

Land Solutions: An Economics of Land Degradation Presentation

24th September, New York
United Nations headquarters

Key actors and senior decision-makers involved in the approval of the Sustainable Development Goals decisions discussed the role of land for economic national prosperity and development at a side event organised by the Economics of Land Degradation Initiative (ELD) on 24th September at the United Nations headquarters during the 70th United Nations Summit.

Keynote Speakers from the Initiative presented the ELD scientific report '[The value of land: Prosperous lands and positive rewards through sustainable land management](#)', together with a range of outputs produced by the Initiative that build the evidence for widespread adoption of sustainable land management. Discussions stressed that land is an underperforming asset in the global economy and land degradation threatens the growing need and availability of fertile lands and land-based ecosystems, and the benefits humanity derives from it. Competition for access to increasingly scarce resources such as healthy and productive soils and water is accelerating, and is further intensified by population pressures, climate change, and resource demands. The ELD reports emphasise the need to focus on the most vulnerable people and where degradation is of greatest threat. This is the less favoured agricultural lands with limited market access, where most of the rural poor live. The ELD Initiative integrates the economics of land as a fundamental part of policy and private sector decision-making. Research by the Initiative was presented, showing that global losses of ecosystem services through land degradation cost between 6.3 and 10.6 trillion USD annually, while 1.4 billion USD annually could be gained. Highlighting a great opportunity this also indicates the need to re-align policies and emphasise the economic relevance of terrestrial ecosystems.

The findings presented aim to serve as a platform to bring together all stakeholders, especially the land user, the private and public sectors. Richard Thomas (ICARDA), stressed that the concept of sustainable land management needs to be institutionalised, mainstreamed into government policies, using standard setting and impact indicators. While it was agreed that economics plays a large role in these discussions, it was also recognised that there needs to be much greater connectivity between the actors at all scales in order to achieve truly transformational changes in the way land is perceived and used. The ELD outputs presented will help to drive for a change through the common language of economic metrics. These include methodological guides using an approach that dovetails with the cost-benefit analysis used by national governments to determine budget allocations.

Robert Costanza (Australian National University), outlined the methodological approach used under the ELD Working Group Data and Methodology in the assessment of global and national scenarios of ecosystem service loss due to land degradation. Findings were presented on the benefits humans derive from functioning ecosystems. It was stressed that there is a need to understand the interaction among natural capital and other types of capital (i.e., social, human and built) to understand sustainable human wellbeing.

Stacey Noel (Stockholm Environment Institute Africa) presented key findings produced under the ELD Working Group Options and Pathways to Action. Focusing on the science-policy interface, the group carried out a range of consultations with stakeholders at national and sub-national scales, with a view to enhance their engagement in the fight against land degradation and promote sustainable land management practices.

Ibrahim Thiaw (UNEP) focused on the need to identify national and local solutions to address land degradation, and how actions in the context of climate change adaptation could transform local governance in least developed countries. He stressed that with one quarter of global land being degraded – affecting the food security of 1.5 billion people – Africa is one of the most severely impacted regions in the world. The ELD Initiative identified solutions to these problems. It showed that it is possible to restore land and that we can do something about it. Furthermore, action is extremely profitable from an economic point of view. Mr Thiaw presented the example from the ELD case study in Mali, which estimated that for every US\$ invested in sustainable land management, the returns generated account for US\$ 13. By making these findings relevant to policy and decision makers, Mr Thiaw believes that the world will gain a united view of how to address land degradation and improve human wellbeing.

Luc Gnacadja (Past Executive Secretary of the UNCCD, Former Minister of Environment and Urban Development in Benin) addressed how to integrate sustainable land management issues into development policies. He provided examples from Benin, where 17-18 percent of the ecosystem's value was lost within the last 15 years, accounting for a loss of US\$ 9.0 to 9.5 billion. He stressed the need to mainstream sustainable land management not only in policies but also in business. If we want to advance good land management, we must ensure that actions start at the local level, based on evidence on available local solutions. In achieving our goals, we must consider all aspects of the vicious cycle of poverty related to land, including food access, environmental migration and child mortality. Mr Gnacadja called for an institutional change to achieve a more sustainable use of land.

Klaus Rudischhauser (European Commission) stressed the relevance of the Initiative's outputs to the activities promoted by large development donors such as the European Commission in ending hunger and improving agriculture across the globe. He outlined the links between climate change and land degradation, and recognised the importance of land in providing key ecosystem services that are vital to sustain the living of the rural poor. He provided positive insights on the potential of the ELD report to help increase the visibility of these issues in the international development agenda, and observed that if we do not mainstream these issues in the broader set of policy actions, we won't be able to achieve any of the sustainable development goals. More efforts should be made to foster communication and discussion among stakeholders on all these integrated issues.

It was concluded that by increasing awareness about the costs and benefits of land and management choices, more strategic and economically rewarding decisions can be taken by decision makers at all levels. Investing in sustainable land management has higher rates of returns to all stakeholders. Tackling land degradation now is more effective than leaving it to the future, and it will help fostering the achievement of all sustainable development goals.