The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification

The Convention to Combat Desertification (CCD) is a UNCED convention. Unlike the Convention on Biological Diversity and the Framework Convention on Climate Change, the CCD is still low on the political agenda. Its potential and importance for sustainable development is generally underestimated.

The term 'desertification' falsely evokes the image of advancing deserts. While a desert is a unique ecosystem, desertified areas are not: they are disrupted ecosystems. Desertification means land degradation, loss of soil fertility and structure as well as the erosion of biodiversity in drought prone areas.

When the negotiations for the CCD started in May 1993, little was known about the dynamics of desertification and the social, political and economic aspects of desertification were poorly understood. Major causes of desertification are unsuitable, poverty-induced agricultural practices; monocultures; the use of agrochemicals; the neglect of traditional knowledge; overgrazing; deforestation; over-pumping; salinisation and climate change, resulting from the greenhouse effect. Land degradation in dry-land areas results in increasing amounts of unproductive land. At the socioeconomic level social and cultural structures deteriorate, food security is lost, migration becomes prevalent as incomes prove increasingly inadequate and debts grow. All these factors undermine a community's capacity to exert self-determination and control over its own resources.

The CCD came into force in December 1996 and has been ratified by more than 150 states. Considerable research, awareness raising, monitoring, lobbying and finance will be needed before it is possible to implement it.

Some strong characteristics of the CCD are:

- participatory, bottom-up approach
- integrated approach and gender sensitiveness
- addressing global dimension of desertification
- linking environment and development
- partnership building between stakeholders
- linking to other conventions and relevant agreements to create synergy.

National Action Programmes

Those taking part in the CCD are obliged to make a National Action Programme (NAP) along the lines laid down in the Convention. In November 1999, the third conference of participants took place in Recife, Brazil. African countries reported on their progress in developing and implementing NAPs. Although all African parties had started on NAPs, only 10 had reached the implementation stage. Donor countries also reported on their activities in support of NAP at the conference. Their reports showed the difficulties of putting the concepts and policies of the CCD into practice. Major bottlenecks to the participation of local communities in the NAP process were shown to be inappropriate and unfavourable laws and regulations at state level, a lack of funding, experience, expertise and the necessary political will. Monitoring progress provides countries with the opportunity to correct the way NAPs are developing.

Argentina (Merega p7) is a good example of how raising awareness on gender issues has influenced the NAP. A few years ago, the NAP process in Argentina was not gender sensitive. Today, Argentina strongly supports the incorporation of gender issues into the NAP.

The International NGO Network RIOD

NGOs have been taking part in the negotiation process that lead to the CCD and have contributed positively and strongly to the text and content of the convention. In November 1994, NGOs established RIOD (a French acronym for the international NGO network to combat desertification), a network to enable the international exchange of information, the raising of awareness and to encourage learning from experience as well as North-South cooperation and joint activities. NGOs have been instrumental in initiating and setting up consultative structures at country and (sub-) regional levels. They have helped raise awareness, involve local communities and create links with local and national authorities, institutions and donors. Many NGOs have contributed research and capacity building to participatory methods.

In August 1999, five years after it had been set up, the first RIOD general meeting was held to review the objectives and structure of the network. One of the conclusions of this review was that as the constraints to implementing the CCD became more visible, it was necessary to emphasis lobbying, campaigns, the creation of synergy and international political action to compel the creation of more favourable environment for combatting desertification.

Structurally changes are being made to improve efficiency at regional level. In the past RIOD had national, sub-regional, regional and global focal points. In the new structure there will be more emphasis on focal points at the national level. Fifteen regional representatives will form a Global Coordination Committee (GCC) for international coordination.

The NGOs in RIOD have recognised that although activities to combat desertification are not new, the CCD approach has great potential. By putting the people of affected areas at the centre of the process and pushing for an enabling environment at the national and (sub-) regional levels, it may be possible to boost those development processes that create more sustainability in environmental, social, economic and political terms.

However, there are many pitfalls. The dangers that the CCD will become just another time-bound document slowly moving from the desk to the bookshelf or that it will turn into a talking circus are very real. There is also the problem of hidden agendas. It is therefore necessary to mobilise and join forces and take action when necessary. There is too much at stake to allow this opportunity to slip by. ■

Edit Tuboly, Caretaker Regional Focal Point Europe, Both Ends, Damrak 28-30, 1012 LJ Amsterdam, The Netherlands. Phone: +31 20 6230823; Fax: +31 20 6208049; Email: et@bothends.org

Reference
- **The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification**. Secretariat of the Convention: Haus Carstanjen, Martin Luther King Strasse 8, D-53175 Bonn, Germany, Phone: +49-228-8151000.

(Names and addresses of caretaker GCC members can be obtained from the author)