

Foreword



The various definitions of desertification are complex and have failed to portray or address desertification as a developmental problem. By complexity, we refer to the tendencies with which biodiversity or conservation, global climate change, and globalization on one hand overlap with desertification on the other. For example, the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) defined desertification as the diminution or destruction of the biological potential of the land, leading ultimately to desert-like conditions (UNCCD, 1977). This was later redefined as land degradation in arid, semi-arid and dry sub-humid areas resulting from various factors, including climatic variations and human activities (Convention to Combat Desertification, Article 1). However, from the agricultural point of view, we wish to consider a rather simpler definition and an easy approach. The UNCCD has not been as successful as other conventions in its pledge to combat desertification. Because desertification is globally considered a major environmental factor, it has numerous setbacks from the socio-economic aspect.

Furthermore, with such a broad definition of desertification as mentioned earlier and being generally perceived as the major cause of land degradation, I would like to take a narrow conception of desertification, from the agronomic view-point. Desertification should be considered a prime environmental phenomenon which affects soil fertility and thus leads to soil degradation. Here, soil degradation refers to all factors directly contributing to biological productivity.

Last year we pointed out “though the world celebrates this millennium as an era of technological advancement, one of our current and future challenges is the human-induced or natural processes leading to land degradation in general and desertification in particular.” Unfortunately, this challenge will likely not be overcome because of the complex nature, differences in combat measures and factors attributing to desertification. As such, we need to re-structure our research so that it focuses on a simple and practical strategy that could help combat desertification. In this way, we can then expand our task to broader approaches involving the most sophisticated technologies to match the intricate nature of desertification. Equipped with this simplicity as an approach as well as a tool, we will surely win the battle against desert expansion based on sustainable land use systems.

While mobilizing all our resources to combat desertification, we are confronted with situations or issues of biodiversity, global climate change, and globalization. All these forces conflict with our motivations and prioritization of our options. Therefore, we need to ask ourselves what role institutions or individuals engaged in combating desertification could play amid these complex situations.

To meet these challenges and combat desertification, there must be (1) a clearer and simpler definition of desertification, (2) initiative to bring in force the participation of the local population as well as utilization of indigenous knowledge, and (3) a strong support to UNCCD, UNEP, ICARDA and other related institutions from donor agencies such as the World Bank and IMF. Combating desertification remains a global issue which needs multi-disciplinary approach as it is evident that the pressure on our “Green Planet” will

continue at an alarming rate as the demand for food, water and energy grows, the global climate situation becomes unstable, and pollution increases amid declining biodiversity.

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