



DRAFT UPDATE FROM DSD ON THE SCIENTIFIC CONFERENCE PREPARATIONS AND EMERGING IDEAS – A DISCUSSION BRIEF

24 June 2009

THE ROADMAP AND CONSULTATIONS

In preparing for the Conference in Buenos Aires (22-24 Sept), DSD is following a roadmap that is published on the DSD and UNCCD websites at

<http://dsd-consortium.jrc.ec.europa.eu/php/index.php?action=view&id=159>

Three Working Groups were convened consisting of approximately 20-60 scientists each. Funds were raised to hold two meetings of 10-20 members per Working Group, and internet discussions were conducted in order to draft white papers on three facets of the overall topic assigned by COP, which is “Bio-physical and socio-economic monitoring and assessment of desertification and land degradation, to support decision-making in land and water management.”

White papers were placed on the internet for comment by the public for one month beginning in late May. The Working Groups will revise that input in a second draft by 31 July. Thus, as of late June the recommendations remain at a discussion stage.

However we wish to take advantage of regional meetings to inform UNCCD stakeholders of current Working Group thinking, and to receive feedback from them. This is the purpose of this Discussion Brief.

THE TOPICS

The facets receiving focus by the three Working Groups are:

1. WG I. Integrated methods for monitoring and assessment of land degradation processes and drivers
2. WG II. Monitoring and assessing land rehabilitation and sustainable land management
3. WG III. Impacts of economic and social drivers and knowledge management on monitoring and evaluation of land degradation

The experience has been that approaching from three perspectives on the same conference topic has been useful because it has resulted in different yet complementary insights and emerging consensus on a number of main issues.

EMERGING SCIENCE IDEAS

The Working Groups perceive that the UNCCD needs a new approach to monitoring and assessment if it is to overcome past controversies about issues such as the definition, scope and extent of DLDD. The UNCCD has since its beginning focused on identifying simple indicators, but in the Working Groups' judgment this does not seem likely to provide the degree of understanding, specificity or quantification needed to resolve these controversies.

A more holistic and in-depth monitoring and assessment (M&A) approach would break with past methods of M&A that separated socio-economic from bio-physical data collection. M&A needs to perceive human and environmental components as co-evolving elements of ecosystems and measure their dynamic interactions, rather than the conventional practice of measuring large numbers of isolated biophysical or socio-economic variables.

Furthermore, the M&A of DLDD needs to connect to real people and places that are the essence of the UNCCD's bottom-up approach. M&A should, therefore, include both scientific assessments of key variables emerging from a scientifically sound conceptual understanding of desertification processes as well as participatory assessments in affected localities, with all stakeholder groups represented. Bringing scientific and local knowledge together stimulates interactive learning and serves as a natural mechanism for capacity-building. Participants can be guided through training courses and then apply their learning by being involved in the participatory assessments.

Such holistic information can then be scientifically aggregated to national and global levels to provide more relevant indicators than currently available, while still being able to trace their connections to their contextual settings in different localities. This can be achieved by relating the indicators to a conceptual framework such as the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment and others.

The Working Groups also feel that the UNCCD should look more broadly than using M&A only to measure the DLDD problem. It should also M&A solutions such as sustainable land management (SLM) practices for agriculture or rangelands that could help rehabilitate lands from their DLDD-damaged condition. Solutions attract more support from investors than problems do; the returns on investment are more appealing.

Another key reason M&A by the UNCCD needs to go beyond simple indicator monitoring is to take advantage of the potential power of being able to forecast future trends and the consequences of different scenarios that might result from different policy decisions. National decision-making needs to be guided by plans stretching 5-10 or more years into the future. Such planning is only possible when supported by robust scientific forecasting methods. The success of the UNFCCC largely attributes to IPCC's ability to tap the world of climate science for such forecasting. Once the public was informed of the ominous longer-term consequences of climate change, it began to support action.

The same forecasting insight could provide much power to the UNCCD. While it appears difficult to forecast the complex issue of DLDD as a whole, many important sub-components may be amenable to effective forecasting. For example, impacts of soil degradation on crop yields; of financial gains from reforestation and degraded-land rehabilitation; of increases in resiliency from the adoption of

particular SLM practices; of SLM on carbon accumulation and sequestration; and numerous other issues are possible or potentially possible (though they may need additional research in support of M&A).

EMERGING INSTITUTIONAL IDEAS

To implement these suggestions, the Working Groups feel that certain institutional changes are needed. The very reason that COP called for a Scientific Conference was to address inadequacies in the flow of science into the Convention deliberations. The Conference is a good start, but its organization has also been a learning process for the Working Groups and for the Dryland Science for Development (DSD) consortium that convenes them. The process might be improved through steps such as those below.

In assembling the expertise and carrying out the consultations described above, the DSD has encountered acute time and financial pressure. COP's aspiration as well as that of DSD would be to have comprehensive global dialogues, but this requires a longer planning time frame and resources to hold many meetings and process many inputs. To meet this need in the future, a stable **assessment network** to advise the UNCCD might be established, much as the IPCC advises the UNFCCC. This funded, stable network of experts would then be in a position to focus expertise on different DLDD sub-topics and provide assessments of prevailing science to inform decision-making on a regular basis.

Such a network would assess available science, not carry out the supporting research that generates that science. DLDD-relevant research takes place in thousands of universities, government agencies, private companies and other entities around the world every day, but is fragmented and not connected to the UNCCD process. A second network, or network of networks focused on providing that science, would be an invaluable resource for both the aforementioned assessment network and for the UNCCD and its Committees. Such a **science network** would interlink and provide a communication channel and platform for deliberating and planning the research needed to address the priority needs of the UNCCD community.

Finally, the Working Groups have pondered the issue of the UNCCD's focus on drylands. There are good justifications for this focus: dryland peoples are more dependent on the ecosystem services provided by land than are peoples in other zones; yet, those services are scarcer and less reliable than in other zones. Thus the drylands are the areas where the need for science-based intervention is greatest.

Having said that, the Working Groups note that land degradation is a global issue, affecting all zones; and that the scientific tools and approaches of modern M&A are equally applicable (with some adjustments) to other zones. Thus from a purely scientific perspective, a global land M&A approach would be feasible. By achieving relevance across all ecozones, the perceived relevance of the UNCCD to the world community might increase, which in turn might lead to greater investment in addressing its problems both in drylands and in non-drylands.