Combating Land Degradation

THE ISSUE

Land is a vital resource to humankind, like air and water. Land degradation—the progressive deterioration or loss of the productive capacity of soils for present and future—is a global challenge that is intimately linked to key aspects of human security and well-being: food, jobs, health, and livelihoods. Land degradation affects everyone but most especially the poor and vulnerable through food insecurity, higher food prices, climate change, environmental hazards, and the loss of biodiversity and ecosystem services.

Land degradation and desertification—the extreme form of land degradation in drylands—is one of the world's most pressing environmental problems. It is already happening at an alarming pace, and will worsen without rapid remedial action. Globally, about 25% of the total land area has been degraded. This affects 3.2 billion people, especially rural communities, smallholder farmers, and the very poor.

The world population is projected to increase by about 35% to 9.7 billion in 2050. This will bring rising demands for agricultural products such as food, feed, fiber, and fuel. Climate change exacerbates variations in yields and income from agriculture, threatening the resilience of agro-ecosystems and the stability of food production systems.

Drought is one of the major drivers of global food and water insecurity, affecting crop and livestock production, and access to food and water. Drought can, in extreme cases, force people to abandon their land, resorting to migration as a last livelihood strategy. Every year, 12 million hectares (ha) of land become unproductive due to desertification and drought, threatening the livelihoods of more than 1 billion people in some 100 countries.

THE APPROACH

Comprehensive landscape approaches are the best way to address the broad, multi-faceted nature of land degradation across the range of agro-ecological and climatic zones. The GEF's investments seek to address drivers of degradation through a holistic approach that delivers multiple benefits in reducing and reverting land degradation, conserving biodiversity, and mitigating and adapting to climate change. Therefore, GEF-funded projects and programs emphasize innovative and integrated approaches to sustainable land management (SLM). Such approaches can be scaled up to maximize global benefits for the environment. At the same time, they can help address issues related to biodiversity and climate change, and improve local livelihoods.

The GEF's mandate to invest in global environmental benefits relates directly to its role as a financial mechanism of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD). The GEF Land Degradation Focal Area (LDFA) provides the opportunity for eligible countries to use resources for implementing the Convention and its Strategic Framework 2018–2030. Such interventions should focus on production landscapes where agricultural and rangeland management practices underpin the livelihoods of poor rural farmers and pastoralists.

The GEF actively supports the UNCCD's voluntary Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN) target setting and its implementation. At the fourteenth Conference of the Parties (COP14) in 2019, UNCCD parties invited the GEF, during its current four-year funding cycle (GEF-7), to continue its support for countries in the context of LDN transformative projects and programs. To that end, it invited

Photo by Hari Mahidhar/Shutterstock

the GEF to provide technical and financial support for capacity building, reporting, and implementation of LDN measures on the ground.

Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) are critical contributors in the agricultural sector, positioned at the leading edge of both environmental impacts and their potential solutions. The GEF pursues strategies with the private sector to target SMEs that are promoting innovative agriculture and livestock production systems. The private sector is playing a growing role in efforts to reduce land degradation and bring about landscape restoration. The GEF's Non-Grant Instruments or "Blended Finance" window has been applying innovative finance models that help mobilize private investments to combat global environmental degradation.

Private sector mechanisms such as the LDN Fund are becoming increasingly important in promoting land management transformation. The fund invests in profit-generating SLM and restoration projects worldwide; the GEF supports its technical assistance facility to help countries with project preparedness. The GEF also cooperates with similar types of funds by providing technical assistance and by facilitating de-risking to make projects bankable.

The GEF's support is aligned to promote the UNCCD's LDN concept through an appropriate mix of investments, to seek effective integration with other GEF focal areas in integrated programs for generation of multiple benefits, and to harness private capital and expertise to finance investments in SLM in cooperation with innovative financing mechanisms.

GEF-7 Impact Programs are a centerpiece of the strategy to reduce land degradation and deforestation during 2018–2022.

- The Food Systems, Land Use, and Restoration Impact Program enables an integrated approach to implement SLM and deliver on voluntary LDN targets set by countries.

- The Sustainable Forest Management Impact Program focuses on globally important biomes such as the Amazon and the Congo Basin, and selected dryland ecoregions.

- The Drylands Sustainable Landscapes Impact Program seeks to avoid further degradation and deforestation in drylands through the sustainable management of production landscapes. It addresses the complex nexus of land degradation, climate change, livelihoods, and environmental security through sustainable management of drylands in arid and semiarid zones. It focuses on drought-prone ecosystems and populations, among other issues.

The GEF has a long history of supporting the Great Green Wall Initiative (GGWI) in the Sahel. Key catalytic interventions, such as the Sahel and West Africa Program in Support of the GGWI, date back to GEF-5. They have continued through various projects and programs in GEF-6 and GEF-7.

Most recently, the GEF has funded a medium-sized project to engage with GGWI countries and development partners on a longer-term framework for collective action. This will help position countries for harnessing commitments and pledges made by world leaders at the One Planet Summit in 2021. In so doing, the project will help countries scale up investments to promote systems transformation and sustainable, climate-resilient growth.

Revising national frameworks and developing new ones set the stage for countries to implement, monitor, and evaluate LDN targets. The GEF also helps countries report to the UNCCD and build related capacity through global set-aside resources.
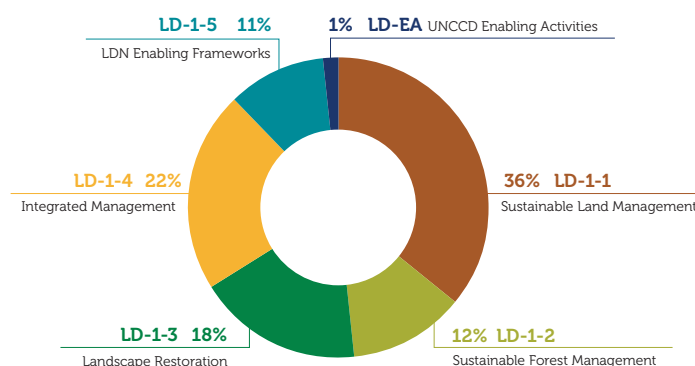
PROGRAMMING STRATEGY

Land Degradation portfolio from July 2018 to December 2021 (3.5 years into GEF-7):

▪ 94% of the $475 million allocated to the LDFA during GEF-7 has been programmed as of December 2021. At the end of GEF-7 in June 2022, close to 100% of the LDFA allocation is expected to be programmed, including global and regional set-asides and the UNCCD Enabling Activities.

▪ More than 100% of LDFA country allocations in the System for Transparent Allocation of Resources (STAR) has been programmed. Some countries used the flexibility or marginal adjustment between the three focal areas of the STAR (Biodiversity, Climate Change, and Land Degradation), bringing the total programming to over 100% ($354 million LDFA STAR allocated; $364 million LDFA STAR programmed).

▪ A total of $1,257 million of GEF resources was provided to 118 approved projects and programs (average $10.6 million), leveraging $9,239 million in co-financing with a ratio of 1 to 7. The share of resources invested by LDFA objective is presented in Figure 1.

▪ Each dollar from the LDFA was associated with two dollars from other GEF focal areas ($475 million/$810 million) in Multi-Focal Area (MFA) projects and programs.

▪ The portfolio includes 34 Land Degradation stand-alone projects ($98 million of GEF resources) and 84 MFA projects and programs ($1,159 million of GEF resources).

▪ GEF-7 Impact Programs: Food Systems; Land Use; and Restoration Impact Program; the Sustainable Cities Impact Program; and the Sustainable Forest Management (SFM) Impact Program are programming with $410 million—about one-third of the total resources.

▪ Of the total 118 projects and programs, 97 national projects are covering 77 countries from the five UNCCD annexes: Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, Central and Eastern Europe, and Northern Mediterranean. In all, 21 projects and programs address global or regional issues. Figure 2 shows the amount of financing by UNCCD region.

▪ Enabling activities: 122[1] countries endorsed a request to support UNCCD Enabling Activities (reporting, formulation of national strategies and plans, and related capacity-building). For the first time since the GEF began supporting such activities, all countries from sub-Saharan Africa are participating.
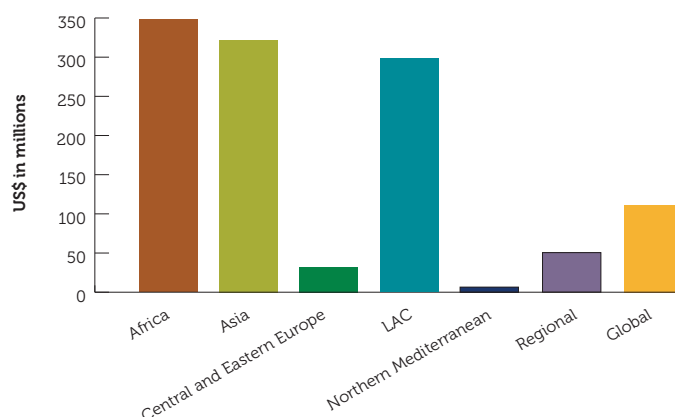
Figure 1:
Programming of GEF-7 LDFA Resources by Focal Area Objectives as of December 2021

Note: Programming still in progress until June 2022.

Figure 2:
Amount of GEF-7 financing by UNCCD Annex

*Financing figures are driven by GEF country allocations and demand. The chart only includes UNCCD countries that are eligible for GEF funding

1   122 countries as of March 22, 2022.

Other GEF funding windows contributing to Land Degradation objectives

- In addition to LDFA stand-alone projects and MFA projects: five projects for $57 million were financed through GEF's Blended Finance window (Non-Grant Instrument), average $11.4 million; and 10 Multi-Trust Fund projects with the Least Developed Countries Fund (LDCF) were financed for $69 million (focus on climate change adaptation, average: $6.9 million).

- The GEF Small Grants Programme (SGP) empowers local civil society and community-based organizations, including women, Indigenous Peoples, youth, and persons with disabilities, to design and lead actions that address global environmental issues. The SGP includes SLM activities as an important element. The GEF approved $128 million of core funding for the SGP in GEF-7. In addition, many countries provided STAR resources to the SGP. This includes $18 million from the LD STAR allocation to support sustainable management of agro-ecosystems and production landscapes where deterioration of ecosystems services and goods undermines the livelihoods of grassroots communities.

Innovation and technologies

- Innovation and new technologies have been supported through seven global and regional projects to support (i) the UNCCD Performance Review and Implementation System (PRAIS4), which underwent a major upgrade to improve access to reporting data for country parties; (ii) Trends.Earth to support countries in analyzing data for their reporting to the Convention; and (iii) the Global Support Program III to facilitate reporting against agreed indicators and enable parties to monitor progress toward results.

Portfolio monitoring

- The Annual Monitoring Report (2021) mentions that despite COVID-19 related implementation challenges, "GEF-financed projects and programs continue to perform well on their path to deliver global environmental benefits." Among current Land Degradation projects, 83% were rated moderately satisfactory or higher for implementation progress.

- Global environmental benefits targets: (i) Area of land restored: 8.0 million ha; (ii) Area of landscapes under improved practices in production systems (SLM): 81.6 million ha; (iii) Carbon: 875 million t of CO_2 eq sequestered or emissions avoided in the Agriculture, Forestry and Other Land Use sector; and (iv) Project beneficiaries: 74.2 million people, including 36.1 million women and 38.1 million men.

Lessons learned regarding new and emerging issues

- Drought mitigation: relevant aspects of national drought plans can be supported through inclusion in land-use planning and drought-smart land management. They should be coordinated with other donor initiatives that support climate change adaptation, including the LDCF.

- Private sector: private sector engagement leverages funding and expertise to transform key economic systems in food and agriculture, cities, transport, and materials production through integrated approaches for delivery of multiple global environmental benefits.

- Gender: improving the conditions of women through access to resources, services, and opportunities, and empowering women to take decisions and be better represented in various decision-making bodies increases the effectiveness and sustainability of LDFA investments.

With the replenishment negotiations for GEF-8 under way, a robust allocation is expected for the LDFA with programming to commence in July 2022. The LDFA strategy in GEF-8 aligns with the GEF's vision to achieve healthy and resilient ecosystems by addressing threats and challenges in agro-ecosystems and production landscapes. This is fully in line with the UNCCD Strategic Framework 2018–2030 with its vision "for a future that avoids, minimizes, and reverses desertification/land degradation and mitigates the effects of drought in affected areas at all levels and strives to achieve a land degradation-neutral world consistent with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, within the scope of the Convention."

The LDFA strategy in GEF-8 will contribute to its goal of avoiding, reducing, and reversing land degradation, desertification, and mitigating the effects of drought with four objectives:

1. **Avoid and reduce land degradation through sustainable land management (SLM)**: This objective promotes the wider application and upscaling of various types of SLM interventions that improve productivity and maintain or improve flow of agro-ecosystem services that underpin food production and livelihoods.

2. **Reverse land degradation through landscape restoration**: This objective will support countries to (i) restore agro-ecosystem services and avoid the reduction of trees and vegetative cover, and (ii) restore forests, and avoid forest loss and degradation, including through SFM.

3. **Address desertification, land degradation, and drought (DLDD) issues, particularly in drylands:** This objective will support countries in dryland geographies to build resilience to mitigate the effects of drought and to prevent the aggravating effects of land degradation, within GEF's mandate, through (i) comprehensive land-use planning taking drought risks into account; and (ii) implementation of drought-smart land management, including croplands, rangelands, dryland forests, and mixed land uses.

4. **Improve the enabling policy and institutional framework for LDN**: Under this objective, the GEF will support countries to (i) improve policy coherence and financing systems; (ii) further develop the institutional and regulatory framework, and build capacity; and (iii) provide support to UNCCD Enabling Activities to help countries fulfill planning and reporting obligations.

GEF-8 Integrated Programs

By adopting an integrated approach to natural resources management, the LDFA drives an agenda for multiple global environmental benefits. These include benefits related to the protection and sustainable use of biodiversity, climate change mitigation and adaptation, and the protection and sustainable use of international waters. In this regard, joint programming with other GEF focal areas will be actively pursued, especially in the context of integrated programs.

During GEF-8, the GEF will continue working on Food Systems and Forest Biomes as integrated programs. In addition, other proposed programs include the Blue and Green Islands (which will address SLM in Small Island Developing States) and the Net-Zero Nature-Positive Accelerator (which will promote nature-based solutions). The Ecosystem Restoration Integrated Program, for example, will generate multiple environmental benefits, create jobs, and secure livelihoods through the restoration of degraded ecosystems globally. This program will contribute significantly to LDN, complementing efforts toward restoration under the LDFA with a broader scope on multiple benefits and at a larger scale. It will link countries in regional clusters for upscaling their project-based efforts through accessing platforms, knowledge products, and best practices. In this way, it will contribute to a coherent approach under the United Nations Decade for Ecosystem Restoration.

Photo by Riccardo Mayer/Shutterstock

The Global Environment Facility was established on the eve of the Rio Earth Summit to tackle our planet's most pressing environmental problems. Since then, it has provided more than **$21.7 billion** in grants and mobilized an additional **$119 billion** in co-financing for more than **5,000 projects** and programs. The GEF is the largest multilateral trust fund focused on enabling developing countries to invest in nature, and supports the implementation of major international environmental conventions including on biodiversity, climate change, chemicals, and desertification. It brings together 184 member governments in addition to civil society, international organizations, and private sector partners. Through its Small Grants Programme, the GEF has provided support to more than 26,000 civil society and community initiatives in 135 countries

gef **GLOBAL ENVIRONMENT FACILITY**
INVESTING IN OUR PLANET

www.thegef.org