



Bimun Get-Together – Debate
United Nations Convention to Combat
Desertification (UNCCD)

Date & Time: May 8th at 7:30pm

Location: Hörsaal XII of the University Main Building

Topic: Migration & desertification in West Africa

Chairs: Jolie

This is a Study Guide based on the UNCCD Study Guide made by Sofie Haljan and Emily Reyes at BIMUN/SINUB 2020 and edited by Johanna Fietze, as well as Jolie and Ada.

Study Guide

The UNCCD

History and Membership

The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) was adopted in Paris on 17 June 1994 after several previous efforts by the international community, acknowledging that degradation and desertification was becoming an increasing global major economic, social and environmental problem. A first step was taken in 1977, when the United Nations Conference on Desertification adopted a Plan of Action to Combat Desertification, yet the undertakings were not significant enough according to the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP). In 1991 UNEP stated that the overall problem of land degradation in arid, semi-arid and dry subhumid areas had not decreased and, despite several local examples of success, even intensified. With the problem of land degradation and desertification (LDD) remaining, a next step was taken in 1992 when the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) was organized.

The conference stressed the importance of actions promoting sustainable development at the community level. It



was during UNCED that the first steps to establish the UNCCD were taken, when an Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee (INC) was established. The negotiations by the INC resulted in the adoption of the Convention. It first entered into force roughly two and a half years later, on 26 December 1996, 90 days after the 50th country ratified the convention. Another year later, in October 1997, the first session of the UNCCD's governing body convened. Currently, 196 countries and the European Union (EU) are parties to the convention. Five regions are specifically focused on with an individual annex per region (Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), Northern Mediterranean, and Central and Eastern Europe).

Mandate

The most important bodies are the Conference of the Parties (COP), the Secretariat and several subsidiary bodies to assist. The COP was established as the Convention's prime decision-making and governing body. It is the main committee of the Convention in which the different parties are represented through their country's delegates. The COP consisting of all 197 ratifying parties, as well as and meets biennially since 2001. Every first meeting of the COP, 10 members (one president, nine vice-presidents) are elected out of all party representatives to form the Bureau, while representing all geographical regions. The mandate of the COP mainly stretches to review party reports on how they are implementing the convention and, based on this, to make recommendations towards the parties. The Secretariat of the UNCCD works closely together and strengthens partnerships with relevant conventions, programs and institutions. However, the Convention to Combat Desertification is the only legally binding agreement connecting environment and development to sustainable land management. Article 21 of the UNCCD established a Global Mechanism (GM) as the primary operational arm to secure substantial funding for the implementation of the Convention. In order to do this, the GM also provides advisory services as well as cooperation with countries, the private sector and donors to mobilize as much resources as necessary and possible.

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and, based on this, to make recommendations towards the parties. This happens with the help of the subsidiary body, The Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention (CRIC). Secondly, since the global contexts change, the COP has the power to adopt annexes or amendments to the Convention, or establishing additional subsidiary bodies if necessary. The COP also supervises the implementation and commitment by the parties of the Convention. In order to facilitate and direct this, strategic plans and frameworks to achieve Land Degradation Neutrality are established. Examples are the ten year 2008-2018 strategic plan and framework to enhance the

West Africa

Geography and climate

On 21 June 2018, a new edition of the World Atlas of Desertification was published by the Joint Research Centre of the EU. It estimated that over 75% of land area in the world is degrading already at a rate of a total of about half the surface of the EU annually. The effects hereof pose enormous strains on the population of West Africa, where 80% of the people depend on natural resources as a fundamental source of living. Faced with increased poverty, inequality and vulnerability, migration is often the best solution to escape degrading soil and lack of water. Created with a specific focus on Africa, it is clear that the UNCCD cannot steer away from paying attention to human consequences of LDD causing the forced displacement of vulnerable people. One of the five UN subregions of the Africa, West Africa consists of the sixteen most western countries of the continent with a population of about 401.861 in 2020. The countries are Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Côte d'Ivoire, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo. The region is a diverse one, with a great variety in countries, cultures and ecosystems. However, it can simultaneously be roughly divided in two general geographic regions: the Sahelian and Guinean countries. Although both experience similar vulnerable and fragile soils by an increase in dry periods, extreme rainfall and overall decrease in rain season length, hardly fertile, low nitrogen and phosphorous content and vulnerability to wind





erosion, Guinean countries generally have a more humid, tropical climate with roughly two rain and two dry seasons each year, therefore offering a better possibility for green vegetation to grow. The semi-arid Sahelian countries on the other hand are faced with irregular rainfall and lasting dry periods, posing difficulties to agriculture. Generally speaking, there is an annual rainy season of three to five months with some north to south variation, in which the green vegetation of the region emerges. The region houses the fertile delta of the Niger river and has a diverse ecosystem, including the drought – and fire - resistant baobab tree, deep rooted Acacia and cram-cram grass, essential for Sahelian livestock. However, declining rainfall and human induced land degradation has increased the desertification process and southward expansion of the Sahara into the Sahel region.

Migration

Historically, migration in West Africa has always offered a temporary and seasonal solution to challenges posed by poor harvests, droughts or dry seasons. Additionally, land degradation in West Africa is no more a new occurrence than migration. The region proved excellent for investments in industrial crops, with cotton and ground nut for the Sahel and coffee, cocoa and pineapple for the coastal region. During the colonial era, the main focus was on obtaining a maximum amount of production and gains. The effects on the soil and climate coming from this extensive exploitation and exhaustion of the lands was hardly taken into account or researched. After the decolonization, droughts, flash floods (the rapid overflowing of lower lying areas) and human activity on the exploited and exhausted soils made traditional agricultural practices and local lifestyle less durable. Many rural inhabitants increasingly sought new opportunities in urban centers, changing the historical seasonal migration to a more permanent relocation. The direct link between drought and migration, as an example, manifested itself visibly in the mass migrations of the Sahara during major droughts in the 1970s and 1980s. The migratory trend, fueled by LDD still exists today and it is estimated that by 2050 between 50 and 700 million people will have to move as a result of degraded soil or lack of recourses. Currently, West Africa acts as the region with the highest percentage of intra-regional





migration and it is estimated that about 8.4 million people, or 2.8% of the total population in the region are migrants.

The factors of LDD and decreasing liveable circumstances pushing a more permanent relocations arise through an interplay between human causes and climatic reasons. The conditions in rural areas are increasingly threatened by multiple human factors, such as rapid urbanization and population growth, pollution and industrialization and the insecurity brought by civil wars and conflicts. The expansion of agriculture furthermore lead to a clearing of natural plant covering that protects the soil from drying out and overexposure to sunlight. Simultaneously, agricultural practices are increasingly industrialized: commercial crops replace slow growing, traditional crops, pastures are overgrazed by bigger cattle groups and resources are used inappropriately to secure a maximum production and profit outcome. Another problem lies in the practice of land grabbing by foreign developed countries. Handing over, or selling land – often for a smaller price than the overall potential of the land – provides for an outflow in profits, increasing foreign impact and influence in the country and importantly, a substantial decrease in arable land available for the native population.

Starting in the 1970s, with the severe drought in the Sahara as its first climax, a downward trend in average annual rainfall, and therefore increasing times of drought, can be seen. This is another by-product of the overall global climate change. The overall warming temperatures cause extremes in the deserts and, combined with the lasting dry periods and abovementioned human causes, facilitate the degradation of the plant cover worsening the desertification in already vulnerable arid zones. Another consequence of the longer dry, sunny and warm periods, is the increasing risk and amount of devastating bushfires. The dry vegetation not only catches fire more easily, lack of water often also prohibits a quick extinguishing, destroying the land and livestock many families depend on to survive. The fire and uncovered land, lastly, also act as a catalysator for more climate change, creating – if not dealt with – a vicious circle.

Regional players



ECOWAS

The most influential regional stakeholder, The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) was established in 1975 and currently has fifteen members. These states are Benin, Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Cote d'Ivoire, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Senegal and Togo. ECOWAS promotes an economic integration in all fields of activity in West Africa. This includes agriculture and natural resources, leading to the organization to be actively involved in agriculture and food security issues which cause forced displacement. ECOWAS supports regional agricultural investment programs (RAIPs) and the Regional Food and Agriculture Agency (RFAA) through financial management and technical assistance for investments plans. Important to note also is the free movement of the population that ECOWAS promotes in its integrated region, facilitating regional migration.

CLISS

The Permanent Interstate Committee for Drought Control in the Sahel (CILSS) was established in 1972 and currently has 12 members. These are Benin, Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, The Gambia, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Senegal and Togo. The committee is coordinated on a political and technical level through the representatives of all twelve sovereign states, conferences of the heads of states of members, a council of ministers and through a board of directors. It consists of three bodies, an Executive Secretariat, Sahel Institute and an AGRHYMET regional centre. The main activity of CILSS is to invest in research about food security and ways to combat the effects of land degradation and desertification (LDD). This happens through multiple actions including coordination and harmonization of the policies

Current Developments

For the UNCCD, the first and most important step to address migration related to degrading lands is to counter the LDD factors and improve the living conditions of the West African



people, decreasing the overall need to seek refuge elsewhere. These improvements concentrate on restoring land, educating the population in sustainable land management and generally create better circumstances and opportunities for them to live.

In 2013, a UNCCD Sub Regional Action Plan for West Africa (SRAP/WA) was created to align with the UNCCD ten year strategy. Yet there still are several constraints, amongst others difficulties in mobilizing financial recourses and inappropriate operation of the coordination and steering mechanisms, which the SRAP/WA aimed to solve. Recently there has been a growing attention to (African) migration illustrated by the 2015 migration crisis in Europe and a partnership between the UNCCD and International Organization for Migration (IOM). The IOM ushered a Memorandum of Understanding which recognizes the mutual influence and relationship of land degradation and human mobility and aims to further increase understanding in that regard. They identified three areas if collaboration: climate change adaptation, rights and security and sustainable development.

Other (regional) initiatives such as the Great Green Wall Initiative aim to increase the plant coverage of more than 8000km of land connecting the west and east coast of Africa as a counter measure. So far, a lot has been achieved, yet according to many, the regreening moves too slow compared to the rapid population growth, and thus a growing need for food security and jobs, in the region. The Sustainability, Stability, Security Initiative (3S Initiative) functions as a link as it aims to improve both the living conditions to prevent migration as well as providing opportunities and safety for displaced people.

Questions a debate should address

- Should the UNCCD play a more central leading role in centralizing and integrating various regional actors?
- If so, in what way can this be achieved?
- How could more developed, resilient and less climate change threatened countries increase their involvement in the region and how can the UNCCD coordinate and assist?





- What role can the UNCCD play in the (encouragement of the) implementation of the Global Compact for Migration in West Africa?

Useful Links

- <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/article/desertification>
- <https://www.unccd.int/conventionregions/annex-i-africa>
- <https://www.unccd.int/actions/actions-around-world>
- https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2018-06/PSI_Report_A_Test_of_Endurance.pdf (pp. 10-18)

Country Matrix

- Burkina Faso
- Côte d'Ivoire
- Niger
- Senegal
- Mali
- Gambia
- Chad
- Guinea
- Spain
- France
- Italy
- China
- USA
- UK

Observers:

- IOM
- ECOWAS
- CLISS

