



# Advancing a Human Rights-Based Approach to Desertification, Land Degradation and Drought

## Key Messages of the UN Environment Management Group Issue Management Group on Human Rights and the Environment

### Introduction

Desertification, land degradation and drought are among the greatest environmental challenges we face today. They affect a range of human rights, including the rights to life, food, water, health, an adequate standard of living and culture. According to the UN Human Rights Council, all people have the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment. Guaranteeing this right requires taking effective measures to combat desertification, land degradation and drought.

Major causes of environmental degradation include climate change and unsustainable production and consumption through over-use of land, water and natural resources. Those most impacted are often the poorest people in the poorest countries, deepening the gap between rich and poor. States are required to respect, protect and fulfil the human rights put at risk by desertification, land degradation and drought. To do so they should take effective measures to integrate human rights in efforts to implement the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD).

States must ensure the rights to participation, access to information and access to justice when taking action to prevent desertification, land degradation and drought. Such action should be rights-based, non-discriminatory, transparent and targeted to

benefit those most affected by desertification, land degradation and drought.

### Land Rights

- Access to, use and control of land has a major impact on the achievement of many human rights, including the rights to life, property, food, livelihood, adequate housing, water and sanitation, freedom of movement and residence, as well as the rights of indigenous peoples to their traditional lands, territories and resources.

- The groups most affected by desertification, land degradation and drought are those already in vulnerable situations, as well as those who depend on nature for their livelihoods. This can include women, youth, indigenous peoples, and local communities. Desertification, land degradation and drought worsen existing societal inequalities and discrimination, deepening vulnerability and increasing the risk of human rights harms.

- Those most affected by desertification, land degradation and drought need stronger rights of access to land. UNCCD outcomes that support strengthened land rights for these groups will, among other benefits, enhance their access to nutritious food, promote gender equality and reduce conflicts over resources. Land rights can also help reduce poverty by providing predictable sources of income.

## Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities

- Although they form only 5% of the global population, indigenous peoples' traditional lands, resources and territories cover 22% of the Earth's surface and 80% of its biodiversity. Indigenous peoples and local communities can play a key role in the sustainable management of land, increasing resilience to desertification through traditional knowledge and sustainable land practices that have evolved over generations.

- Many countries do not adequately protect the rights of indigenous peoples over their traditional lands, resources, territories and knowledge. This threatens a wide range of their other rights, including those to self-determination, health, food, development and an adequate standard of living, as well as cultural rights such as the ability to practice and pass on traditional knowledge and sustainable land management practices. It is essential that the rights of indigenous peoples and local communities over their traditional lands, resources, territories and knowledge are recognised in UNCCD outcomes and that indigenous peoples and local communities are able to participate meaningfully and effectively in efforts to prevent desertification, land degradation and drought.

## Gender Equality

- Women and girls are likely to be more impacted by environmental degradation, including desertification, than men, especially where agriculture is the main source of livelihood. Women also tend to have less access to rights over land than men and can face barriers to their participation in policy-making. This can leave them at risk of human rights violations in times of environmental stress, particularly where their mobility is limited.

- At the same time, women play critical roles in agriculture. UNCCD outcomes that empower women and girls can create greater capacity to adapt to desertification, land degradation and drought, including through better water management, land conservation and rehabilitation. These outcomes should include support for women's land rights and their full participation in relevant decision-making processes.

## Children and Youth

- Children and youth, especially those from low-income and indigenous backgrounds, are particularly at risk from environmental harm. Children and youth-led movements play an important role in combatting environmental harm, including desertification. The UNCCD has stressed that youth-oriented programmes should include young farmers and those from vulnerable groups such as indigenous communities. It has emphasised the need for rural youth to have access to sustainable livelihoods, such as through agro eco-tourism. Our Common Agenda and the Secretary-General's Call to Action for Human Rights emphasize the importance of ensuring the right to participation of children and youth in environmental decision-making and protecting the rights of future generations. Strengthening avenues for the participation of children and youth at the UNCCD, such as the Global Youth Caucus, is an important step toward fulfilling their human right to participation and securing more effective outcomes.

## Migration

- While the relationship between desertification, land degradation and population movement is complex, studies have identified clear links across these areas. Droughts and desertification impact a range of human rights, further affecting people in vulnerable situations, including those in rural areas. These environmental factors can affect income and access to basic necessities, fuelling tension and conflict, which in turn drive migration. Sustainable land management and land rehabilitation contribute to a reduction of these risks. Human rights-based outcomes at the UNCCD in this area include proactive measures to support those exposed to desertification, land degradation and drought. It is also necessary to ensure the meaningful participation of those impacted, along with their freedom of choice and movement within conditions that protect human rights.

### More Info

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