

The Rio Conventions



Children clearing weeds on the woodland alongside their parents on the Wulugu project, Ghana.
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Synergy for Sustainable Development

Sustainable development—the satisfaction of current human needs without depleting the natural resource base for future generations—is perhaps the greatest challenge facing humanity today. Much thought and debate have gone into elaborating this vital concept. But how do we actually get there? What practical steps can governments and civil society take to translate the concept of sustainable development into reality?

Many of the practical tools and actions for promoting sustainable development are available through the three Rio Conventions: the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification, the Convention on Biological Diversity, and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.

UNITED NATIONS CONVENTION TO COMBAT DESERTIFICATION

Combating Land Degradation: The Wulugu Experience

In Ghana, the impact of desertification is being harshly felt in the northern parts of the country, comprising the Northern, Upper East and Upper West regions, which together constitute more than 30 per cent of the total land area of the country. These areas are naturally savannah. Aside from the harsh climatic conditions, a high level of human activities such as bush fires, bad farming practices and overgrazing, have further exposed the environment to land degradation, deforestation, loss of biodiversity and a decrease in soil fertility, leading to low crop yields and large-scale hunger among the people.

Wulugu is a small but growing farming community in the West Mamprusi District of the Northern Region of Ghana. There are about 4,000 inhabitants, who are subsistence farmers, mainly involved in the cultivation of cereals such as maize, millet, guinea corn, sorghum and rice. A few are raising animals like cattle, sheep and goats, as well as chicken and guinea fowls. In addition, some are harvesting wood from the savannah woodlands to sell, as firewood and charcoal constitute a major livelihood activity and a source of income for the people — mostly poor women. Bush fires, started for the purpose of bush-meat hunting and land preparation for farming, are rampant and often burn out of control.

Like most communities in the savannah, Wulugu fell prey to the reality of a looming scourge of desertification, which ravaged the community, leaving in its trail barren land and scaled landscape. It exposed people to hardships that they hardly dreamt of, much less, prepared for, such as food shortages. Longer than expected dry seasons as well as dying and withering plants and fields became their lot. Firewood, which used to be gathered from just the surroundings of settlements, became scarce. Women and children had to travel over long distances in search of firewood.

Also as a result of fuelwood scarcity, agricultural residues like cormcobs and millet stalks, and other biomes like cow dung, were increasingly being used as cooking fuels, thereby depriving the soils of natural organic nutrients these residues provide. The fuelwood scarcity severely affected income generation from fuelwood sold by the local women. Most of the community wells and bore holes, which were dug several feet deep, became dry, forcing women to trek on foot in the scorching sun for hours in search of water for both humans and animals.

Under these unfavourable and hopeless conditions, some people had to migrate to urban centres for survival. Conscious of these hardships, the people of Wulugu readily took up the challenge in the year 2000 when help came through Friends of the Earth-Ghana and the Japan Fund for Global Environment (JFGE). They marshalled forces with the leadership of the area's assemblyman.



When it comes to combating desertification, the entire community of Bitings, in far eastern Niger, leads a hand. Here, the women, men and children of the 500-member village are building a wall of shrubs against the wind.
UNEP Photograph: Adam Rogers

About 60 people came together — women, men and children — to engage in a community wood lot and afforestation project.

They formed two groups that managed to secure about 13 acres of land through the good will of a generous landowner in the community. Here they cultivated over 2,000 seedlings of acacia to provide an alternative source of firewood for domestic use and for income from sale, as well as to reduce pressure on the rural savannah woodland in Wulugu. The groups, which are 95 % women, were trained by Friends of the Earth-Ghana on nursery, wood lot and project establishment and management.

The determination and enthusiasm of the people are now paying off. The more than 2,000 seedlings planted on both projects have grown beautifully. They have inter-cropped the acacia with locally known edible and medicinal plants called "Bunghun", and with soybeans. People working on the project are hopeful it will benefit the entire community. They are confident that the project will help check and control desertification as well as supply their fuelwood needs. It will also bring in some extra income to improve their standard of living. They hope to sell seedlings as well as impart the knowledge they have gained to surrounding communities in the future so that they can collectively combat desertification.

They have a long-term vision for the project. One of them puts it aptly in these words, "we want to do our part now and leave something behind for posterity".

— By George Bright Awudi
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CONVENTION ON BIOLOGICAL DIVERSITY

Panama Case Study

The “Corredor Biológico Mesoamericano del Atlántico Panameño” or “Panama Atlantic Mesoamerican Biological Corridor” (CBMAP) project covers 3 million hectares of terrestrial and marine areas corresponding to 39.7% of the national territory in the Atlantic slopes of the Isthmus of Panama.

The project promotes sustainable development and the improvement of living conditions of rural communities through the conservation, sustainable use and management of biological diversity.

GEF-World Bank and Panamanian funds adding up to US \$9,245,000 have been invested in the project, under the responsibility of the National Authority for the Environment (ANAM).

The CBMAP has established priority areas for investment based on their biological diversity and social-economic needs. In these areas, the elaboration of community sub-projects encouraging sustainable uses of biological diversity is promoted. At present, there are 79 sub-projects running, for a total investment of around US \$1,700,000.

Over half of the sub-projects are carried out by indigenous groups such as Ngöbes-Buglé, Naso-Teribes, Kunas and Emberaas; 28% are executed by farmers and 3% by Afro Panamanian groups.



The Ecotourism Sub-Project of Salt Creek

Salt Creek, a poverty-challenged community organized according to the Ngöbe traditional structure, is promoting ecotourism as a sustainable activity with a low impact on biological resources. In addition to conventional activities, such as fishing, lobster diving, carbon sequestration with mangroves and subsistence agriculture, the sub-project is offering new income opportunities and a tool to improve the quality of life of residents.

The Salt Creek Community has been actively involved in ecotourism activities and has succeeded in the reconstruction of some access roads to the community, the construction of a path going from the Long Beach up to the tourist huts, and the opening of a restaurant.

The Sub-Project on Aquaculture, Agro-forestry and craft development of La Gloria

The community of La Gloria is composed of families from the Ngöbe-Buglé ethnic group (95%) and Latin and Afro Panamanian groups (5%). This sub-project is managed by 22 women belonging to the Organization of Rural Women. It is aimed at the improvement of the protein diet in the region, through the promotion of aquaculture, and sustainable harvesting techniques of timber, bananas and other fruits for soil recovery, as well as the upgrading of craft techniques by means of training and the purchase of equipment.

The exemplary organization of the group of rural women has reinforced their leadership capacity and has stimulated community support. The local community is now more aware of the negative impacts of deforestation and tree felling and is actively involved in the sustainable use of biological resources.

Why have a Convention?

The international community's growing concern over the unprecedented loss of biological diversity and its profound consequences inspired negotiations for a legally binding instrument aimed at reversing this alarming trend. The Convention is thus the first global, comprehensive agreement to address all aspects of biological diversity: genetic resources, species, and ecosystems. It recognizes —for the first time — that the conservation of biological diversity is “a common concern of humankind” and an integral part of the development process.

What are the objectives?

The objectives of this Convention are:

- the conservation of biological diversity;
- the sustainable use of its components;
- the fair and equitable sharing of the benefits arising out of the utilization of genetic resources.

The Convention at work

The Convention was opened for signature in June 1992 at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, and to date it has been ratified by 183 countries and one regional integration organization.



Convention on Biological Diversity

Help our planet

Join in the global effort to conserve biodiversity.
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THE FRAMEWORK CONVENTION ON CLIMATE CHANGE

The Framework Convention on Climate Change aims to minimize the negative impacts of global warming by returning concentrations of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere to safe levels. It recognizes that the climate system is a shared resource whose stability can be affected by industrial and other emissions of carbon dioxide and other heat-trapping gases. Governments use the Convention to: gather and share information on green-house gas emissions, national policies and best practices; launch national strategies for limiting greenhouse gas emissions and adapting to expected impacts. The Convention encourages reductions of emissions by developed countries over the next ten years; it also aims to lower the costs of emissions reductions in developing countries through a range of specialized mechanisms and the provision of financial and technological support.



The Clean Development Mechanism, one of three mechanisms of the Kyoto Protocol, supports sustainable development and limits greenhouse gases in developing countries. Above, a man cleans solar cells, part of a clean technology project in Mongolia.
Photographer: A. Orsini

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