PROGRESS TOWARDS THE SDG LAND DEGRADATION AND RESTORATION COMMITMENTS

WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THE 2022 VNRs AND THE SGD INDICATORS' GLOBAL DATABASE?

SDG LAND
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THE SDG LAND MOMENTUM GROUP

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

THIS BRIEF

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

Seven years after the SDGs were set in motion and nearly half of the way into their implementation timeframe, it is important to assess how far we have come: what have countries done to address their ambitious but critical cross-cutting commitments to combat desertification, restore degraded land and soil, and strive to achieve a land degradation-neutral world? This assessment is particularly timely given that the **2022 High Level Political Forum**[1] reviewed progress toward **SDG 15**[2] on life on land and considered the *integrated, indivisible, and interlinked nature of the SDGs*. As such, we studied progress towards land-focused elements of reports on SDG 15 to "*protect, restore, and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and half and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss.*"

There are indeed countries that have advanced their SDG land degradation and restoration commitments. Some have undertaken thoughtful planning or allocated new resources. Others have augmented or strengthened land restoration and sustainable land management practices in an inclusive way. A few have introduced ambitious reforms, established new national programs, or drafted new legislation to ensure long-term efficacy. While work on deforestation is active and growing, work on land degradation outside of the forestry sector is relatively uncommon, outside of some examples in Africa where reporting on land degradation is growing at least in country reporting. Our review suggests that many countries have yet to prioritize land degradation neutrality in their national development agendas and most have not undertaken significant action. Even those who have acted decisively have a long way to go before their new laws, policies and strategies are fully implemented, or their programs reach the necessary scale.

1 https://hlpf.un.org/2022
2 https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal15

This lack of sufficient action is particularly vexing since many countries have also made similar environmental commitments to other UN frameworks: the **UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)**[3] and the **UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD)**[4]. Since the commitments and reporting requirements of the SDGs overlap significantly with those of the UNFCCC and UNCCD, policy designers have mutually reinforced incentives to advance this SDG commitment. When environmental degradation is minimized and restoration efforts are prioritized, ecosystems can sequester and store more carbon and lessen the impact of some climate change effects. As we advance the UN Decade of Ecosystem Restoration 2021-2030, we can hope to see greater alignment and collaboration across the agencies striving for a more sustainable world.

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

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

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

BACKGROUND ON SOURCES

For the analysis that follows we have relied on the 43 publicly available Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) submitted for the 2022 High Level Political Forum by Andorra, Argentina, Belarus, Botswana, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Djibouti, Dominica, El Salvador, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Eswatini, Ethiopia, Gabon, Gambia, Ghana, Greece, Grenada, Guinea Bissau, Italy, Jamaica, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Latvia, Lesotho, Liberia, Luxemburg, Malawi, Mali, Montenegro, Netherlands, Pakistan, Philippines, Sao Tome and Principe, Senegal, Somalia, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Suriname, Switzerland, Togo, United Arab Emirates, and Uruguay.

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

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

» VNRs that report concrete actions such as a new or revised national strategy, legal or policy reforms, programmatic action, active policy implementation, or similar measures. Many governments described existing policies' goals or aspirational activities; however, these statements are not included below.

» VNRs that report activities that have taken place after the SDGs have been agreed upon and set in motion; that is, since 2015. Important as past actions might be, we sought recent policies or implementation activities.

Several countries have reported taking *decisive action on SDG 15.3* (halting land degradation). *Many countries have also reported related activities that protect or restore land under SDG 15.2 (sustainable forest management) and SDG 13 (climate action).* We have also included these reported actions where relevant to land restoration or protection.

3   https://unfccc.int
4   https://www.unccd.int

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

» **ANDORRA –** The country adopted Law 7/2019 on Conservation of the Natural Environment, Biodiversity and Landscape. The law provided a framework for establishing the National Landscape Strategy (ENPA) (2021-2035) setting in place mechanisms for landscape conservation and balanced use planning.

» **BOTSWANA –** In 2020, the country launched a Land Degradation Neutrality project.

» **CAMEROON –** A national strategy and action plan for implementing the Great Green Wall initiative was developed in 2020 to stabilize degraded lands. The country also reports several recent reforestation efforts and projects to support participatory forest management.

» **CÔTE D'IVOIRE –** The country has committed to 100 percent restoration of degraded land by 2030 through initiatives such the African Forest Landscape Initiative (committed in 2016) and the Abidjan Initiative, a program for sustainable soil management and forest ecosystem restoration presented in 2021.

The 2017 National REDD+ Strategy was adopted to restore forest cover and includes a "*zero deforestation agriculture*" component. The Joint Action Framework of the Cocoa and Forests Initiative was adopted with the goal of eliminating deforestation in the cocoa supply chain. Further, the Policy for the Preservation, Rehabilitation and Extension of Forests (2018) and a new Forest Code (2019) were adopted for use in ensuring sustainable forest management.

» **DJIBOUTI –** The country greatly in strengthened its programming to support the Great Green Wall, including work on improving agro-pastoral systems, supporting fragile ecosystems, and plantation projects to counter desertification and degradation.

» **DOMINICA –** The country adopted a National Forest Policy in 2022 and a 'Million Tree Planting' is being carried out to re-establish forest lost during Hurricane Maria.

» **EQUATORIAL GUINEA –** The country adopted a National Land Management Policy and Equatorial Guinea 2035 Agenda to support environmental and territorial planning to use resources sustainably and reduce the loss of forests.

» **ERITREA –** The government reports that it is implementing a variety of soil conservation programs to restore and rehabilitate degraded land.
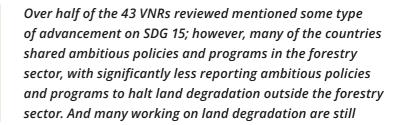
» **ESWATINI –** Since 2019, mapping of degraded areas in the country is being supported by the Global Environment Fund (GEF). The country is also implementing measures to restore degraded lands and soils resulting in a slight improvement of protected areas with restored lands.

» **ETHIOPIA –** In 2017 funding was secured from the Green Climate Fund to rehabilitate and manage degraded lands around water sources. A Green Legacy Program was launched in 2019/20 to increase forest coverage through wide-scale tree planting. The country rehabilitated 2.8 million hectares of land in 2020/21. Ethiopia adopted a National REDD+ Strategy (2016-2030) to reduce deforestation and forest degradation.

» **GABON –** In 2018, the Cross-Cutting Program for National Land Use Planning and Forest Monitoring was launched (as part of Gabon's participation in the Central African Forest Initiative) to promote improved strategies for land allocation and monitoring of land use with the goal of reducing/minimizing deforestation and forest degradation.

» **GAMBIA –** In 2016 the country launched Action Against Desertification to support rural communities in controlling land degradation and managing forests. In the same year it launched the Community Based Dryland Forest Management project to counter land degradation. Further, the 2022 Rural Integrated Climate Adaptation Resilience Building Project (RICAR) includes a component to support climate resilient agriculture and improve soils. Finally, the Ecosystem Based Adaptation Project (2017-2023) includes work to restore degraded forest and agricultural land; 7,000 hectares have been reported as restored through this project.

» **GHANA –** In 2021 the government developed a Digital Soil Map and AgricTech App to provide soil resource information for policy making, planning, and to support technology transfer. In the same year, the president launched the Green Ghana Project as part of an extensive afforestation and reforestation program. The country also adopted a National REDD+ Strategy (2016-2040). Finally, the NGO-led Regreening Africa project is cited by the report as an important case study in Ghana and the project includes Farmer-Managed Natural Regeneration (FRNR) to restore degraded lands.

» **GREECE –** The country reports adopting a legislative and policy framework to ensure the protection and preservation of agricultural lands to avoid its loss and degradation. The country has also created and is ratifying forest maps to ensure protection and sustainable management of forests. Further, the 2020 law to modernize spatial and urban planning was passed to ensure better land use planning, protection of designated areas, and to combat urban sprawl. Finally, a National Reforestation Plan was reported to be starting in 2022.

» **JAMAICA –** Several landscape, forestry, and watershed management projects include components to restore degraded land, such as the Jamaican Path from Hills to Ocean project and the 2019 National Tree Planting Initiative. Two plans also support land protection and restoration including the National Mangrove Forest Management Plan (2018-2021) and National Forest Management and Conservation Plan (2016-2026).

» **LATVIA –** The country reports that 2,220 hectares of degraded ecosystems have been restored and that criteria and procedures to identify, classify, and assess degraded areas and soils are in place, including degradation prevention plans.

» **LESOTHO –** In 2021 the country launched ReNOKA ("*We are a river*") as a national program to combat land degradation through integrated catchment management. The country also developed a Land Cover Atlas (2017) providing statistics on hectares of trees, shrubs, and grasslands, which is being used for land use planning and rehabilitation. Finally, the country is implementing the Smallholder Agriculture Development Project II (SADP II), which includes the promotion of climate smart agricultural technologies.

» **LIBERIA –** The Liberia Forest Sector Project (LFSP) has the objective of improving forest management and strengthening implementation of the country's REDD program.

» **MALAWI –** The country reports that it has scaled up implementation of its National Forest Landscape Restoration Strategy (2017), which earmarked conservation of 4.5 million hectares of land.

» **MALI –** For the year 2020, Mali listed undertaking multiple projects to counter desertification and land degradation, such as biological and mechanical fixation of dunes as well as projects to sustainably manage land and water.

» **MONTENEGRO –** The country adopted a 2018 Land Degradation Neutrality Report and 2020 National Drought Plan and reports that activities are underway to remediate degraded lands.

» **PAKISTAN –** The Green Stimulus Package (GSP) and Ten Billion Tree Tsunami Programme, both implemented in recent years, aim to restore forests and combat land degradation and desertification. To combat desertification, the country reports that it is working to halt rapid land degradation and combat desertification through sustainable land management practices at the local level. The 2016 National Forest Policy supports increased tree cover and conservation of biologically diverse areas.

» **PHILIPPINES –** In 2017 Bataan Province launched the 1 million Trees for 1 Bataan project.

» **SAO TOME AND PRINCIPE –** The Directorate of Forestry implemented a reforestation program in 2017, planting 5,000 trees per year and which is still underway.

» **SRI LANKA –** In 2022 the Green Sri Lanka National Program was launched with the objective of increasing forest cover to 30 percent by 2025. It also includes work to preserve existing forest cover.

» **SURINAME –** The country is working to empower Indigenous and Tribal Peoples to engage in REDD+ preparedness. Further, the Planning of Our Future project includes work to manage, preserve, and protect the land of Indigenous communities.

» **SWITZERLAND –** The Swiss National Soil Strategy was adopted in 2020 to preserve soil health. In 2020 the country adopted a Forest Policy to ensure sustainable, natural management.

» **SUDAN –** The Range and Pasture General Directorate completed a Range Inventory of Sudan, which will contribute to improved resource management. Sudan's forest conservation efforts were launched through its initiation of REDD+. In 2017 a plan for Forest National Conservation was adopted.

» **TOGO –** To preserve and restore lands and prevent desertification, in the 2018 to 2021 time period, Togo reports that it adopted a decree (decree 2021-083/PR of 2019) to reduce forest loss by restricting exports, developed a national reforestation strategy, prepared a national drought plan, completed a second national Forest Inventory (IFN2), built the capacity of women's farmer cooperatives to sustainably manage natural resources, and adopted a National Strategy for REDD+.

» **URUGUAY –** The Climately Smart Livestock project works to restore degraded land through the promotion of climate smart practices in the livestock sector. The country is also implementing REDD+ and has developed a new strategy for forest management.

While these are all promising steps, considerably more work is needed. These laws, strategies, and activities need to reach the scale needed to ultimately fulfil the goal of land restoration and land degradation neutrality by 2030.

Over half of the 43 VNRs reviewed mentioned some type of advancement on SDG 15; however, many of the countries shared ambitious policies and programs in the forestry sector, with significantly less reporting ambitious policies and programs to halt land degradation outside the forestry sector. And many working on land degradation are still

at the assessment and inventory stage, rather than the action stage. We do positively note that the current reports from African countries tend to be more likely to note work to counter land degradation and desertification. However, much more is needed to achieve measurable progress on the ground.

Until VNRs focus on effective scaled actions rather than drafted documents, inventories, and limited activities, the SDGs are falling short of their intended global transformation.

We are hopeful that recent increased international funding commitments will lead to further action on the SDG land degradation targets. We note that the Global Forest Finance pledge made at COP 26 and the commitment to a loss and damage fund made at COP 27 may both help countries prioritize their goals related to SDG 15.

WHAT PROGRESS HAS BEEN MADE SO FAR ON INDICATOR 15.3.1?

The relevant outcome-based land degradation indicator is SDG 15.3.1, which tracks the proportion of land that is degraded over total land area in pursuance of Target 15.3: "*By 2030, combat desertification, restore degraded land and soil, including land affected by desertification, drought and floods, and strive to achieve a land degradation neutral world.*" Based on the 2022 VNRs, we conclude that:

There has been very limited update for this indicator in the VNRs. From the 2022 VNRs, only two countries reported clear new data to compare against the 2015 baseline data: Pakistan and Eswatini. Pakistan reported that indicator 15.3.1 was 5% in 2015 and improved to 0.04% in 2019. Eswatini reported that that 15.3.1 was 30% in 2015 and remained at 30% as of the VNR. Several countries provided alternative, tangential, or unclear information on 15.3.1 (Botswana, Ghana, Kazakhstan, Malawi, and Togo). And some countries reported 2015 baseline figures for 15.3.1, but provided no update (Djibouti, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Guinea Bissau, Jordan, and Latvia).

This lack of comprehensive uptake of indicator 15.3.1 is concerning for two reasons.

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

» The UNCCD, Food and Agriculture Organization, UN Statistics Division, UN Environment, UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, and Convention on Biological Diversity have built SDG indicator metadata that allow countries to retrieve freely available national data from global and regional datasets derived from satellite imagery on land cover and land cover change, land productivity, and soil organic carbon stocks[5]. Given this global framework alignment with the UNCCD and freely available data, it is disappointing to see limited uptake for this indicator in VNR reporting.

Data on indicator SDG 15.3.1 in the Global SDG Indicators Database[6] is limited to 2015. The Global SDG Indicators Database tracks annual entries for each SDG indicator for each country. It is unclear whether the lack of information is due to the SDG database failing to update for 2016-2022 or whether not a single country has reported on 15.3.1 in the global database since 2015. Regardless, without the ability to monitor progress on indicator 15.3.1 in an easy and timely fashion, the SDG platform cannot pressure countries to act.

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

6   **https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/dataportal/**

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

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