

PROGRESS TOWARDS THE SDG LAND DEGRADATION AND RESTORATION COMMITMENTS

WHERE ARE WE AT?



WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THE 2023 VNRS AND THE SGD INDICATORS' GLOBAL DATABASE?

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When UN member states adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, we celebrated world leaders' recognition of the foundational and strategic role that sustainable land management must play to advance climate resilience, biodiversity conservation, and maintain sufficient food supplies for us all.

Nine years after the SDGs were set in motion and over halfway into their implementation timeframe, it is important to assess how far we have come: what have countries done to address their ambitious but critical cross-cutting commitments to combat desertification, restore degraded land and soil, and strive to achieve a land degradation-neutral world?

SDG 15 aims to *"protect, restore, and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss."* This brief focuses on countries' actions toward meeting SDG sub-goal 15.3 which by 2030 aspires to *"combat desertification, restore degraded land and soil, including land affected by desertification, drought and floods, and strive to achieve a land degradation-neutral world."*¹


SDG 15.3 overlaps significantly with country commitments under the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD). Significantly, one of the tasks of the UNCCD is to monitor progress on SDG Indicator 15.3.1, which measures progress toward SDG 15.3. In addition to monitoring, the UNCCD also promotes education and best practices to help countries meet their SDG 15.3 targets.²

Each year a subset of UN member countries submits Voluntarily National Reports (VNRs) on their progress toward implementing the 2030 SDG Agenda. In 2023, 38 countries, as well as the European Union, submitted VNRs. We reviewed these submissions to understand what steps countries are taking to meet their SDG land degradation and restoration commitments.


There are indeed countries that have advanced their SDG land degradation and restoration commitments. Some have undertaken thoughtful planning or allocated new resources. Others have augmented or strengthened land restoration and sustainable land management practices in an inclusive way. A few have introduced ambitious reforms, established new national programs, or drafted new legislation to ensure long-term efficacy. Our review finds that, while work on deforestation is active and growing, work on land degradation outside of the forestry sector is relatively uncommon.

1 See the UN Statistical website page "[IAEG-SDGs: Tier Classification for Global SDG Indicators](https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/iaeg-sdgs/tier-classification)" at Website [IAEG-SDGs — SDG Indicators \(un.org\)](https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/iaeg-sdgs/) (visited January 12, 2024).

2 See e.g., UNCCD and Landesa, 2022, "[Land rights matter for people and the planet: An options paper for raising awareness on responsible land governance for combatting desertification, land degradation, and drought](https://www.unccd.int/sites/default/files/2022-09/2022-09-20_Land_rights_matter_for_people_and_the_planet.pdf)" [UNCCD Awareness-raising Options Paper on Responsible Land Governance.pdf](https://www.unccd.int/sites/default/files/2022-09/2022-09-20_Land_rights_matter_for_people_and_the_planet.pdf)



Save for countries facing acute desertification, many countries have yet to prioritize land degradation neutrality, and most have not taken significant action. Even those who have acted decisively have a long way to go before their new laws, policies, and strategies are fully implemented, or their programs will reach the necessary scale needed to achieve land degradation neutrality.



The following sections provide a detailed description of the analysis we have carried out to assess what progress countries have made toward SDG 15.3 on land degradation neutrality and the indicator that tracks this commitment, 15.3.1.

BACKGROUND ON SOURCES

For the analysis that follows we have relied on **39 publicly available Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) submitted** for the 2023 High Level Political Forum by Bahrain, Barbados, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Brunei Darussalam, Burkina Faso, Cambodia, Canada, Central African Republic, Chile, Comoros, Croatia, Democratic Republic of the Congo, European Union, Fiji, France, Guyana, Iceland, Ireland, Kuwait, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Maldives, Mongolia, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Rwanda, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, Slovakia, Tajikistan, Timor-Leste, Turkmenistan, United Republic of Tanzania, Uzbekistan, Vietnam, and Zambia.

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WHAT STEPS HAVE COUNTRIES TAKEN TO ADDRESS THEIR SDG LAND DEGRADATION COMMITMENTS?

While the vast majority of the VNRs included comments around land, land degradation, or land use, frequently these mentions were limited to descriptions of the country's context, history, or challenges rather than active steps being taken in the context of meeting SDG 15.3. Thus, to gauge the extent to which governments are moving toward fulfilling their SDG land degradation and restoration commitments, we screened countries' VNRs for two criteria:

- » VNRs that report concert actions such as new or revised national strategy, legal or policy reforms, programmatic action, active policy implementation, or similar measures. Many governments described existing policies' goals or aspirational activities and these are not included below.
- » VNRs that report activities that have taken place after the SDGs have been agreed upon and set in motion; that is, since 2015. Important as past actions might be, we sought recent policies or implementation activities.

The summaries below share *countries' reported activities that adhere to the criteria described above*. We have made no attempt to validate the reports' claims. We want to recognize the following countries for the specific actions that they report taking on to reverse land degradation:

- » **Barbados** – Barbados has committed to implementing the Caribbean Soil Care project, a joint initiative by the Partnership Initiative on Sustainable Land Management (PISLM) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) to support Small Island Developing States (SIDS) meet Land Degradation Neutrality targets.
- » **Belgium** – Belgium reports coordinating on regional efforts to restore soil health in agricultural areas.
- » **Brunei Darussalam** – The country reports that as of 2022, 586 hectares of degraded lands within forest reserves and logged-over forests have been reforested and restored.
- » **Croatia** – The country's 2023-2027 Common Agricultural Policy Strategic Plan provides state support for the restoration of degraded forest areas and forest crops.
- » **Democratic Republic of the Congo** – The country agreed to the Central African Forest Initiative (CAFI), which provides for the regeneration of 8 million hectares of degraded land and forests.
- » **European Union** – The EU Soil Strategy for 2030 was adopted to protect and rehabilitate degraded areas and combat desertification.
- » **Fiji** – In 2019 the Ministry of Forest and Fisheries committed to plant 30 million trees under its Reforestation on Degraded Forests Project. As of January 2023, the project had planted almost 17 million trees over an area of 152 square kilometers.
- » **Iceland** – In 2022, a national strategy for land restoration and forestry took effect and the country reports that afforestation, land restoration, and wetland reclamation have all increased in recent years.
- » **Ireland** – Ireland reports taking steps on bog rehabilitation, increased afforestation, improved management of grasslands, and increases good soil management practices.
- » **Kuwait** – The country's Environmental Protection Agency has worked in recent years through the North of the Jahara Reserve project to rehabilitate degraded areas by increasing plant cover and reducing desertification. The country is also working to restore coastal mangrove areas.
- » **Mongolia** – In 2021 Mongolia launched a large scale reforestation initiative—“*Billion Trees*,” through which the government committed to reduce forest degradation and deforestation.

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- » **Poland** – Poland reports that in 2021, it reclaimed 2.2 thousand hectares of degraded land.
 - » **Romania** – Romania adopted a National Strategy on Preventing and Combating Desertification and Land Degradation in 2019.
 - » **Saint Kitts and Nevis** – The country's Improving Environment Management through Sustainable Land Management Project (2020-2025) includes work on restoration of degraded forests, farmlands, and mangroves.
 - » **Saudia Arabia** – Through the Saudi Green Initiative, the country has a target of planting 10 billion trees and to rehabilitating 40 million hectares of land. Saudi Arabia is also working to address desertification through improved land use practices, promotion of sustainable agriculture, and supporting the development of sustainable land management systems. Over the next eight years the country aims to rehabilitate over 225,000 hectares of oases through tree planting.
 - » **Tajikistan**–In 2018 the country joined the global Bonn Challenge and pledged to restore over 66,000 hectares of degraded and deforested land by 2030. It also adopted the Astana Resolution to increase forest cover and stop desertification and land degradation.
 - » **Turkmenistan** – The wide ranging National Programme of Socio-Economic Development of Turkmenistan, 2022-2052, includes a component to improve soil and land quality. The National Climate Change Strategy calls for the implementation of measures to prevent soil salinization, pasture degradation and desertification of territories.
 - » **Uzbekistan** – In 2022 the country adopted a Resolution “*On measures to create an effective system of combating land degradation,*” which created a new separate department under the Ministry of Agriculture to address land degradation. In 2021, 672,000 hectares of forest was created or reforested, most of these in the desert zone. In 2018-2021, desert plants were planted on the dried Aral Sea bottom.

WHAT PROGRESS HAS BEEN MADE SO FAR ON INDICATOR 15.3.1?

The relevant outcome-based land degradation indicator is SDG 15.3.1, which tracks the proportion of land that is degraded over the total land area.

Uptake by countries of this indicator has increased.

Indicator 15.3.1 is now a “Tier 1” indicator, signaling both that standards for reporting on the indicator are clear and that at least 50 percent of countries are regularly producing data for the indicator.

Importantly, the UNCCD 13th Conference of the Parties approved a four year frequency for countries to provide information on SDG Indicator 15.3.1.³ The UNCCD is the custodian agency responsible for SDG indicator 15.3.1.⁴ Under this agreement, the first reporting period was 2018 and the UN Statistics Division included the outcome of this reporting in the 2019 SDG Report. Baseline data for measuring this indicator is from 2015.

15.3.1 indicator data are now available for most countries for 2015 and 2019.

The UN SDG Indicator Database now contains data for both the 2015 baseline year and 2019 for 118 of the 146 countries included in the database for the indicator.

Official statistics on indicator 15.3.1 for the next four year period, which would presumably be from 2022, have yet to be made public. For now, official statistical comparisons can still only be made between the 2015 baseline and 2019.

One hundred fifteen countries have publicly available data on the UN SDG Database for both the years 2015 and 2019. Of those 115 countries, 41 show progress in reducing land degradation between the two data points. Two countries show no change: Poland with 0.2 percent land degradation and Lesotho with 8.83 percent land degradation. Seventy-two countries show worsening land degradation between the two years.

3 See Decision 15/COP.13, “Improving the procedures for communication of information as well as the quality and formats of reports to be submitted to the Conference of the Parties,” available at [cop13decision.pdf](https://unccd.int/cop13decision.pdf) (unccd.int)

4 Please see the UNCCD (2021) “Good Practice Guidance: SDG Indicator 15.3.1” Version 2.0 for further information on the collection of data for this indicator Good practice guidance. SDG indicator 15.3.1, Proportion of land that is degraded over total land area. Version 2.0. | UNCCD

Charts 1 and 2 highlight countries with either high reductions or high increases in land degradation from 2015 to 2019 15.3.1 datapoints in the UN SDG Statistical Database. We included countries whose change in percentage of degraded land changed by 15 percent either positively or negatively.

Chart 1. Countries with large reduction in land degradation from 2015 to 2019 (% land area degraded over total land area)

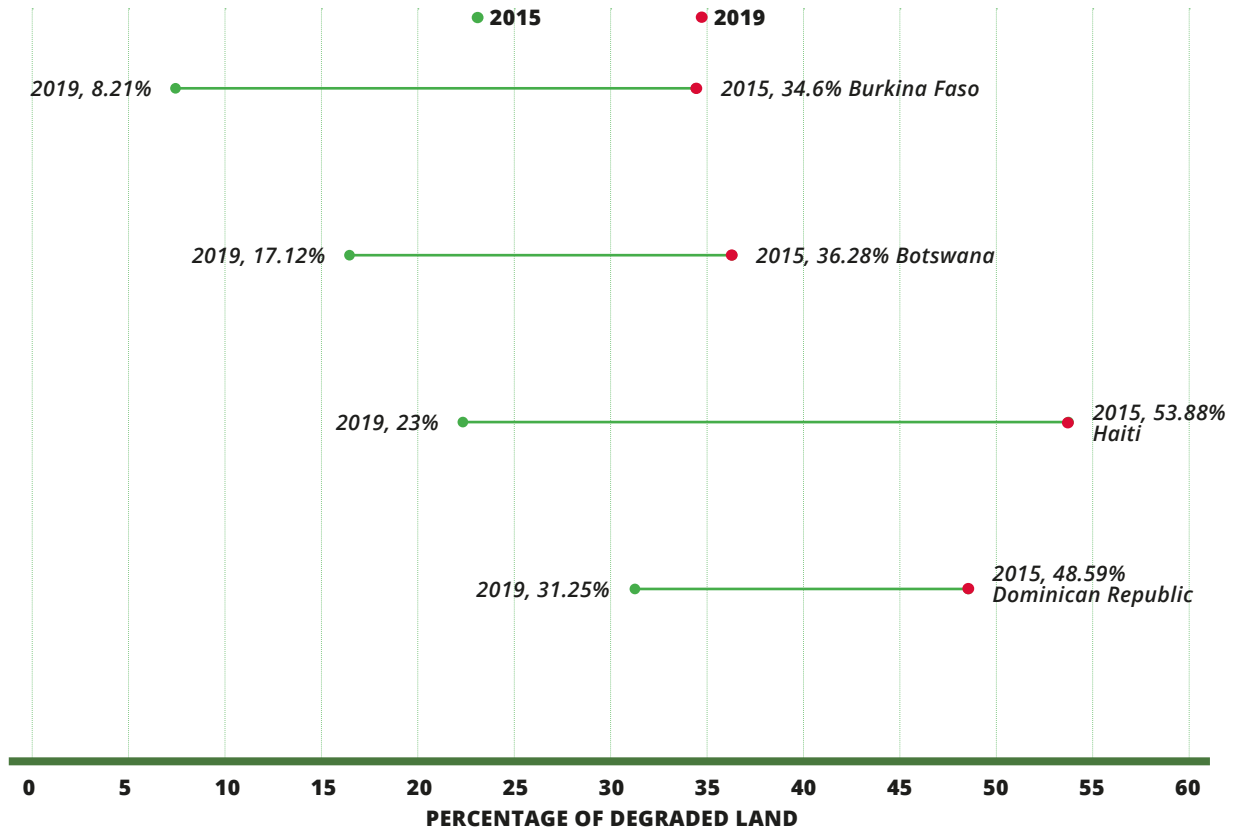




Chart 2. Countries with large increase in land degradation from 2015 to 2019
 (% land area degraded over total land area)







Reaching the SDG land degradation neutrality target will require strong political commitment in all countries, backed by dedicated resources, to enact concerted, deliberate, and multi-sectoral efforts. As a brief review of the 15.3.1 indicator itself suggests, some countries are achieving progress and are either maintaining land degradation neutrality or are even reversing land degradation. Many, however, have lost significant ground in the period between 2015 and 2019.



The uptake of reporting on this indicator is extremely positive. However, action and evidence reported to halt land degradation by countries through their VNRs remains scant.



The 15.3.1 data shows significant changes in land degradation for some countries, however, the VNRs do not provide detailed explanations for these changes between the two data points. The highly visible and powerful platform provided by the SDGs only works if it catalyzes action. Without understanding the realities of what is occurring on the ground through meaningful VNRs that explain why countries have experienced changes in land degradation—either positively or negatively—the difference between the 2015 and 2019 data remains merely a figure. More meaningful VNRs would encourage and include shared learnings between countries and global policymakers on what interventions and strategies are proving to be the most successful or challenging to land degradation neutrality efforts. Providing rich information on these topics in the VNRs can focus governments and policymakers on key contributing issues and the most effective interventions. Rich information would offer better scope for engagement and advocacy by civil society organizations and could help the broad array of stakeholders working on land degradation remain strategically aligned and focused on effective actions.



We are hopeful that the expanded availability of data on SDG indicator 15.3.1 will spur additional specific action by government on SDG 15.3.

We applaud the efforts of the UNCCD to increase education and awareness of the importance of land degradation neutrality and to encourage governments to take action to meet their commitments under both SDG Agenda 2030 and as signatories of the UNCCD.

NOTES

Lined area for writing notes.





THE SDG LAND MOMENTUM GROUP is a coalition of civil society and multi-lateral organisations geared towards monitoring the progress of the SDG land targets and conducting advocacy to meet the same end. Currently the secretariat of the group is coordinated by the International Land Coalition Secretariat. Members of the group include Asian NGO Coalition, GLTN, Huairou Commission, IPAR, IWGIA, Land Portal, Landesa, Natural Resources Institute - University of Greenwich, Oxfam, Rights and Resources, TMG Think Tank, Transparency International and World Resources Institute



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