Land Restoration for Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals

An International Resource Panel Think Piece

Some 25 per cent of the world's land is degraded.
Land restoration and rehabilitation together represent one of three primary strategies for achieving SDG 15 (Life on land), and particularly for meeting the land degradation neutrality target (15.3).

This International Resource Panel (IRP) Think Piece concludes that **both the process of land restoration and rehabilitation, and the restored land, can have significant co-benefits for all the SDGs.**

Maximize conservation of natural capital

AVOID
1

REDUCE
2

REVERSE
3

AVOID
Land degradation can be avoided by addressing drivers of degradation and through proactive measures to prevent adverse change in land quality of non-degraded land and confer resilience, via appropriate regulation, planning and management practices.

REDUCE
Land degradation can be reduced or mitigated on agricultural and forest land through application of sustainable management practices (sustainable land management, sustainable forest management).

REVERSE
Where feasible, some (but rarely all) of the productive potential and ecological services of degraded land can be restored or rehabilitated through actively assisting the recovery of ecosystem functions.
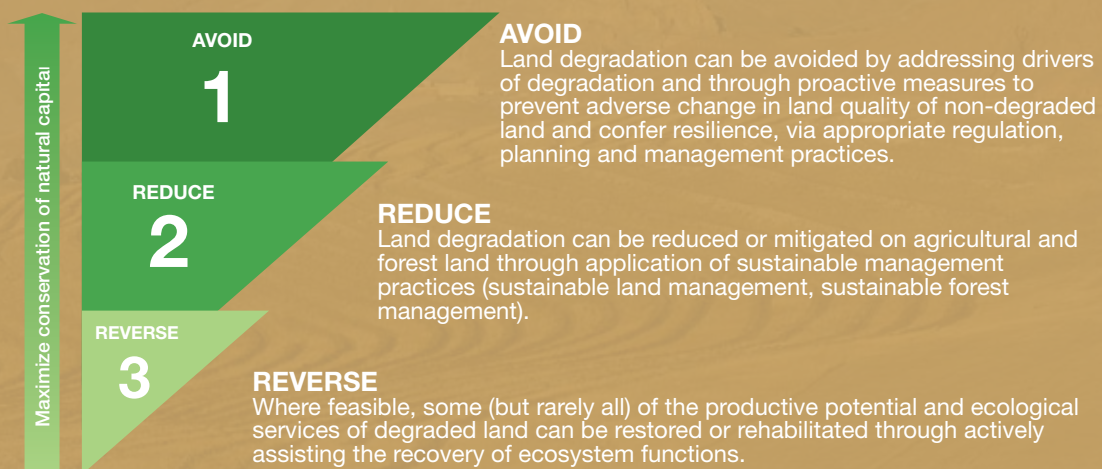
Photo credit: Mustafa DEMIRBAŞ, World Day to Combat Desertification 2019 photo contest organized by the Republic of Turkey Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, General Directorate of Combating Desertification and Erosion

Sustainable Development Goals

Conclusions

The Think Piece's conclusions are derived from individual chapters addressing each of the SDGs, together with a couple of synthetic chapters.

1

Land restoration and rehabilitation can have significant co-benefits for all the SDGs. While other reports have focused on a subset of the SDGs, this report has intentionally considered all of them, and has done so by inviting a large number of diverse authors to participate in the process. Their observations and conclusions, while by no means comprehensive, paint a picture of opportunity and hope as investments in land restoration rapidly grow across the globe. A summary of their conclusions is that land restoration has co-benefits for all SDGs, indirectly, directly, or both. At the same time, the authors collectively acknowledge that the challenges of restoring land, and of realizing SDG co-benefits, are significant, as evidenced by the variable success of past initiatives.

2

The extent of the restoration co-benefits and the potential risks and trade-offs vary widely among the SDGs and their respective targets. The review recognizes not only the diversity of co-benefits that restored land and the process of restoring land can provide, but also that the extent that restoration provides these co-benefits also vary widely among SDGs. One significant observation is that the relative benefit of restoration for the general Goal is often perceived to be greater for some of the Goals than for the specific targets. This is because the targets are in many cases more narrowly defined than the Goal. An example is climate change (SDG 13). Land restoration is widely acknowledged to be essential to the goal of combatting "climate change and its impacts", as stated in the Goal itself. But the targets do not explicitly call for increasing climate-change mitigation (e.g., through increased soil carbon sequestration). In other cases, such as gender (SDG 5), co-benefits are by no means guaranteed: they depend almost entirely on how and by whom restoration work is completed, and who is able to leverage the benefits of the restored land.

3

The co-benefits of the restoration process are often much different than those of the restored land, and often work at different temporal scales. The relative benefit of each varies among the SDGs. This conclusion has significant implications for how projects that attempt to address land restoration together with one or more other SDGs are both planned and financed: co-benefits of the restoration process (e.g., on poverty through incomes) are realized immediately, while the benefits of the restored land (e.g., on hunger through increased agricultural production) may require years or decades to be realized.

4

Quantitative and qualitative modelling, including scenario development, at local to global scales can help guide future investments. It is easy to identify potential synergies and co-benefits. It is much more difficult to ensure that they are realized. Informal discussions among the authors revealed widespread frustration with the extent to which development initiatives are developed and implemented independently from each other, resulting in unrealized opportunities to realize co-benefits through synergies at best, and in unnecessary trade-offs at worst. Even projects funded by the same government, government agency, or donor are often uncoordinated. The scenarios included the International Resource Panel's recent Global Resources Outlook (IRP 2019) illustrate the power of developing and applying integrated models to help structure and navigate the incredible number and complexity of interacting factors that determine the extent to which co-benefits of restoration will be realized.

5

An integrated landscape approach, including targeting research and investments, is key to increasing the total return on land restoration investments. An integrated landscape approach is one that takes into account spatial variability in land potential, and is "responsive to, inclusive of, and designed by the diverse stakeholders" (chapter 4). It can be used to help meet the needs of displaced populations while land is being restored. Furthermore, targeting investments to those parts of the landscape that are most likely to respond, and where recovery is likely to persist, is key to optimizing returns on investments.

Strategies to maximize cross-cutting opportunities

Strategies to maximize cross-cutting opportunities for land restoration or rehabilitation across multiple SDGS:

COMPLETE holistic and systematic analyses to identify potential synergies and trade-offs

APPLY a landscape approach to planning and implementation – especially in landscapes with variable land potential e holistic and systematic analyses to identify potential synergies and trade-offs

DEVELOP targeted solutions

INVEST in areas where persistence is likely

UN environment
United Nations Environment Programme

International Resource Panel

United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification