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# COP14 on desertification: a land agenda that advances in the interest of climate, biodiversity and people

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While climate and biodiversity are now major concerns on the international discussion agenda, the potential of nature-based solutions (NBS) in general, and land restoration in particular, is increasingly recognised. In this context, the accumulation of experience and political will within the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), which held its last Conference of the Parties (COP14) in Delhi, India, last September, could be used to promote the fight against climate change and the preservation of biodiversity.

In this guest blogpost, Marie-Hélène Schwoob, advisor to the Executive Secretary of the UNCCD, deciphers the actions of a convention that links these two major topics.

The subjects of negotiation of the UNCCD, which emerged at the 1992 Earth Summit alongside the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), are likely to affect nearly half of the world's land surface and population. Desertification is all too often wrongly associated with deserts, such as the sandy stretches of the Sahara, while it refers to the phenomenon of land degradation in arid, semi-arid and dry sub-humid areas. These areas, which [represent 46% of the Earth's total surface area and are home to about three billion people](#), some of the most vulnerable on the planet, are far from being "deserts"; they are home to [44% of all cultivated systems](#). While it is true that developing countries are particularly affected by the problem, the countries declared affected are found on all continents, with no fewer than 12 countries located in the European Union.<sup>1</sup>

The UNCCD is the international convention for which land is the main focus of concern and study. Neutrality in land degradation is at the heart of the actions of the country Parties, [122 of which have committed themselves to setting targets for land degradation](#). More than 80 countries have already adopted national targets, and have been supported by the [Global Mechanism](#) in setting targets and implementing projects and programmes. The sustainable management and land restoration<sup>2</sup> or rehabilitation<sup>3</sup> actions undertaken under these objectives constitute a unique accumulation of experiences, especially in a context where both the [IPBES](#) and the [IPCC](#) warn of the major importance of land: land use change is the main cause of biodiversity decline, according to the IPBES, while the recent IPCC report on soils highlights the potential role that land could play in climate change mitigation, as land comes second after the oceans as the largest carbon sink.<sup>4</sup> Land restoration therefore appears, in the light of the latest scientific evidence, as a nature-based solution—some studies demonstrating its [low costs](#) and [good returns on investment](#)—that could make the link between climate and biodiversity agendas.

The 14th Conference of the Parties of the UNCCD (COP14), held in Delhi, India, from 2 to 13 September, brought together the global land restoration community, bringing together nearly 9,000 participants (local and national governments, heads of State and United Nations organisations, but also representatives of the private sector and civil society) around the theme "Investing in land: developing opportunities". In addition to the emphasis on land-climate-biodiversity linkages, the conference carried the important message that combating land degradation goes beyond the biophysical aspects to which it has been confined for too long, and is carried out above all as a struggle for humans; land restoration is indeed a means of economic development and improving people's living conditions. At the technical level, COP14 adopted some 30 decisions to encourage Parties that had not yet committed to it to make neutrality in land degradation (see Sustainable Development Goal 15.3) a national target. The decisions also identify deadlocks in implementation and actions on the ground, related to land and gender, as well as avenues to address them: Parties are therefore invited to take these aspects into consideration in order to create an enabling environment for combating land degradation, and the UNCCD monitoring and reporting framework will be reworked to take into account gender and integrate existing indicators related to land governance. The Committee on Science and Technology, for its part, emphasised the importance of production and consumption patterns. In terms of combating droughts, whose frequency, intensity and geographical scope are constantly increasing, the creation of a [toolkit](#) and the multiplication of training and capacity-building activities have been implemented. The participation of non-state actors and the mobilisation of innovative financial resources were at the heart of COP14, with the holding of forums, parallel events and high-level events that served to catalyse meetings and reflections. Finally, COP14 allowed the launch of initiatives such as South Korea's Peace Forest initiative<sup>5</sup> or the commitment of the Indian Prime Minister N. Modi for increasing the national restoration ambition from 21 to 26 million hectares by 2030 and for supporting developing countries.

UNCCD COP 14 thus demonstrated that the land agenda is moving forward and that the commitment of countries and non-state actors to restoration is materialising. But these solutions still constitute only a very small fraction of the solutions envisaged, the knowledge mobilised and, above all, the investments ([public<sup>6</sup>](#) and [private<sup>7</sup>](#)) made, even though the deterioration continues to cost between [10% and 17% of world GDP](#) each year. Experiences in land

restoration and sustainable land management are multiplying **throughout the world**, databases are flourishing. All that remains to be explored is how to change the scale of the action. The three Rio conventions should explore margins for progress in the coming years.

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1 Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Malta, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain.

2 Restoration refers to the process of supporting the recovery of an ecosystem that has been degraded, aimed at restoring pre-existing ecological structure and functions, including biotic integrity ( [https://www.unccd.int/sites/default/files/documents/2019-06/LDN\\_CF\\_report\\_web-french\\_0.pdf](https://www.unccd.int/sites/default/files/documents/2019-06/LDN_CF_report_web-french_0.pdf) ).

3 Rehabilitation refers to measures taken to restore the functionality of ecosystems, with an emphasis on goods and services provided rather than on restoration ( [https://www.unccd.int/sites/default/files/documents/2019-06/LDN\\_CF\\_report\\_web-french\\_0.pdf](https://www.unccd.int/sites/default/files/documents/2019-06/LDN_CF_report_web-french_0.pdf) ).

4 A study shows that conservation, restoration and better land management measures could represent 37% of cost-effective mitigation measures by 2030. <https://www.pnas.org/content/114/44/11645>

5 <https://www.unccd.int/news-events/cop14-peace-forest-initiative-discussed-seoul>

6 In sub-Saharan Africa, some studies show that government resources allocated to land-related sectors account for 5% of expenditures <https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007%2F978-3-319-19168-3.pdf>

7 Investments in sustainable land use constitute a fraction of total investments in land, between US\$1.3 billion and US\$51.8 billion [https://unfccc.int/files/cooperation\\_and\\_support/financial\\_mechanism/standing\\_committee/application/pdf/tools\\_to\\_unlock\\_finance\\_for\\_sustainable\\_land-use.pdf](https://unfccc.int/files/cooperation_and_support/financial_mechanism/standing_committee/application/pdf/tools_to_unlock_finance_for_sustainable_land-use.pdf)

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