Lessons for Sustainable Development from the UN's Global Desertification Regime

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Sustainable development is a key guiding principle for global environmental governance. Premised on the assumption that environmental, economic, and social objectives can be integrated together, sustainable development found widespread support amongst policy-makers at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro 1992. This notion became legally articulated in the main institutional outputs of the UNCED process, including Agenda 21 and three parallel environmental regimes designed to address important global sustainability issues: the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, the Convention on Biological Diversity, and the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD). But more than two decades on, these agreements are in trouble. Significant problems are evident in their implementation, raising doubts over the commitments on sustainable development made by national representatives at Rio. These implementing issues are highly evident in the Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), an agreement which has to date 'received scant attention by governments' (Tollefson and Gilbert 2012: 23). Despite some successes, the Convention provides important lessons – and perhaps some normative solutions – regarding the multiple constraints on embedding sustainable development through global governance.

International action on desertification enjoyed some degree of political support prior to Rio. Faced with serious threats from drought and famine, particularly in Africa, the United Nations Environment Programme convened a Conference on Desertification in 1977. The discussions lead to the publication of a UN Plan of Action to Combat Desertification, although its approach was considered 'top-down' and too reliant on the establishment of state-level institutions (Stringer 2008: 2066). African countries were then instrumental in lobbying for the inclusion of a global agreement on desertification in the Rio UNCED process (Toulmin 1995). The resulting Convention proposal was strongly supported by developing countries but met with some resistance from developed nations, particularly those in Europe, who argued that land degradation was not their problem (Stringer 2006). In spite of these concerns, the Convention was finally agreed in 1994, with 191 countries ratifying by 2006.

At the time, the Convention was considered an important mechanism for ensuring the sustainable development of dryland ecosystems. Article 2 of the agreement therefore establishes its core objectives in terms of combatting desertification and mitigating the impacts of drought, particularly in African countries (UN General Assembly 1994: 6). A strong emphasis is also placed upon the importance of such objectives in 'contributing to the achievement of sustainable development' (*ibid.*). Measures introduced include, *inter alia*, general obligations on parties to support the objectives, the development of National Action Programmes on desertification linked to regional and sub-regional actions, and the establishment of a Committee on Science and Technology. In keeping with the principles of sustainable development articulated at Rio, the Convention also privileges the role of communities in developing action programmes. The Convention provides a channel for local land users to be involved in preventing desertification. These actors are also encouraged to form new alliances and partnerships that link states, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), international institutions, and communities. A dedicated funding body, the Global Mechanism, was also established in order to help access financial resources from sources such as the UN's Global Environment Facility in support of national-level implementation.

In the intervening years, the Convention has enjoyed some successes. Firstly, it is recognised as an important

symbolic milestone in promoting desertification as a global issue. To date, 195 countries have signed the Convention, while many states have taken action. For example, the UNCCD Secretariat lists 26 National Action Programmes in Africa, although the majority date from the early 2000s (UNCCD 2012). Regional cooperation is also occurring in the Mediterranean, South America, Africa, and Asia, with several sub-regional programmes also established. Secondly, as Chasek *et al*. (2014: 2) note, the Convention text 'excels in capturing sustainability' through linking environmental, economic and social objectives, also providing an important mechanism for 'poverty reduction, gender equality, community participation, and science-based land management'. Finally, it has provided a framework for mobilising funding for development in developing countries.

Yet, several major challenges are apparent. Most saliently, the agreement has failed to halt global desertification. The Rio+20 Conference in 2012 noted that 'desertification, land degradation, and drought… continue to pose serious challenges to the sustainable development of all countries' (UNCSD 2012: 36). According to the UNCCD, 110 countries in the 1990s suffered dryland degradation but in 2013 this figure had grown to 168 states (UNCCD 2013: 2). The same assessment report records that the percentage of 'highly degraded' land globally was 15% of the total area in 1991 but by 2011 this had increased to 25% (*ibid*.: 4). Universal national support for the Convention is also beginning to erode: Canada pulled out of the agreement in 2013, citing concerns over its financial contribution. Although many National Action Programmes have been published, Chasek *et al*. (2014: 2) argue that they 'are irrelevant to mainstream policy making and development', with international funders preferring bilateral cooperation arrangements. This feature in turn relates to another deficiency, namely that funding from developed countries has not generally been forthcoming, reflecting their perception that desertification is still a developing country problem. By 2011, only $329 million had been provided by the Global Environment Facility for implementation (Tollefson and Gilbert 2012). Without the necessary funding, developing countries can lack the institutional, scientific and technical capacity to implement the Convention. Technology transfer, for instance, has not been effectively facilitated to prevent injurious land management practices (Tal 2007; Tal and Cohen 2007). Public participation in combating desertification has also proved highly constrained in practice (Stringer *et al*. 2007). Implementation itself has been impaired, according to experts, by the difficulties in defining key concepts such as desertification, which have become subject to scientific and political contestation (Gilbert 2011). Another constraint is the relatively low capacity of the Convention Secretariat to compel implementation, as it is reliant on national cooperation. Finally, there is only limited coordination with the two parallel UN agreements on climate change and biodiversity, despite the establishment of a UN Joint Liaison Group in 2001. This lack of global 'joined-up' thinking is perhaps particularly poignant, given the Convention objectives to support wider sustainable development and the interconnectedness of land degradation, climate and biodiversity issues.

Potential solutions may be equally problematic to put into effect. Recognising widespread implementation deficits, the UNCCD embarked on a review process in 2007. The outcome of the review, a 10-year strategy covering 2008-2018, contains both strategic and operational objectives (UNCCD 2008). High-level international commitment for the strategy was also provided by the Rio+20 Conference, which pledged its commitment 'to achieve a land-degradation neutral world' (UNCSD 2012: 36; see also Chasek *et al.* 2014). But several of the strategy objectives, such as ensuring implementation and mobilizing resources, have consistently run up against a lack of concerted international cooperation in the past. The situation appears both paradoxical and intractable. Developing countries have the requisite political support for implementation but possess only limited resources, while developed countries could provide the resources but lack political engagement (Stringer 2006).

In this respect, the Convention highlights the constraints on global sustainability governance more generally. As Connelly *et al*. (2012) argue, sustainable development is often perceived by developed countries to be a developing country issue, while the anarchic nature of the international state-led system means securing the cooperation of governments is often difficult in the absence of strong, legally binding and enforceable institutions. One evident response could be greater vertical 'subsidiarity' (Benson *et al*. 2014) within the global desertification regime. The UNCCD text heavily promotes community engagement, public participation, and local knowledge in managing desertification. Providing the requisite scientific and financial resources are made available, empowering local actors through more ecosystem-based 'collaborative management' approaches (Benson *et al*. 2013) may therefore be one way forward for the UNCCD. Another may be through recognising the sectoral interconnectivity of land degradation via the promotion of innovative horizontal policy responses at all institutional levels. As Tollefson and Gilbert (2012:

23) observe, 'the problem of land degradation cannot be solved in isolation because it is intrinsically tied to the other issues that brought leaders to Rio in 1992'. Nexus-type thinking, which seeks to integrate water, climate, food production, energy, and trade concerns (see WEF 2011), is beginning to enter political discourses at national, EU, and global levels. There is consequently, we would argue, significant potential to link the Convention objectives with parallel global regimes for climate mitigation, biodiversity loss, trade liberalisation, and water management in order to better re-connect it with the broader sustainable development agenda.

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