
UNCCD COP 14 Side-Event

Monitoring and Combating Land Degradation in Pastoral Areas – Are Participatory Approaches Important?

At the recently concluded United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) Conference of Parties (COP 14), a key outcome was the emphasis on placing people first. These include indigenous communities such as pastoralists, women and youth. In build-up to this resolution, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) led the organization of a side-event displaying why people should be at the centre of sustainable rangelands and grasslands management. The side-event was co-organized with various partners including the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and speakers drawn from government representatives of Kenya, Niger, Burkina Faso, Uruguay, local NGO from Kyrgyzstan, World Bank, UNCCD and civil society members of FAO's Pastoralist Knowledge Hub. The aim of the side-event was to emphasize the importance of rangelands and grasslands to the UNCCD agenda, highlight important roles played by pastoral communities in the management of their land and overall to improve understanding on land degradation assessments of rangelands and grasslands.

Various speakers observed that rangelands and grasslands provide an array of ecosystem services including to global communities in far-flung parts of the world, however, it is only in recent years that they are beginning to receive attention. For countries such as Kenya, over 80% of the land is arid to semi-arid with most of these under management by pastoralists supporting both local and national economy. Ms. Nahid Naghizadeh from Iran stated that “pastoralists are guardians and stewards of drylands with key socio-economic values underpinned by a dynamic livelihood system that enable adaptation, resilience and living in harmony with nature.”



Figure 1 – Participatory rangeland assessment in Kyrgyzstan

Land degradation is reportedly affecting over 3.2 billion people including in pastoral areas leading to food insecurity, damage to ecosystems and compromised livelihoods. “In Uruguay, as in neighbouring countries, grasslands are being lost due to conversions which has led to loss of 15% of the country’s grasslands in the last 15 years,” stated Santiago Medina of Ministry of Environment in Uruguay. UNCCD’s Chief Scientist, Barron Orr pointed out that “people’s way of life is being challenged and as a result, this is leading to all sorts of problems such as civil unrest and violence.” While land degradation remains an issue in pastoral areas, it is also true that data on extent of degradation has been exaggerative; this is according to IUCN’s Jonathan Davies. Discrepancies such as these are attributable to differing opinions on definitions of land degradation and on management objectives.

It is important to understand how pastoralists interact with their land. In improving robustness of assessments of rangeland health, this can be done by harnessing traditional knowledge with scientific approaches. On this, FAO's Assistant Director General, Mr. Rene Castro noted that, "to know better is to do better. Improved methodologies for land degradation assessment can contribute to well-informed decision making on investment and sustainable land management in pastoral areas." Country representatives shared ways in which pastoral communities are helping strengthen land degradation assessment through integration of locally relevant indicators, site selection and establishing periods of assessment.

Some of the participants called for the United Nations designation of an International Year of Rangeland and Pastoralists as a means to bring rangelands and pastoralists issues to the forefront. At the same time, the United Nations Decade on Ecosystem Restoration 2021-2030 that calls for reversing land degradation including in rangelands, provides opportunities for understanding the complexities of rangelands at multiple levels and addressing climate change, preserving biodiversity and protecting pastoralists' livelihoods.



Figure 2 – Some of the participants of the COP 14 side-event

Support and integration of these into various policies for sustainable management of pastoral areas will contribute to the realization of Agenda 2030 that already places emphasis on leaving no one behind. Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN), a key target for Sustainable Goal, 15 (Life on Land) is one such area where the role of pastoralists in management of land is key. Indeed, the success of LDN in rangelands can also benefit from leveraging on important platforms such as the UNCCD where parties agree on targets as well as the scientific framework that takes into account large areas of land that are multi-functional such as rangelands and grasslands.

"This side-event has shown how we can work together as partners across civil society, governments, local communities, NGOs, UN agencies, development partners, academia to build needed momentum and generate necessary data with an aim to influence well informed policies and interventions in pastoral areas," said FAO's Vivian Onyango who coordinated the side-event. "We still have a long way to go but increasingly we are seeing attention towards pastoral areas increasing."