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Rights-based approach to combatting desertification: A matter of duty, not of charity

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Bonn, 4 September 2017. The 13th Conference of Parties (COP) to the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) is being held this week in Ordos, China, with the theme, "Combatting Desertification for Human Well-Being". This year's theme, however, only reflects desertification as a cause of human ill-being. It does not show that desertification is a result of factors such as climatic variations and unsustainable human activities on productive land. The causes of desertification are complex, ranging from the more recognisable "proximate causes" that are geophysical in nature up to the less perceptible "underlying causes" such as poverty. The UNCCD promotes Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN) as a means to fight desertification. Yet the aim of LDN in achieving no net loss of healthy and productive land may only address the proximate rather than the underlying causes of desertification. If desertification is to be reversed and prevented, its underlying causes also need to be considered. The UNCCD cannot do it alone.

The power of three

The UNCCD and the other two Rio Conventions – the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) – were all negotiated and adopted at the time of the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (more popularly known as the "Earth Summit") held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. With the concept of sustainable development underpinning these conventions, the need to maximize their synergies was emphasized from the beginning. The environmental foci of the three conventions are interconnected; for example, desertification and loss of biodiversity are two of several slow-onset impacts of climate change. In spite of this, a Joint Liaison Group (JLG) between the three Rio Conventions was only established in 2001. Up to this day, the JLG is still exploring "concrete, potential lines of cooperation". The JLG has the potential to play a key role in identifying and exploring solutions to underlying – and not only proximate – causes of desertification. However, as an informal forum that meets only once a year, the JLG's mandate is only limited to "enhancing coordination" and "exploring options for further cooperation" among the Rio Conventions.

Address underlying causes to improve human well-being

The underlying causes of desertification need to be addressed alongside its proximate causes; otherwise, its causes and effects become stuck in a vicious cycle. Poverty is an underlying cause of desertification, but desertification also results in poverty. If a household's resources are only enough for its basic needs, alternative practices such as LDN or sustainable land management may take some time before they are adopted. It is important to find an approach that emphasizes the development challenges exacerbated by desertification. As products of the Earth Summit, the UNCCD along with the two other Rio Conventions mostly operate from an environmental perspective focusing on ecosystems rather than people. The foremost objective of LDN, for instance, is to maintain land-based natural capital and ecosystem services, with human well-being and food security as by-products. If well-being is to be improved, outcomes for both social and ecological systems must be considered.

Rights-based approach to address underlying causes

The UNCCD has a strategic partnership with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), which established the Integrated Drylands Development Programme (IDDP). The programme is a people-centred approach to reaching SDG Target 15.3 on combatting desertification by 2030. This has the potential to address underlying causes of desertification, but change depends on governments mainstreaming dryland issues into their policies.

A rights-based approach emphasises a universal responsibility in addressing underlying causes of desertification. The UN has previously emphasised the links between poverty and human rights and stated that fighting poverty is a "matter of duty, not of charity." If combatting desertification were to really contribute to human well-being, the UNCCD and the JLG as well as the IDDP should employ a rights-based approach in addressing the proximate and underlying causes of desertification. As the underlying causes of desertification are also shared by other environmental challenges such as deforestation and biodiversity loss, the impacts of a rights-based approach in addressing desertification may extend far beyond its targets.