating for serious commitment to implement the Convention.

58 Target 15.3: “*by 2020, combat desertification, and restore degraded land and soil, including land affected by desertification, drought and floods, and strive to achieve a land-degradation neutral world*” under Goal 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*”; <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/focussdgs.html>

59 *Land Degradation Neutrality: Resilience at local, national and international levels*, UNCCD 2014, p17.

Conclusions

In many aspects, this evaluation serves to endorse directions already being taken, as well as suggesting what may be new ones. In doing so, it is careful to avoid the risks of blaming NAPs for failing to be something that they are not and of seeking to change the form which NAPs take simply because it is within the scope of the secretariat to do so.

Underprioritized in comparison to the other Rio Conventions by affected and donor states alike, NAPs are too often treated as a document that states are obliged to produce with few tangible benefits on the ground. However, a possible SDG, the broader trend to focus strategies on concrete LDN targets and the coming on-stream of a methodology and evidence base relating to the economics of land degradation all suggest that 2015 may be a year of opportunity.⁶⁰ This evaluation encourages the secretariat to test whether it is in the right shape to take advantage of these opportunities and to reflect upon the role it plays and the place that NAPs occupy.

The secretariat's role of technical expertise remains essential. There is high demand for supporting states with the accumulation of evidence of the extent of the problem, with one Focal Point reporting that *"Secretariat support is very important in the analysis of the current situation of land degradation"*. The view of one African civil society commentator that *"many states don't know the scale of the problem... We need to start with land degradation assessments and generating a baseline"* has its echo in the call from a colleague in Latin America for *"an updated evidence base of the scale of the problem [since] all official documents are old and still cite data from late 1990s"*.⁶¹ National and international commentators stress the functions of advising on legal frameworks for regulating the use of natural resources, sharing good practice examples⁶² and guiding states in applying to the various funding instruments available and the principles and frameworks to which they work.

But there is demand also for the secretariat to carve out for itself a more 'political' role, a reinterpretation or reiteration of the secretariat's aim relating to awareness-raising, education and especially advocacy. Focal Points call for secretariat aid in mobilizing stronger political support for the implementation of their NAPs, with one locating the secretariat's chief function as being to help him *"to raise the level of political support for implementation of the NAP"*. The secretariat's support should be about content and politics more than process and outputs, overcoming bottlenecks in delivery more than support to develop a plan.

At the international level, the secretariat has *"a duty to trigger discussion on how the Convention is doing and to trigger critical partners to do something about it"*. With an Executive Secretary already

60 That there is also said to be *"some fatigue with the 'climate change circus'"* contributes to the sense that *"there is an opening for desertification and SLM. It is a good time to advance the agenda, showcase big results and generate momentum"*.

61 There is a suggestion that this demand remains acute because of problems in integrating the scientific function on the side of the secretariat.

62 One secretariat staff member notes that it is *"at the local level where there have been the main achievements to date; [that is,] individual initiatives that demonstrate that the technology is affordable and accessible and the solutions neither complex nor expensive"*. This respondent draws the conclusion that it is a key secretariat function to inventorize and disseminate local good practice case studies.

playing a role of proactive advocacy towards donors and the UN community, high visibility should be maintained at fora dealing with related issues to assert sustainable land management as part of the solution to these issues and as something of critical importance to affected states and more so than climate in many cases. Asserting LDN as a central plank of climate adaptation should be a strong message taken into the 2015 Paris climate conference, for example. Frontrunners can be encouraged by creating space in key fora for high-level panels which give a platform to senior figures from affected states to promote good practice and the benefits of coordinated implementation. This would also serve to cement the commitment of these states. As an extension of this, the COP and its subsidiary bodies can evolve, insofar as is formally possible, toward showcasing success stories and helping to sustain political momentum.

To ensure that political commitment translates from rhetoric in international meetings to tangible action on the ground, the 'arena-gap' between the secretariat's international advocacy – and its communications materials – and the political realities and points of reference at the national level needs to close. There are several dimensions to this more political and more relevant role⁶³:

- empowering local actors to make a better case to decision-makers by helping them to identify the processes, channels and language to use in domestic political advocacy;
- supporting the political as well as technical function of increasing coherence between Ministries and between NAPs and initiatives like the Great Green Wall. Several national-level respondents point to the importance of high-level political support being concretized in the creation of a Commission or central department focused on DLDD. While not a panacea, this can help to overcome the tendency of bureaucracy towards gate-keeping and territoriality and underwrite stronger continuity of action by softening the effects of politicians' default focus on issues which bring rewards within a single electoral cycle.
- selling NAPs to Heads of State and Ministers of Finance by leading with economic argumentation. With LDN representing a goal which can be formulated in economic terms, the secretariat's role can be to support the steering of national-level dialogue towards this concept;
- catalyzing demand from CSOs and Parliamentarians through a role of convening and facilitating discussion among potential supporters.

The corollary is for Focal Points and other key agents at the national level to be involved in constant political dialogue across all sectors, selling the cross-sectoral benefits of sustainable land management,

63 Not all the dimensions listed would warrant equal weight in each case. The relative importance of each would vary in each country. There is no one package of solutions or tactics which will unlock the door to greater political backing in every setting.

lobbying relevant line ministries to adhere to coherent, integrated programming and mobilizing legislators and CSOs to adopt supportive positions.⁶⁴

The human resource-intensity of this form of work poses questions of capacity of both Focal Points and the secretariat. The secretariat cannot create political energy from nothing, but is more likely to be able to ride a wave of existing commitment, contributing to the actions that states themselves choose to take. Capacity constraints suggest that the secretariat could look to focus its energies on a 'coalition of the willing', providing support to the most engaged and easing off from a principle of universal support.⁶⁵ One international commentator argues for streamlining the sequencing of forming a consensus on the need for a Convention, negotiating its terms, agreeing the institutional mechanics and implementation by *“proceeding straight to implement with those who want to implement and building from that, proving that an idea is possible with a small number of states and making the case at the international level on this basis”*. In practice, the two tracks of political discussion at the international level and the 'feasibility track' of testing ideas on the ground can run in parallel – as with the current LDN pilots. This suggests focusing the role of the secretariat on testing solutions and securing concrete wins on the ground in committed states, allied to smart interventions at the international level to seed the creation and direction of favourable 'waves', a policy and financial environment conducive to states taking the 'right' decisions.

In turn, this points to a need to clarify the status of NAPs themselves. With NAPs not seen as the instrument to organize and bring to the fore governments' preferences, the solution may be to shift pressure off NAPs and to move them up a level to being a general statement of aims or similar for which top-level support is secured as a precondition for elaboration and implementation of specific projects. The purpose of NAPs can be clarified (or reiterated) as a policy framework which sets targets and describes how different projects contribute to meeting them. As such, NAPs would not compete with other initiatives, but provide the umbrella within which these other initiatives can reside, acting – as indeed intended – as an engine for mainstreaming and integrated programming, with the role of Focal Points being that of leading a strategic process and not the implementation of projects. The structure of planning instruments is less important than results, however. If the NAP were an initiative within an umbrella provided by a more privileged issue or process, this need not matter if DLDD issues were taken seriously and acted upon effectively.

There is an argument that NAPs are an inherently imperfect tool for channelling political will once this has been garnered: commitment is not limited to the issues of any one Convention and may be hamstrung by the rigid NAP process. The point is not to dwell on the process, but to concentrate on delivery and hence on encouraging states to *“focus on four or five priorities and let them push these priorities through whichever mechanism is most efficient”*, whether a UNCCD NAP or a climate, risk

64 This function could involve engagement of local government authorities with responsibility for preventive and remedial action in their territories. In some states, it may be easier to operate at the local level given restrictions on political advocacy towards the central government.

65 This can be an issue of degree and of relative priority within a programme of support still notionally available to all. Neither would the secretariat have to be explicit about its strategic choices.

management or other mechanism. Fundamental to this is clarity of goals and the streamlining of reporting systems to focus on top-level outcome and impact indicators to avoid the choice between the current system of heavy, but generally low-value reporting against individual Convention mechanisms and the challenge of measuring progress across disparate work streams.

Annex: host ministries of NAPs among African states as signal of political importance⁶⁶

| State | Host Ministry |
|---|---|
| Angola, Benin, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Chad, Comoros, Ivory Coast, DRC, Equatorial Guinea, Ethiopia, Gabon, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Kenya, Liberia, Madagascar, Mozambique, Namibia, Nigeria, Sao Tome and Principe, Senegal, Seychelles, South Africa, Togo, <i>Tunisia</i> , Zimbabwe | Ministry of Environment or equivalent ⁶⁷ |
| Cape Verde, Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea, Guinea-Bissau, Libya, Mauritius, South Sudan, Sudan, Swaziland, <i>Tunisia</i> , Uganda | Ministry of Agriculture or equivalent ⁶⁸ |
| Algeria, CAR, Republic of Congo, Lesotho, Malawi, Rwanda | Ministry of Forestry or equivalent ⁶⁹ |
| Sierra Leone, Zambia | Ministry of Land or equivalent ⁷⁰ |
| Mauritania | Ministry Delegate to the Prime Minister for the Environment and Sustainable Development |
| Morocco | High Commission for Water, Forests and Desertification Control |
| Niger | National Environmental Council for Sustainable Development, under the Cabinet of the Prime Minister |
| Somalia | Office of the Prime Minister |
| Tanzania | Office of the Vice-President |

66 Ministries do not always fall easily into comparable categories. They are listed against what appears to be the lead responsibility of the Ministry in each case. Details have been taken from the country pages on the UNCCD website. The assumption is that Agriculture > Environment in terms of political importance. The last five listed states represent examples of higher political support for effective action towards fulfilling the Convention.

67 Urban Affairs and the Environment (Angola), the Environment, Habitat and Urbanization (Benin), Environment, Wildlife and Tourism (Botswana), Environment and Sustainable Development (Burkina Faso, Mali, Senegal), Water, the Environment and Planning (Burundi), Environment and the Protection of Nature (Cameroon), Environment and Fisheries (Chad), Production, the Environment, Energy, Industry and Craft (Comoros), Environment, Urban Health and Sustainable Development (Ivory Coast), Environment, Conservation of Nature and Tourism (DRC), Environment and Fisheries (Eq. Guinea), Environment and Forests (Ethiopia, Madagascar, Togo), Environment, Work and Sustainable Development (Gabon), Environment, Parks and Wildlife Management (Gambia), Environment, Science, Technology and Innovation (Ghana), Environment, Water and Forests (Guinea), Environment and Mineral Resources (Kenya), Environment and Tourism (Namibia), Planning and the Environment (Sao Tome and Principe), Environment and Energy (Seychelles), Environment and Natural Resources Management (Zimbabwe).

68 Agriculture and Fishing (Cape Verde), Agriculture, Livestock and the Seas (Djibouti), Agriculture and **Land Reclamation** (Egypt), Agriculture and Rural Development (Guinea-Bissau), Ministry of Agro-Industry, Food Production and Security (Mauritius), Agriculture, Forestry, Cooperatives and Rural Development (South Sudan), Agriculture and the Environment (Tunisia), Agriculture, Animal Industries and Fisheries (Uganda).

69 Forest Economy, Environment and Tourism (CAR), Forest Economy and Sustainable Development (Republic of Congo), Forestry and **Land Reclamation** (Lesotho), Forests and Mines (Rwanda).

70 Lands, Housing, Country Planning and the Environment (Sierra Leone), Lands, Natural Resources and Environmental Protection (Zambia).