



## Moving towards a twin-agenda: Gender equality and land degradation neutrality



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### ABSTRACT

The conceptual framework for Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN) highlights that land degradation in developing countries impacts men and women differently, mainly due to unequal access to land, water, credit, extension services and technology. It further asserts that gender inequality plays a significant role in land-degradation-related poverty hence the need to address persistent gender inequalities that fuel women's poverty in LDN interventions. This paper presents recommendations for moving towards a twin-agenda: gender equality and land degradation neutrality. It first introduces gender dimensions of current global environmental regimes, identifying critical interlinkages between gender equality and women's human rights and land rights with a focus on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD). Next, it analyses gender entry points in the LDN conceptual framework, presenting promising gender mainstreaming practices in local efforts to address land degradation. The research methods of content analysis of relevant literature, including official documents of the UNCCD Conference of the Parties (COP); collection and analysis of case studies from different geographies to identify promising gender-responsive practices at country and local levels; and the analysis of the outcomes from a capacity building workshop on gender mainstreaming held during the COP13 in Ordos, China, in September 2017 are used to recommend how gender perspectives can be incorporated into policies, programs and interventions aimed to avoid, reduce or reverse land degradation at local and national levels.

### 1. Land degradation through a gender lens

Land is a life-giving asset and the foundation of every society. Healthy land and soils ensure healthy ecosystems (Keesstra et al., 2016; Laban et al., 2018; Pereira et al., 2017) and a life with dignity for human beings. Yet, the UNCCD (2017d) reports that land is being degraded at an unprecedented pace –at an average of 12 million hectares per year. Rural women and girls tend to be the most impacted because agriculture is central to their livelihoods and their day-to-day activities are tied to natural resources. Hence, when land is degraded and becomes unproductive, women are subjected to even more time-consuming, labor-intensive but unpaid or poorly remunerated work tied to women and girls' household responsibilities including producing food and procuring water (Davis et al., 2015). Despite women's significant

role as environmental stewards, they are often excluded from planning and decision-making with respect to conservation and management of land, including decision-making around soil conservation and other sustainable land use practices, and likely to be excluded from decisions on large-scale land-based investments and infrastructure, development and conservation projects (Mor, 2018). Compounding and increasing vulnerability to land degradation is the fact that discriminatory statutory and customary systems in many societies deny women and girls the rights to own and inherit land (Mor, 2018).

The UNCCD conceptual framework for Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN) highlights that land degradation in developing countries impacts men and women differently, mainly due to unequal access to land, water, credit, extension services and technology (Orr et al., 2017). The conceptual framework likewise asserts that gender inequality plays a

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significant role in land-degradation-related poverty hence the need to address persistent gender inequalities that fuel women's poverty in LDN interventions (Cowie et al., 2018).

Inequality hinders and diminishes women and girls' actual and potential roles in and contributions to avoiding, reducing and reversing land degradation, and improving their livelihoods and that of their families and communities. Empowering women by strengthening and enforcing their rights to access, use and make decisions over their land can generate incentives, security and opportunities for conservation and land management, ensuring its long-term productivity. This paper argues that advancing gender equality and achieving land degradation neutrality work in tandem.

The paper first introduces gender dimensions of current global environmental regimes, identifying critical interlinkages between gender equality and women's human rights and land rights with a focus on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) (Section 2). Next, it analyses gender entry points in the LDN conceptual framework (Section 3), and it presents promising gender mainstreaming practices in local efforts to address land degradation (Section 4). The research methods of content analysis of relevant literature, including official documents of the UNCCD Conference of the Parties; collection and analysis of case studies from different geographies to identify promising gender-responsive practices at country and local levels; and the analysis of the outcomes from a capacity building workshop on gender mainstreaming held during the UNCCD 13th Conference of the Parties in Ordos, China, in September 2017 are used to offer recommendations (Section 5) on how gender perspectives can be incorporated into policies, programs and interventions aimed to avoid, reduce or reverse land degradation at local and national levels.

## 2. Global norms reinforcing critical interlinkages between gender equality, women's human rights and land

Women's rights to land and other productive resources are outlined in a number of international legal and policy instruments<sup>1</sup> including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which establishes the principle of non-discrimination on the basis of sex, recognizes the rights to property, food and education, and guarantees women equality and non-discrimination in rights to land and access to natural resources. Secure land rights and natural resources are often a precondition for rural women's realization of other human rights, including economic livelihood, adequate standard of living, housing, food security, education, health, freedom from violence and participation in decision-making at all levels<sup>2</sup>. General Recommendation 34 on the rights of rural women of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) directs State Parties to uphold rural women's rights to land and natural resources, and provides detailed guidance to this end (Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, 2016).

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action<sup>3</sup> (United Nations,

<sup>1</sup> For a detailed discussion of these human rights instruments, you may refer to *Realizing Women Rights to Land and Other Productive Resources* (UN Women & United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2013)

<sup>2</sup> UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), Article 14(2) instructs States to facilitate equal participation in and “benefit from rural development” and in, particular, women's right to “equal treatment in land and agrarian reform.” Article 15(2) mandates equal rights to women “to administer property,” and Article 16(1)(h) extends equal rights to “both spouses in respect of the ownership, acquisition, management, administration, enjoyment and disposition of property,” which is interpreted to include land.

<sup>3</sup> Under the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action, governments pledged to remove legal and customary obstacles and cement in law “women's equal access to economic resources, including land ... as a means to further the advancement

1995), and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the associated Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) reinforce a focus on gender equality and the empowerment of women in access and control of natural resources such as land (Fig. 1). The SDGs recognize women's land rights as a catalyst for poverty eradication (Goal 1), food security and improved nutrition (Goal 2), and gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls (Goal 5) (UNGA, 2015). These benefits can accrue to women when their rights are legally recognized and upheld in their societies. Discriminatory laws, weak or resistant governance, biased social norms and lack of information are among the many barriers to women realizing their rights to access, use, inherit, transfer, control, benefit from and own land, and to having a voice and finding redress in their claims to land (Mor, 2016). Seven targets and six indicators of the SDGs focus on land rights and land tenure security, and three indicators are relevant to women's land rights and land tenure security: indicator 1.4.2 (secure land rights); indicator 5.a.1 (rights over agricultural land); and indicator 5.a.2 (legal frameworks, including customary law, that guarantee women's equal rights to land ownership and/or control over land) (UN, 2018).

In addition, the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the Context of National Food Security (FAO, 2012) emphasize gender equality as a principle, and task States with ensuring equal tenure rights and access to land, independent of civil and marital status.

Among the three Rio Conventions on Biodiversity, Climate Change and Desertification, the UNCCD is the only one with explicit reference to women's roles and participation in the text of the Convention (articles 5, 8, 10 and 19, see Table 1, Supplementary Information). Since its adoption, the Secretariat, Parties and other stakeholders have demonstrated interest and sensitivity to gender equality and women's rights in the implementation of the Convention's mandate. The development of the Advocacy Policy Framework on Gender in 2011; the Namibia Declaration and the Ankara Initiative; a number of decisions adopted by Parties at the 13th session of the Conference of the Parties to the UNCCD (COP13) (Table 2, Supplementary Information); and the high-level gender day events at UNCCD's COPs sessions demonstrate an evolving commitment to gender mainstreaming in the implementation of the UNCCD at all levels.

A major intergovernmental breakthrough was realized at the COP 13, which was held in Ordos, China in September 2017. Parties to the Ordos Declaration pledged “to address the gender inequalities which undermine progress in the implementation of the Convention by pursuing the full and effective participation of both men and women in planning, decision-making and gender-responsive implementation of the Convention at all levels” (UNCCD, 2017e). Supporting the Ministers' pledge are COP decisions with specific gender-related mandates, including the multi-year work-plans for the Convention; the Gender Action Plan (2017); the work of the Science Policy Interface on the conceptual framework for LDN; and the UNCCD 2018-2030 Strategic Framework (Table 2 SI). Objective 2 of the 2018-2030 Strategic Framework calls for improving the living conditions of affected populations so that “local people, especially women and youth, are empowered and participate in decision-making processes in combatting desertification, land degradation and drought” (UNCCD, 2017b). Of relevance from an implementation perspective, are gender-responsive decisions of the workplans and costed workplans, which operationalize the 2018-2030 Strategic Framework (see Table 2 SI).

In a landmark decision, the COP 13 adopted the first Gender Action Plan (GAP) on “gender equality and women's empowerment for the enhanced and effective implementation of the Convention” (UNCCD, 2017c), consolidating earlier efforts and key decisions recognizing the crucial contributions of gender equality and empowerment of women to

(footnote continued)

and empowerment of women and girls.” (United Nations, 1995)

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