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## **Reviewing the International Year of Deserts and Desertification 2006: What contribution towards combating global desertification and implementing the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification?**

### **Abstract**

During the United Nations General Assembly's 58<sup>th</sup> Ordinary Session in 2003, a decision was adopted declaring 2006 the International Year of Deserts and Desertification (IYDD). This paper critically reviews this International Year. It draws on the key outputs from IYDD events from across the globe to highlight the challenges and ways forward in both combating desertification and implementing the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD). The paper considers what the IYDD outputs mean for the current and historical controversies surrounding the desertification issue and presents an overall evaluation of the successes of IYDD for the different stakeholder groups within the desertification regime. It is concluded that while the International Year can be considered to have met the United Nations's four objectives: to address the long-term oriented implementation of the UNCCD; raise awareness of the implications of desertification; facilitate networking with all stakeholders; and disseminate information relating to the UNCCD, the real challenge lies in moving the IYDD outcomes away from the conferences, meetings and networks that contributed to their generation, towards a more concrete, tangible effort to conserve deserts and effectively monitor and control desertification and land degradation on the ground.

## **Introduction**

International Years have been designated by the UN since 1959, and have covered a wide range of topics, from social and political themes such as refugees, human rights and disabled persons, through to environmental themes including mountains and freshwater. One of the most recently concluding International Years is that of deserts and desertification, celebrated during 2006. This was declared by the United Nations General Assembly's 58<sup>th</sup> Ordinary Session in 2003, which was reportedly: 'concerned by the apparent exacerbation of desertification, particularly in Africa, and the negative implications it has for achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)' (UNGA, 2004). As such, the International Year of Deserts and Desertification (IYDD) was adopted as a way of 'raising public awareness about desertification' and 'helping to protect dryland biodiversity and the knowledge and traditions of the people whose everyday lives are affected by desertification' (UNGA, 2004). By placing the focus of the International Year on both deserts and desertification, it provided an opportunity to celebrate the world's desert environments, their populations and their cultures, but also to raise awareness about land degradation problems (particularly in the drylands) with the overall goal of enhancing the implementation of the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) (UNGA, 2004).

Taking 2006, the International Year of Deserts and Desertification as a case study, this paper assesses the success of IYDD. First, IYDD is contextualised within an overall history of global attempts to combat desertification and the successes and challenges faced therein. The goals and objectives of IYDD are then considered in relation to both deserts and desertification, and evaluated in an analysis of IYDD events and their

outcomes. At the centre of the analysis are the key policy recommendations, declarations, memoranda of understanding and so on, arising from events convened all over the world throughout 2006. The paper then explores who IYDD might have been a success for, and examines how its outputs may be used to shape future efforts to protect desert regions by combating global desertification and implementing the UNCCD.

### **Deserts, desertification and the global political arena**

The world's deserts have long been recognised as distinct in their geomorphology and landscapes, but they are also unique in terms of the cultures, knowledges and traditions of the dryland populations that live there (Thomas, 1997). As Western understandings of deserts have evolved over time, political interest has grown regarding the concept of 'desertification' in relation to the degradation of desert areas. Desertification was first conceptualised as an issue in need of global political attention following the severe drought and associated famine in the Sudano-Sahel region of Africa between 1968 and 1974 (Thomas and Middleton, 1994). In response to this tragedy, the UN Conference on Desertification (UNCOD), was convened by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) in 1977. The intention of the UNCOD meeting was to expand not only the scientific understandings of desertification and drought and their socio-economic consequences for desert populations, but also to stimulate development and desertification mitigation in severely degraded regions (Rhodes, 1991). At the policy level, UNCOD gave rise to the UN Plan of Action to Combat Desertification (PACD), which was adopted by the UN General Assembly (Corell, 1999). This gave UNEP a mandate to organise and coordinate action with a view to the eventual control of

desertification world-wide by the year 2000. The PACD recommended three key actions:

1. The creation of government institutions to combat desertification at the national level.
2. The convening of conferences, seminars and workshops at regional level, as well as the undertaking of inter-regional studies to establish regional training centres by Regional Economic Commissions. These commissions would also organise and coordinate the implementation of trans-boundary projects to combat desertification.
3. Promotion of the participation of UN Agencies and Organizations by UNEP through a plan of action based on requests for assistance received from governments. UNEP would also undertake joint planning with other agencies to formulate specific actions, mobilize finance and coordinate projects to counter desertification (FAO, 1993).

These recommendations represented a rather top-down approach to addressing desertification, which, although coordinated through international institutions like UNEP, placed responsibility and initiative at the state level. By the early 1990s however, a UNEP evaluation of the PACD found that progress had been minimal, primarily as a result of the failure of African governments and the donor community to make desertification a priority issue. The necessary significant financial support from governments had failed to be mobilised; anti-desertification measures had been inadequately integrated into national development plans; and legislation to stop the

human-induced drivers of the problem was found to be lacking. Furthermore, the complex nature of desertification was starting to be better recognised (Rosenov, 1990).

Despite these set-backs, the ineffectiveness of the PACD, together with the advances made by the scientific community in understanding the complex causes and effects of desertification, were used by the African states as a point of leverage to further promote the problem as extending beyond the Sahel. Ultimately it contributed towards gaining desertification a truly international profile at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) (Najam, 2004; 2006). Also around this time, the first edition of UNEP's World Atlas of Desertification (1992) was published, which summarised the scientific knowledge of the era on the causes of desertification and extent of the world's drylands. It appeared to show that large parts of the world and vast numbers of people were experiencing (or at least at risk of experiencing) processes of soil degradation, and strengthened the case for global action to be taken. As such, the desertification "crisis narrative" (Thomas and Middleton, 1994) was used to facilitate and justify political action at the international level.

During the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED, 1992) persistent demands from the African states for an international legal treaty addressing the desertification issue continued. In particular, these countries felt the attention of the developed world was too focused on problems of climate change and biodiversity (Toulmin, 1995), whereas the challenges to sustainable development that they faced, including food insecurity and poverty, were being largely overlooked. The idea for an international convention to combat desertification was initially poorly received by developed states; particularly those in the EU of the time. They argued that

desertification was not a global problem and that its causes were mostly local; a cumulative result of desert populations' decisions and actions (Batterbury et al., 2002). This established a rather deep political schism between the global north and south (Najam, 2006), which still remains problematic today (Ortiz and Tang, 2005). Nevertheless, following considerable political bargaining in the final stages of the Rio summit, the developed world finally conceded that local decisions are often driven by wider influences (e.g. climate, trade patterns, human migration, technology and so on). As a result (and in conjunction with chapter 12 of Agenda 21), the UN General Assembly called for establishment of the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee on the Desertification Convention. Five intense negotiation sessions later (which are well documented in the literature– for example, see Najam 2004; Long, 2004; Corell, 1999), on 17 June 1994, the *United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification in those Countries Experiencing Serious Drought and/or Desertification, Particularly in Africa* (UNCCD) was adopted. On 26 December 1996, following its 50<sup>th</sup> ratification, the agreement legally entered into force. It is therefore rather fitting that 2006, the tenth anniversary since the UNCCD came into effect, should be marked by its designation as the International Year of Deserts and Desertification.

### **Desertification and the UNCCD**

The objective of the UNCCD is: “to combat desertification and mitigate the effects of drought in countries experiencing serious drought and/or desertification, particularly in Africa, through effective action at all levels, supported by international cooperation and partnership arrangements, in the framework of an integrated approach which is consistent with Agenda 21, with a view to contributing to the achievement of

sustainable development in affected areas”. It therefore seeks to preserve desert environments whilst addressing the problem of their degradation and its impacts on dryland populations. The UNCCD also recognises linkages with the other Rio Conventions and broader issues such as sustainable livelihoods, stating that: “Achieving this objective will involve long-term integrated strategies that focus simultaneously, in affected areas, on improved productivity of land, and the rehabilitation, conservation and sustainable management of land and water resources, leading to improved living conditions, in particular at the community level” (UNCCD, 1994, Article 2).

The UNCCD therefore makes obvious reference to the norms and principles that dominated debates during the Rio Summit (Chasek, 2001). It advocates a decentralized, participatory approach towards implementation, calling for the empowerment of local populations and inclusion of local as well as scientific knowledge in the development of National Action Programmes (Bruyninckx, 2005; Stringer *et al.*, 2007). This is particularly important, given the sheer numbers of people inhabiting desert areas.

Estimates suggest that drylands are home to more than 2 billion people (MA, 2005), and drawing on the range of understandings, know-how and world views those 2 billion people hold could help to preserve desert environments and combat desertification (UNCCD, 2005). The UNCCD further highlights the importance of civil society and NGOs in providing a bridge between the international political arena and on-the-ground action and the valuable experience these organizations have in helping to empower often marginalized groups such as women and young people. Finally, the Convention notes the importance of adequate resources and financing from developed parties, given the earlier PACD’s failure in this regard. Today, the UNCCD has an impressive 193

parties; the most universal membership any comparable international environmental agreement has achieved to date. However, despite such absolute endorsement, the UNCCD and moreover, the desertification issue, remains an important site of tension and north-south cleavage.

The framing of desertification within the UNCCD as both an environment and development issue may have carved a unique niche for the convention as the world's "sustainable development convention", yet it has also hindered global action in addressing the problem (Ortiz and Tang, 2005; Mortimore, 2006). Developing countries (legitimately) use the convention to stress the need for Overseas Development Assistance to aid poverty reduction (with poverty being portrayed as both a cause and consequence of desertification (Way, 2006)). Developed parties however, particularly those without significant dryland parts, remain reluctant to view desertification as a global issue in need of substantial financial support. Consequently, this echoes some of the challenges faced by the earlier PACD. This in turn has resulted in: marked differences in access to financial and other resources in comparison with the UNCCD's sister conventions, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity (Wagner, 2006); the failure at the international level to mainstream UNCCD programmes and activities into the respective development support initiatives among UNCCD partners (Sporton and Stringer, 2007); an emphasis on National Action Programme development and bureaucratic activities rather than the intensification of field activity (McDonagh and Lu, 2007); and a lack of UNCCD prioritisation in affected states, which to date have had little success in integrating UNCCD objectives into overall national development

plans (Ortiz and Tang, 2005). Once more, these barriers share parallels with those met by the PACD.

The criticisms extend beyond the policy level to the other stakeholder groups engaged in the fight against desertification. Scientists too have questioned the UNCCD; not least, for inadequately clarifying what desertification actually is. More than one hundred definitions can be found in the literature (Glantz and Orlovsky, 1983) with debates playing out on numerous different disciplinary stages. It is unclear whether desertification is a process or an end point; whether it is reversible or irreversible (and over what time-frame these questions should be considered) (Nelson, 1990); whether it is primarily caused by human activities or broader biophysical processes (particularly relating to climate and topographical controls); whether it is marked by a change in economic productivity or chemical, physical and biological properties of the soil (Thomas and Middleton, 1994); whether it occurs only in deserts, or “arid, semi-arid and dry sub-humid areas” as implied by the UNCCD’s use of terms (Grainger et al., 2000), and whether indeed, it is a global or local issue (Batterbury et al., 2002). In turn, the UNCCD has been criticised for its absence of scientific and institutional benchmarks and indicators for monitoring the international impact of the convention on the overall condition and extent of the world’s drylands (Long, 2004; Wagner, 2006). Yet again, this represents a problem rooted in the 1970s’ debates on what constitutes project success when undertaking activities to combat desertification (e.g. Barraclough, 1995).

In light of these ongoing controversies, IYDD offered an ideal opportunity to tackle head-on some of these challenges, perceptions and debates, through the multiple global events that took place, whilst also celebrating the landscapes, cultures and knowledges of those living in desert areas. It also acted as an appropriate platform to increase visibility of the desertification issue on the global stage (cf. Seyfang, 2003) and allowed for information sharing and learning to take place both within and between the different (often disparate) groups involved in the desertification regime (cf. Najam et al., 2002). It was further envisaged that the Year would help to develop a clearer indication of possible ways forward given the continuing debates. Accordingly, four objectives for the Year were established by the UNCCD Secretariat and its partner agencies, presented under the apt abbreviation 'LAND':

- Long-term oriented implementation of the UNCCD;
- Awareness of the implications of desertification;
- Networking with all stakeholders;
- Dissemination of information relating to the UNCCD.

Although the LAND objectives could be said to focus more on desertification than deserts *per se*, activities celebrating the biodiversity, cultures and traditions of desert areas formed an important part of the Year. However, the politicised nature of all International Years and the agencies and institutions charged with their execution resulted in the IYDD being presented primarily as an opportunity to help preserve desert environments and combat their future degradation and desertification. Thus, because the IYDD activities focused largely on combating desertification and implementing the

UNCCD, the remainder of the paper also takes this stance. The results and outcomes of the Year are now examined, together with the key successes and challenges that have emerged.

### **Results: IYDD events and outcomes**

A wide range of activities and events took place across the globe during the IYDD. These can be broadly categorised into three groups: a) meetings (e.g. scientific and political conferences, workshops, lectures and seminars); b) cultural events (including exhibitions, film and musical events) and c) public awareness-raising activities (such as the production of leaflets and information literature on desertification and the organisation of campaigns and competitions) (UNCCD Secretariat, 2007). Some of the events in the ‘meetings’ category aimed to specifically include particular stakeholder groups within the desertification regime; for example, the conference entitled: *The Future of Drylands* organised in June 2006 by UNESCO (the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation) was promoted as an international scientific conference and the majority of conference delegates were members of the scientific community (or at minimum, had some level of scientific training). Other conference events involved multiple stakeholder groups, for example, the Joint International Conference: Desertification and the International Policy Imperative, which was organised by the UNU (United Nations University) and held in Algiers in December 2006. These types of activities sought to contribute towards the objective of “networking with all stakeholders”.

The cultural events and public awareness raising activities were more broadly inclusive and in particular, targeted the media and the general public throughout the globe. These contributed towards objectives A and D in LAND, in that they helped to raise “Awareness of the implications of desertification” and aided the “Dissemination of information relating to the UNCCD”. Activities falling into this category include the production of commemorative coins and stamps by countries including Argentina, Armenia, Brazil, China, Egypt, El Salvador, Holy See, Portugal, Spain and Turkey. Together, these activities also support the participatory goals of the UNCCD, which aims to involve governments, NGOs, community organisations, scientists and the people whose everyday lives are affected by desertification in addressing the issue. They also include a more holistic interpretation of IYDD and emphasise the celebration of deserts. For example, museums and exhibitions and in countries such as Algeria, France and Germany focused on desert landscapes, while a conference in India explored the music, dance and cultures of desert populations.

This combination of different activities demonstrates that the impact of IYDD was envisaged to extend beyond the ‘popularisation’ of the desertification issue. It was also viewed as an opportunity to catalyse the generation and diffusion of knowledge about drylands, and develop joint goals for the future, as well as increase participation in the fight against global desertification and contribute towards agenda-setting. Thus, it was hoped that it could engender positive collateral outcomes too, including further steps towards sustainable development (Fomerand, 1996; Seyfang, 2003) and objective L: “Long-term oriented implementation of the UNCCD”.

The summary of IYDD events shown in Table 1 was synthesised using information available on the IYDD website ([www.iydd.org](http://www.iydd.org)) up until May 2007, and the web links therein. This dataset was selected because all 193 parties to the UNCCD that chose to be involved in IYDD activities were requested to register their efforts on the UNCCD website. As such, this provided the largest available synthesis of IYDD events. It is acknowledged that not *all* countries may have registered their events, so whilst constituting the most ‘complete’ dataset available, the IYDD website should not be viewed as wholly exhaustive.

**[Insert Table 1: Events and activities that took place during IYDD]**

Several of the events shown in Table 1 yielded concrete policy recommendations and/or declarations. Although these types of outputs may not necessarily be legally binding, they represent firm commitments to the desertification cause from a variety of different groups (NGOs, scientists, decision-makers), and can nevertheless exert influence in guiding and securing action, support and resources. For the purposes of analysis, these outputs are considered indicators of success with regard to objectives A, N and D of the “LAND” abbreviation of objectives. Many of the IYDD events may also be broadly interpreted to have triggered processes of information sharing, both within and between the different groups in the desertification regime. Social learning is most likely to have taken place during those events at which communication was multi-directional (cf. Rowe and Frewer, 2005), and where participants were able to reflect on the new information they were receiving and apply it to the issues under discussion (cf. Pahl-Wostl and Hare, 2004).

A number of priorities, discourses and potential ways forward for global action to combat desertification have been identified from the IYDD event outputs. These are used as indicators of objective “L”, as they suggest actions to be taken over the longer term. Some of these represent calls addressed to specific stakeholder groups and UNCCD bodies, while some demand the strengthening of existing well-established aspects of the UNCCD implementation and address the Convention’s long-term goals (UNCCD Secretariat, 2007). Other recommendations focus on specific cross-cutting areas (such as women, young people etc) and new, emerging cross-sectoral issues (such as food insecurity and migration) (see Box 1).

**[Insert Box 1: Key thematic areas at which recommendations emerging from IYDD events were targeted (based on UNCCD Secretariat, 2007)]**

## **Discussion**

The recommendations and guidance emerging from IYDD events target not only the problem of desertification as a form of environmental degradation, but also as a broader, cross-cutting development issue in desert regions. For example, ‘women’ and ‘young people’ were highlighted as key stakeholder groups that should be encouraged to become more involved in environmental decision-making and activities to combat desertification. These types of recommendations support the participatory focus of the UNCCD’s approach (cf. Bruyninckx, 2004) and represent some of the broader, cross-cutting aspects of the desertification issue, which are currently considered to act as

barriers to achieving overall sustainable development goals (Warren, 2002). The prominence of the cross-cutting themes (both pre-existing within the Convention and emerging cross-sectoral considerations) also demonstrate how desertification's boundaries do not necessarily match those of the institutions charged with managing the issue, neither spatially or temporally (Folke *et al.*, 1998). As a result, this yields a complex interplay of social and environmental elements (Berkes, 2006). For instance, the inter-linkages between desertification and other global socio-environmental concerns, such as environmental security, conflict, migration and health were highlighted as being in need of enhanced international attention by actors in the desertification regime. This emphasises the social aspects of the desertification issue and the UNCCD's role at the interface of environment and development considerations. It also demonstrates the importance of the international 'partner' agencies in helping to implement the UNCCD, as well as attain the Millennium Development Goals. To understand many of these links, further cooperation will be required between the UNCCD and other global organisations (Sporton and Stringer, 2007). For example, to better comprehend the links between land degradation, desertification and health (e.g. the effects of HIV/AIDS on sustainable land management), collaboration may be required between the World Health Organisation, the UNCCD Secretariat's Committee on Science and Technology and UNAIDS. Similarly, research to further understanding of these interactions requires an interdisciplinary response from the scientific community, an observation that has long been made by researchers working at the interface of land degradation and societal issues (e.g. Blaikie and Brookfield, 1987).

Several of the IYDD conferences and meetings stressed the need for more explicit attention to be paid to ecosystem approaches and for the ‘economics’ of desertification (including the costs of inaction) to be further investigated. This may involve a focus on ecosystem goods and services and their valuation, particularly when designing land use policies and incentive measures, as well as the development of payment mechanisms for dryland ecosystem services. The need to examine the economic aspects of desertification at an international level was also stressed (Requier-Desjardins and Bied-Charreton, 2006), with an emphasis on international trade and enhancing access to markets for dryland products. This, in turn, is bound up with the development of alternative (viable) desert livelihoods. The potential for desert ecotourism as a promising option emerged at a number of IYDD events. However, careful, holistic assessment of the broader impacts of increased tourism activities (particularly in terms of carbon emissions and increased pressure on water resources) would be needed if this is to be pursued.

Finally, the IYDD outputs clearly indicate the need for different stakeholder groups within the desertification regime to continue to collaborate and cooperate, in order to promote knowledge sharing and to further integrate traditional knowledges with more modern scientific approaches to manage dryland areas. This may involve the further refinement of more flexible, adaptive management approaches (cf. Gunderson and Holling, 2002) in order to define integrated land and water management strategies, but also the bringing together of stakeholders to develop indicators and monitor progress towards internationally agreed targets (which the UNCCD is currently lacking (Ortiz

and Tang, 2005)). In this respect, objectives A, N and D need to continue beyond the International Year to ensure the overall success of objective L.

Together, these recommendations show that the desertification issue remains highly complex and that it has many inter-related components. As such, it requires consideration to be given to elements as diverse as governance, economics, communication, information flows and learning, as well as biophysical components such as landscape, environmental assessment and broader, related problems of climate change and biodiversity loss.

Despite the identification of needs and the potential ways forward outlined above, the IYDD has also raised a number of new questions and controversies, in some cases perpetuating the existing challenges to combating global desertification. While important progress may have been made at the international level in terms social learning and the development of research networks to further global knowledge about desertification, agreement has still remained elusive on some of the key debates. For example, the extent and severity of global desertification and land degradation remain unclear and continues to be shrouded in uncertainty (e.g. MA, 2005). Also, the definition of desertification as employed by the UNCCD (1994): “land degradation in arid, semi-arid and dry sub-humid areas resulting from various factors, including climatic variations and human activities” remains contested. Many scientists and decision makers (including the Global Environment Facility, which provides a vital source of funding to address land degradation issues) favour use of a more broadly conceived “degradation” which is not confined to specific climatic (desert) zones, over

the use of the term “desertification” (cf. Hannam and Boer, 2002). It is further argued that the climatically-bound definition of desertification as used within the UNCCD calls into question the extent of the problem, triggering further questions about whether the problem is globally occurring or not. Nevertheless, a scientifically and politically acceptable route through this impasse is yet to emerge and IYDD appears to have contributed little towards mediating this debate.

The widespread “Dissemination of information”, “Awareness-raising” and promotion of IYDD has relied heavily on the desertification ‘brand’, which, as outlined earlier, is highly contested. This can be damaging if it is misconstrued by policymakers, and can help to perpetuate some of the “myths” surrounding the problem (see Forsyth, 2003; Thomas and Middleton, 1994). By intensifying awareness-raising activities without receiving minimum scientific consensus on the information being publicised, incorrect or partial information can be perpetuated, leading to further problems and misunderstandings. Consequently, IYDD may have maintained and even further popularised the (inaccurate) narratives of the problem, in the absence of adequately deconstructing what desertification actually is and what it means. This is especially so because while desertification was being presented as a severe threat to sustainability, the world’s deserts and their peoples and traditions were being celebrated. This therefore sent out some very mixed messages. IYDD and the desertification brand may also have been used strategically to make political gains at the national level, with exploitation of the desertification issue being utilised to further disempower groups that have already been marginalised (cf. Davis, 2005). This has happened before in relation to desertification in the 1980s, when President Kountche of Niger used the need to fight

desertification as an excuse to halt his country's democratisation process and urged his countrymen to 'join the fight against the advancing Sahara' (Warren and Agnew, 1988).

Despite the best intentions of the declarations and policy recommendations emerging from many of the IYDD events, it is the process of translation of policy into local-level action that provides the most significant challenge (cf. Seely and Moser, 2002; Seely, 1998). This is particularly difficult in the absence of substantial financial resources and strong political will across all parties to the UNCCD. Many of the remaining desertification controversies are also closely linked to the nature of the political institutions involved in UNCCD implementation at the national and international levels. In this respect, IYDD has failed as yet, to clarify any new ways forward on this issue, particularly in terms of actions to harness more financing, enhance national prioritisation of desertification, facilitate mainstreaming of the desertification and develop the much-needed benchmarks and indicators to monitor progress. While this demonstrates the complexities of the interplay and fit between different institutions operating at different levels within the global desertification regime (cf. Young, 2002), it also highlights a central challenge: to turn the 'wish list' outcomes of the IYDD events into on-the-ground results. Until that happens, the IYDD outcomes will remain rhetorical and, like the PACD, fail to be translated into meaningful field-level action to help the people whose everyday lives are affected by desertification.

Finally, while the themes in Box 1 have indicated some of the emerging priority areas for consideration, it remains unclear whether these ways forward will be able to overcome all or even some of the historically-rooted controversies relating to

desertification and the UNCCD. Scientific understandings and knowledge about desertification in 2006 have adapted and grown in conjunction with changing governance paradigms and evolving global processes. Different international priorities and environmental norms are emphasised in the world of today compared with those of 1996 when the UNCCD entered into force. While some of the issues (for example, the lack of benchmarks and indicators for monitoring desertification's severity and extent and the impact of the UNCCD) remain in need of urgent global attention, multi-lateral environmental agreements like the UNCCD, and the political actors that are maintaining them, need also to evolve. They need to embrace changing donor priorities and aid harmonisation strategies, and build on the strength of the media coverage given to closely related issues such as climate change, which, in the past have been seen as 'competing' with desertification for funds and publicity (Wagner, 2006). Perhaps this is the most fundamental, yet underplayed, success emerging from IYDD: a broader recognition that global efforts to combat desertification need to be innovative, synergistic and dynamic, and capitalise on the available opportunities.

### **Policy outlook: has IYDD left desertification high and dry?**

The critical issue in reviewing the IYDD is not just to ask whether it has been successful or not, but to consider for whom it has been a success. For the UNCCD Secretariat and the United Nations more generally, the sheer number of international events that took place during the Year implies that increased awareness of desert environments, their inhabitants and the desertification problems they face will have taken place, and that the UN General Assembly's *LAND* objectives will have been met

(regardless of the scientific accuracy or politicised nature of the information that has been disseminated during awareness raising). For NGOs and scientists, the various meetings held around the world have helped these groups to identify common ground and a common agenda, as illustrated by the various declarations that emerged. The events are also likely to have promoted social learning and information exchange both within and between groups, while also extending and consolidating research networks that could lead the way to future collaborative efforts to address desertification.

IYDD may also be considered successful for dryland governments in those countries affected by desertification and that have been most active in mustering global political support to address the issue. Indeed, IYDD provided a high-level platform for the Algerian government's proposal in December 2006, that 2010-2020 should be heralded the International Decade of Deserts and Desertification. Since then, the idea has received support from the UNEP Governing Council and the UNCCD's COP 8 held in Madrid in September 2007, and will shortly be taken forward to the United Nations General Assembly for a decision to be passed. On the one hand, this indicates the perceived importance of the problem and the level of global political support and commitment towards combating desertification and mitigating the effects of drought (desertification as a political bargaining chip notwithstanding). On the other hand, an International Decade needs to be supported by appropriate local-level action for it to make any difference to the everyday lives of the communities living with the impacts of desertification. Without this, it risks subjection to the same criticisms as IYDD. There is also a risk to be taken in pursuing efforts for the Decade: should the proposal be successful, it could not only perpetuate the controversies and inaccuracies that failed to

be addressed during IYDD but also invoke a degree of ‘issue fatigue’ relating to the problem. This could have a negative impact on the donor community and the already scarce financial resources available to address desertification.

The final stakeholder group to be considered is the desert communities themselves. The UNCCD devotes considerable space within its text to emphasising the central role of the people affected by desertification in participating in efforts to reduce the problem.

Indeed, more than 50 references are made to local populations, communities and NGOs in conjunction with participation and participatory activities (Poulsen and Lo, 2006).

Despite this goal to empower the poorest and most marginalised groups, to date, none of the various IYDD reports outline any long-term grassroots level initiatives initiated by IYDD or undertaken within the IYDD framework. This indicates that despite the achievements and ways forward that have emerged from IYDD, at present, the outcomes are little more than rhetoric that identifies what needs to be done, together with some options as to how efforts might proceed. This shares parallels with frustrations relating to the UN’s mega-conferences on the overall direction of human development, which have been referred to in the literature as “circuses with a serious cause” (Jordan and O’Riordan, 2003: 223), “momentary media events” (Haas, 2002) and “expensive talking shops” (Seyfang, 2003: 224). However it is some consolation that these global summits are now acknowledged to help with raising awareness, placing new issues on the global agenda and encouraging dialogue between disparate groups (Najam et al., 2002), as well as facilitating joined-up thinking, endorsing common principles, providing global leadership, building institutional capacity and legitimising global governance through inclusivity (Seyfang, 2003). Events like IYDD

could no doubt have contributed to some of these broader sustainable development goals too.

## **Conclusion**

The real challenge in shaping future global efforts to combat desertification lies in moving the IYDD outcomes away from the conferences, meetings and networks that contributed to their generation, towards a more concrete, tangible effort to effectively monitor and control desertification on the ground, albeit within the broader framework of today's global issues and priorities, such as the Millennium Development Goals. This challenge now formally lies with the UNCCD Secretariat, following the Conference of the Parties' (COP's) final decision on the Outcome of the International Year of Deserts and Desertification on 15<sup>th</sup> September 2007. The COP requested that the UNCCD Secretariat "explore ways and means to address the recommendations in the report on the outcomes of the IYDD and invites the General Assembly to declare 2010-2020 the Decade of Deserts and Combating Desertification" (ICCD/COP(8)/L.24). Nevertheless, if IYDD's objectives were truly met, and the networks that formed, awareness that was raised, and agendas that were developed during IYDD are sustainable, all groups could start to act now to put their recommendations into effect. Whether they will or not remains to be seen.

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**Table 1: Events and activities that took place during IYDD**

<b>Date</b>	<b>Location*</b>	<b>Activity</b>
January	Several	Publication of 2 <sup>nd</sup> edition of the book <i>Deserts of the World</i>
19-20 Jan	Italy	Workshop on combating desertification & poverty in drylands
February	Several	Book launch: 365 pictures for the IYDD
27 Feb	USA	World Bank Rural Day: Tackling degraded lands to ensure future food production. Session on land management.
7-9 Feb	Dubai	Global Ministerial Environment Forum
March	France	Deserts through photography exhibition by Jacques Durou
March	Germany	Deserts through photography exhibition by Michel Martin
March	France	Deserts through photography exhibition by Arthus Bertrand
9-11 Mar	Spain	Seminar on desertification & environmental security: consequences & prevention
29 Mar	Germany	Press conference for launch of the international exhibition “The deserts”
30 Mar- 8 Oct	Germany	International exhibition “The deserts”
11-12 Apr	Switzerland	International conference: Combating desertification, hunger & poverty
2-12 May	Italy	Mediterranean Training Programme: First seminar on Desert Locust Control – information management, prevention, monitoring and impact assessment.
8-10 May	Cuba	IYDD & the Caribbean
14-19 May	Morocco	14 <sup>th</sup> Conference of the International Soil Conservation Organisation (ISCO)
22 May	Global	International Biodiversity Day “Achieving the 2010 biodiversity target: protecting biodiversity in the drylands”
29 May-1 June	China	Beijing international conference on women & desertification
31 May	Switzerland	International symposium “Desertification & global change”
5 June	Algeria	World Environment Day: “Don’t Desert Drylands”
5 June	Global	UNEP publication launch: Global Environment Outlook for Deserts (GEO DESERTS) & Our Planet magazine focusing on deserts and drylands
9 June- 31 Aug	France	Exhibition of GEO deserts photographs
13-15 June	Chile	Sustainability in the combat against desertification: monitoring and evaluation of the process and its impact
14 June	Republic of Korea	International symposium on northeast Asia forest network for combating desertification and dust and sandstorms
15-17 June	Mexico	International forum on the combat against desertification and the mitigation of drought
17 June	Global	World Day to Combat Desertification
17 June	Algeria	a) Launch of the international observatory on the environment & the combat against desertification; b) launch of the park & museum of the world deserts: opening of the international institute of the world’s deserts; c) Opening of the centre to combat desertification
19-21 June	Tunisia	UNESCO conference: The future of drylands
26-27 June	Jordan	IUCN conference: Drylands’ hidden wealth: integrating dryland ecosystems into national development planning
3-14 July	Italy	Mediterranean Training Programme Second Seminar on climate change and extreme events. Early warning systems for extreme event impacts.
21 Jul-17 Aug	Japan	International photo exhibition Living with Deserts (UNU)
25 Aug	Japan	Living with deserts II: Linkages between dryland science & on the ground practice
25 Aug	South Africa	Forum on sustainable land management: combating environmental degradation and reviving ecosystem productivity

27 Aug	Japan	International conference: dryland studies & combating desertification
4-6 Sept	Mali	International conference on youth & desertification
21-23 Sept	France	International conference on civil society & desertification
22 Sept	Belgium	International conference: desertification, migration, health, remediation and local governance.
23-25 Sept	Niger	From desert to oasis: a symposium/workshop on the role of science & research in combating desertification in semi-arid sub-Saharan Africa
11-22 Oct	France	Exhibition: Grains of science- journey to the ends of the deserts
16-17 Oct	Germany	International workshop: challenges in desertification research and answers from Europe – Launching the European Desertnet
25-27 Oct	Spain	International Symposium on desertification & migration
29 Oct-30 Nov	USA	IYDD photographic exhibition at UN HQ in New York
1-2 Nov	USA	Roundtable discussion “Assessing the UNCCD process & identifying challenges ahead” at UN HQ New York
2 Nov	USA	Presentation of the report on the celebration of the IYDD to the UN General Assembly
2-4 Nov	Tunisia	International seminar on aromatic & medicinal plants
6-9 Nov	Israel	Deserts & Desertification – challenges & opportunities
15-17 Nov	USA	International conference on water in arid and semi-arid lands
16-17 Nov	Kyrgyzstan	1 <sup>st</sup> Preparatory conference to the OSCE economic and environmental forum on land degradation and soil contamination
26-29 Nov	Saudi Arabia	Second international conference on water resources and arid environments
27 Nov	Egypt	Regional training course on the role of gene banks in promoting the use of agricultural biodiversity to combat desertification
1-7 Dec	Italy	International film festival “Desert nights: tales from the desert”
4-7 Dec	Dubai	International symposium on dryland ecology and human security: regional perspectives, policy responses and sustainable development in the Arab region
5 Dec	Germany	Opening of an exhibition on the Sahara
11-15 Dec	Tanzania	International workshop on climate & land degradation
14-16 Dec	Spain	International conference on oasis and sustainable tourism
17-19 Dec	Algeria	UNU International Conference: Desertification & the international policy imperative
22-24 Dec	India	International conference on music, dance and culture of the desert

\*While this column indicates the country in which the event was held, this does not necessarily mean it was initiated at the state level in that country. It also does not preclude the possibility that other states, groups or organisations were involved in the organisation of the event, nor the possibility that they participated in those events.

**Box 1: Key thematic areas and groups at which recommendations emerging from IYDD events were targeted (based on UNCCD Secretariat, 2007)**

Strengthening existing aspects of the implementation process of the Convention

- Enhancing participation and empowerment
- Enhancing the role of civil society/NGOs and networking
- Scientific research, training and consensus
- Concerns and requests for long-term UNCCD implementation
- Requests for the identification of indicators and targets
- National Action Programmes
- Resources and Financing

Cross-cutting themes

- Synergy and interlinkages
- Traditional knowledge
- Culture and education
- Water
- Renewable energy
- Alternative employment opportunities, access to markets and sustainable livelihoods

New emerging cross-sectoral issues

- Health
- Food security
- Environmental security, migration and environmental refugees
- Ecosystem goods and services, their valuation and the costs of inaction

Groups to which different recommendations were addressed

- UNCCD bodies (including the Committee for the Review of Implementation of the Convention (CRIC); the Conference of the Parties (COP); the Committee on Science and Technology (CST); the Secretariat)
- Country parties to the UNCCD
- International agencies
- The scientific community