

What kind of world?

The challenge of land degradation



GLOBAL
ENVIRONMENT
FACILITY

“GEF IS FULLY COMMITTED TO
TACKLING LAND DEGRADATION
PROBLEMS, WHICH THREATEN
OUR ENVIRONMENTAL AND
FOOD SECURITY.”

Len Good
Chief Executive Officer and Chairman
Global Environment Facility

Land Degradation's Pervasive Impact

Land degradation—especially desertification and deforestation—has triggered large-scale population movements, disrupted economic development prospects, aggravated regional conflicts and instability, and threatened the lives and livelihoods of people living under its shadow.

Desertification takes a particularly serious toll on those who depend most directly on natural resources for their survival — the poorest of the poor. It affects more than 110 countries, directly influencing the daily lives of more than a billion people, the so-called environmental refugees. Each year 12 million hectares are lost—enough land to grow 20 million tons of grain.

Deforestation also leads to pervasive land degradation. The U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization currently estimates that about 15.2 million hectares of forests are lost every year in the tropics alone. In forested areas, the main causes of land degradation are logging and the conversion of forested land for agriculture or human settlements. The loss of forests puts at risk the communities that depend on forests for their survival.

But the environmental and economic consequences of land degradation are not confined to the countries where it occurs. The impacts—loss of biodiversity, reduced atmospheric and subterranean carbon sequestration, and pollution of international waters—significantly affect environmental and food security throughout the world.

The Role of GEF

The Global Environment Facility (GEF) acts as a major catalyst for improving the global environment. Since its inception in 1991, the GEF's work to preserve biodiversity, reduce the risks of climate change, protect the ozone layer, and clean up international waters has had the added benefit of strengthening sustainable land management.

But with land degradation around the world reaching alarming levels, a more focused and systematic GEF response to land degradation is critical. Already land degradation is widespread and severe enough to reduce agricultural productivity, especially in Africa, Central America, and Asia.

In 2002, the Second GEF Assembly significantly expanded GEF's mandate through the addition of land

degradation to the GEF portfolio. Over the next three years, GEF expects to invest more than \$250 million in projects that:

- integrate sustainable land management into national development priorities,
- strengthen human, technical, and institutional capacities,
- bring about needed policy and regulatory reforms, and
- implement innovative sustainable land management practices.

GEF is increasing its work on land degradation by building on current activities as well as on the experience and lessons of its partners. GEF's land degradation strategy recognizes that land and water resources are key to sustainable development in the world's dry areas. It also recognizes that the problems of degradation cut across country borders, areas of tech-

nical expertise, and agency responsibilities. As a major supporter of the Convention to Combat Desertification, GEF can emphasize a more coordinated, longer-term view of land degradation issues, one that is deeply anchored in environmental values, ideals, and common sense.

Where do governments and civil society fit in? GEF has a solid record of channeling and expanding upon the commitment, experience, and resources of hundreds of individual governments, institutions, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to tackle problems of global significance. Without their political will, leadership, and cooperation, no initiative to identify national priorities and seriously address the issues surrounding land degradation—such as land use planning, water pricing, and public participation—can succeed.

The developing world will face severe pressure on its land and water resources, and food production

systems in coming decades. The principal driving forces will include population growth, with world numbers expected to rise to 7.5 billion by 2020; income growth, which will fuel rising food demand; and the continuing effort to help the more than 800 million people who currently do not get enough to eat to lead healthy and productive lives.

The challenge for GEF and its partners is to re-energize the pursuit of sustainable development and protection of the global commons, a complex undertaking that will require unprecedented levels of effort, knowledge, and international cooperation. Finding ways and means to forge a better way of life for the world's poorest will depend on the leadership of many people and nations and the balancing of millions of actions and interactions throughout the world. This, indeed, is GEF's vision for the future.



GEF Targets Severe Land Degradation in Africa

Nearly 40 percent of Africans live below the poverty line. About 70 percent of them are in rural areas and depend on agriculture. But the basic resources for their existence are threatened by land degradation, which affects 65 percent of agricultural land. In the relatively short period of 15 years, deforestation alone has stripped 66 million hectares.

GEF is collaborating with African states to address serious land degradation and water scarcity problems. Since its inception, GEF has allocated more than \$300 million in grants for 80 land degradation and water projects in 46 African countries. Most recently, GEF has contributed \$600,000 to support the preparation of an environmental action plan by the New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD), a key African-led initiative.



GEF's Work in Latin America

On about one-fourth of the world's agricultural land, soil degradation is widespread, with the pace of degradation accelerating in the past 50 years. In developing nations, productivity has declined substantially on about 20 percent of agricultural land.

The GEF is funding projects that place renewed emphasis on smaller countries where land degradation is most severe—such as the innovative pilot project to improve degraded pasturelands in Colombia, Costa Rica, and Nicaragua. The project will reduce erosion and improve soil and water quality, promoting increased production, income, and employment in rural areas that are home to poor farmers.



Convention to Combat Desertification

The Convention to Combat Desertification (CCD), which entered into force in 1996 and has the support of 179 countries, offers a legally binding framework to tackle land degradation, promote sustainable development in fragile ecosystems, and mitigate the effects of drought, particularly in Africa. The CCD recognizes that the people of the drylands themselves hold the key to combating desertification, and that the eradication of poverty is a precondition for success.



Secrets of the Fertile Crescent

Most of the 48 million people living in the Fertile Crescent are farmers whose dryland cultivation practices have withstood the test of time. They leave wild relatives of fruit trees growing on field borders to supply seeds and rootstock. They maintain diverse plant stocks as a contingency in the face of the dry climate, disease, and pests. Their crops are known for hardiness.

But, in recent years, the high yields of modern varieties witnessed under optimal conditions have led some farmers to neglect their traditional species and gene pools. At the same time, expanded and intensified land use, including overgrazing, has begun to degrade vegetation and soils.

A GEF project aims to preserve the many different domesticated and wild genes of crops which originated in the Near East or Central Asia as many as ten millennia ago. In its vast germ plasm bank in Syria, the International Center for Research in the Dry Areas (ICARDA)—one of the partners in this project—holds more than 130,000 seed samples for future use. ICARDA scientists are also working with farmers to conserve species on and near their farms.



New GEF-China Partnership Alleviates Land Degradation in Western China

Land degradation in the dry and highly fragile environments of China's impoverished western region is seriously affecting the livelihoods of the region's 355 million residents, and threatening critical habitats and endangered species. The Chinese government, recognizing the complexity of the problem, has made alleviating land degradation—and the poverty that results from it—an even greater national priority.

The GEF is working with the Chinese to strengthen their efforts to ensure that ecosystems in the western region are managed in an integrated manner. A \$15 million GEF grant for the first phase of the 10-year project will help coordinate the government's efforts as well as engage local people in hands-on conservation solutions for the region. In addition to direct environmental, economic, and social benefits to local communities, the GEF project will generate global benefits such as improved biodiversity conservation and carbon sequestration.



About the GEF

The Global Environment Facility (GEF) is an international financial organization with 175 countries as members. GEF forges cooperation and finances actions to address critical threats to the global environment: biodiversity loss, climate change, deteriorating international waters, land degradation, ozone depletion, and toxic organic pollutants.

In 12 years, GEF has grown from a pilot program to the largest single source of funding for the global environment. In 2002, donor nations cast an extraordinary vote of confidence by replenishing GEF's

trust fund by \$3 billion—the largest amount ever.

At the heart of GEF's work is its strong and dynamic partnership with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), and the World Bank. These three implementing agencies share credit for GEF's measurable on-the-ground achievements in 1,200 projects in more than 140 nations. The \$4.5 billion committed by GEF to protect the global environment has leveraged \$13 billion in additional financing.





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