Desertification: The Way Forward

by Saidou Koala, Hartmut Krugmann, Eglal Rached, and Ola Smith

The ecological crisis associated with desertification has by no means gone unchallenged by the global community. Indeed, nearly twenty years have passed since the United Nations Conference on Desertification (UNCOD) in 1977. Despite past responses, the battle against desertification has achieved little and it is time to draw lessons from past experience in order to plot a new course.

Past efforts to combat desertification have tended to use "top-down" approaches concentrating on technical means to halt, control or reverse land degradation. They assumed that traditional systems required major transformations, that governments would develop and transfer new sustainable land use practices to rural areas and that involvement of local communities was neither necessary nor desirable.

Since the early 1980s, however, there has been growing recognition that without the integration of local people's socio-economic and cultural realities, the transfer and application of the world's best technologies cannot solve the problem of desertification. This latter point has been identified by most development agencies as a primary reason for the failure of most anti-desertification projects in the 1970s and 80s.

Realities such as local institutional and authority structures, class, ethnic and gender relations, inter- and intra-household dynamics, markets, trade and economic incentives, labour and migratory patterns, and land tenure and management arrangements all have profound effects upon the success of any development efforts, including projects addressing desertification issues. Integrating these realities into such projects cannot occur without the full participation of local people in all parts of project design and implementation. The need for a "bottom-up" approach concentrating upon both socioeconomic and technical issues is becoming ever more clear.

In addition, we have learned that the response to desertification must be integrated at local, national, and international levels. At the local level, integrated approaches to research and action are required to handle the systemic complexity of linkages between people and nature. As a rule, interventions should be "cross-sectoral," designed on the basis of interrelated local biophysical, socioeconomic, institutional and social aspects, factors and processes.

It is no exaggeration to say that the struggle against desertification will be won or lost at the household, community, and municipal level. Essentially, desertification has been facilitated by local people not having the means to use their resource base sustainably, as they used to. The causes behind the impoverishment of local people in terms of both lack of resources and lack of influence on decision-making processes are many and interrelated -- insecure land tenure, population growth, short-term decision making intended simply to cope, and the general marginalization of local people.

On the basis of this diagnosis, in order to control or even reverse desertification, local rural people (via their community-level institutions) need to:
have greater control and responsibility over their local resources;
be able to command a greater range and level of resources to be more "resourceful";
participate in and influence higher-level decision-making processes that affect them; and
be able to organize themselves more effectively by forming or influencing representative local institutions and interacting horizontally with institutions of other communities by means of locally controlled information and communication systems.

Women are often the principal household-level natural resource managers and the custodians of crucial knowledge about natural resource use and management. As such, they must have greater influence and control over their lives, over the natural resource base and its use, access to resources and credit, and effective participation in decision-making processes.

The empowerment of local people, women, communities and institutions requires an enabling environment at national and international levels. Such an enabling environment must have certain key elements. At the national level there must be more democratic, participatory and decentralized political and administrative structures. These structures would require devolving authority and resources over natural resource management to government levels as close as possible to local people and institutions at the forefront of using and managing natural resources, i.e. those whose livelihood depends directly on the integrity of the natural resource base.

Systems and policies for resource/land tenure and ownership must reflect existing socio-cultural diversity across local settings and allow statutory laws to build on local customary rules, instead of undermining them. Economic policies, structural adjustment approaches, and marketing structures should enhance local rural marketing possibilities and improve -- or at least not affect negatively -- the terms of trade between local communities and larger-scale markets and between rural and urban areas.

Local capacity for self-help should be fostered and technical and financial support provided to community institutions on the part of NGOs, governments and donors. Finally, formal education systems and policies should give greater weight to traditional local knowledge, combining it with modern scientific knowledge in natural resource management and use.

At the international level, an enabling environment for fighting desertification would require world trade patterns and policies that ensure access by poor developing countries to Northern and other Southern markets and allow these countries to build up and diversify their economic base. Some measure of protection for key sectors in poor developing countries may have to be allowed to support fledgling enterprises that cannot yet compete globally. Trade policies should be consistent with international development assistance to avoid anomalies such as subsidized meat exports from the European Community to West Africa and parallel EC development assistance to small livestock owners whose livelihoods are being undermined by the exports. International donor assistance to the South should also be appropriately coordinated.

Finally, there is a need for the gradual reduction in foreign debt obligations, possibly linked to progress in creating a national-level enabling environment for sustainable local livelihoods and concomitant control of desertification.

**WHAT WE DO NOT KNOW**

The steps discussed above to create an enabling environment indicate that the essential elements in a framework for effective action on desertification are known. Most elements of the framework are reflected in the draft text of the Desertification Convention, which was fine-tuned at the meetings of the intergovernmental negotiating committee and is to be signed by September 1994. However, there is little experience in translating such a framework into action in specific local contexts. Many questions surround the application of relevant knowledge, technologies and experiences and their transfer from one place to another. Other questions persist about how to develop the local capacity for such application and experience and how to facilitate learning processes. It is here that further research on capacity-building and
action is needed.

Case studies of different aspects (technical, economic, institutional, organizational) of particular desertification control measures and programs need to be identified and evaluated more systemically and the reasons for their success or failure pinpointed. Further, it is necessary to examine and experiment with capacity-building and learning processes at local and national levels.

Within the elements of the above framework, little empirical information is available about the interrelationships between world trade and structural adjustment programs on the one hand and local desertification processes on the other, nor on how macro-economic policies and market-based instruments can be used to control desertification (please see A Market for Drylands and Deserts?).

Further research is also needed on appropriate land/resource tenure forms. Such research would examine how customary and statutory tenure forms and contents intersect in particular contexts and how they can be made compatible; the effects of widespread privatization of resource tenure in drylands in Africa; and how diverse tenure systems could be developed and maintained (please see Unearthing the Impacts of Land Tenure).

Another topic of great relevance is indigenous knowledge. The challenge is to effectively combine local traditional and modern scientific knowledge to address desertification problems (please see Ancient Ways Guide Modern Methods).

SUPPORTING LOCAL CAPACITY

A further key area where innovation is needed is in developing project and program modalities appropriate for local-level intervention. All too often, large amounts of relatively inflexible financial support end up undermining local capacity rather than strengthening it. This issue raises questions concerning project funding: what kinds of organizations should be supported, at what scale, with what mechanisms, by whom should they be controlled and for what precise purpose?

In parallel to the process of developing and implementing National Action Programs, empirical research in the coming years on the gaps in understanding desertification -- including issues of land/resource tenure, indigenous knowledge, and the impact of world trade and economic policy -- can be fed into national processes as they proceed in an interactive fashion.

With the signing of the Convention this year, the world now has a policy tool to fight desertification. Accompanied by appropriate research and coordinated action at the local, national and international levels, there now exists the opportunity to move forward in restoring environmental integrity for threatened areas and improving food security and economic options for affected peoples.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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