

Africa's drylands are getting more support. How to make the most of this

June 17 2021, by Anja Gassner, Philip Dobie and Robert Nasi



Arid chaco. Credit: [Valerio Pillar](#), CC BY-SA 2.0

The United Nations (UN) recently launched the [Decade on Ecosystem Restoration](#) to prevent, halt and reverse the degradation of ecosystems worldwide. It is a response to evidence that our current abuse of nature

has [accelerated global warming](#) and [degraded natural resources](#) to a degree that threatens [the wellbeing](#) of people.

The Decade will use overseas development aid to influence land use policies that align with [its 10 point strategy](#). This will be channeled through instruments such as [the Global Environment Facility's drylands program](#) and the [Land Degradation Neutrality Fund](#).

These efforts will be particularly important to [Africa's drylands](#). Drylands are typically low rainfall areas where high temperatures and a lack of water [constrains](#) crop, animal and forest production.

In Africa, drylands [cover](#) 60% of the continent. They are [home to over](#) 525 million people who depend on rainfed agriculture and livestock husbandry. The [weather conditions](#), combined with the effects of human activity on the land, make drylands highly vulnerable to land degradation, known as desertification. This [includes](#) the loss of soil, soil fertility and vegetation.

Unpredictable climate and challenging socio-ecological conditions have shaped societies with astonishing and innovative coping capacities. For instance, dryland pastoralists [produce more than](#) half of Africa's red meat and milk.

However, the climate crisis, with temperatures rising [1.5 times faster](#) than anywhere else in the world, threatens the balance communities have created in this landscape. Conflicts over resources are [on the rise](#) and so is [migration](#).

Investments in Africa's drylands are needed to restore this balance and sustain productivity while catering to the next generation's aspirations: providing job opportunities and turning local business into engines for development.

Neglected and underfunded

Drylands are an overlooked biome. This is rooted in the origins of the [Rio conventions](#)—three conventions created with the aim to promote a sustainable planet for future generations.

One of these conventions, the [Convention to Combat Desertification](#), was adopted in 1994 to address the concerns of African leaders about poverty, drought and food insecurity. But, unlike climate change and biodiversity, programs under this convention—which aimed to halt soil erosion and the loss of soil fertility—[were not perceived](#) to contribute to a global public good. This left the Convention to Combat Desertification [chronically underfunded](#) and drylands remained a lower environmental priority.

With international environmental funds not available, the first leadership of the convention wanted to tap into development funding. They did this by painting a [bleak picture](#) of degraded lands, rapid population growth and inadequate livelihood options. But, for years to come, this made private investors and development financiers shy away from investing in agricultural enterprises in Africa's drylands.

Now, with the launch of the Decade on Ecosystem Restoration, much more funding will be channeled into drylands through projects on the ground.

Making an impact

To ensure that these investments make the most impact, there are a few lessons to bear in mind.

We recently attended the [Global Landscapes Forum](#). This brought

together experts, policymakers, businesses, investors and local communities. It involved 232 speakers, with 127 from Africa, and 50% of whom were women. They gave a clear message about how funds can lead to change.

Land degradation in drylands is a multi-faceted problem. Single sectoral approaches—like maximizing crop yields or banning fires—won't work. The solution for sustainable African drylands is to ensure there is optimal vegetation, water and soil resources under the constraints of climate change and inadequate human and financial resources.

All of these measures are important because restoration alone won't work. More is needed to solve the underlying economic problems of population growth and insufficient income opportunities in the drylands. Opening up economic opportunities through land restoration will.

To achieve this, modern innovations and science need to work hand in hand with local practices and knowledge to produce the quality and quantity of products needed to build investment cases in restoration. One example of this is the [Supporting Pastoralism and Agriculture in Recurrent and Protracted Crises program](#), which brings together scientists and local communities across sub-Saharan Africa. It links pastoralists and their milk and meat products to investors as well as markets.

Funding is needed in capacity building for land-use practices and business skills. In addition there need to be investments in equipment and infrastructure as well as stronger local governance and institutions.

Approaches must give responsibility and rights to local communities, the owners and custodians of the land. They must be equal partners in restoration efforts. Through years of implementing landscape restoration activities, it is clear that [only programs](#) that co-design interventions with

local communities—which assure equal benefits and access rights—lead to long-lasting change.

Women and young people, whose lives are [disproportionately affected](#) by degradation, must be at the fore.

In Kenya, for example, these areas are predominantly inhabited by patriarchal communities. Women are responsible for nurturing the children and, without productive lands for food and firewood, their lives are very challenging. Various progressive pieces of legislation were enacted in the recent past. However women [continue to be](#) marginalized and discriminated against.

Women must be supported in leading inter-generational dialogs within their families and clans. The idea would be that these would foster a shift in social norms to ensure equitable access to land regardless of gender or age.

As for young people, the traditional way of life can no longer offer a prosperous future for them all and off farm opportunities are very limited.

There are encouraging stories of new generations of entrepreneurs in dryland areas that are turning community-based NGO activities into sustainable businesses. [Sahel Consulting](#), for example, links [private investors](#) to women dairy producers in Nigeria. [Enda Energie is an initiative](#) that links women cooperatives to personal care and cosmetic markets [where they](#) sell fruits.

In addition carbon credits can be a real incentive for investors in clean energy technologies, such as [solar cooking](#) or [biogas](#). Governments must recognize the potential of drylands so these initiatives can flourish. This includes ensuring people have access to markets and finance so they can

sustainably scale up.

Finally, external funding programs must support the de-risking of pastoralism and enhanced resilience to shocks. This can be done through, [for instance](#), index based financing and insurance.

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