

Roy Behnke and Michael Mortimore (eds)

The End of Desertification? Disputing Environmental Change in the Drylands

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The End of Desertification?, edited by Roy Behnke and Michael Mortimore, provides new insights into an issue of global significance. After a thorough introduction, the book is organised into three sections. The opening section (six chapters) provides a state-of-the art assessment of the scientific evidence behind ‘the late twentieth century desertification crisis in the Sahel’. The wrap-up from the editors is that, while in certain areas land degradation is unambiguous, the widespread, catastrophic environmental degradation of the desertification crisis is ‘a non-event’, something widely believed to have existed but that actually never occurred. The middle section (four chapters) turns to the concept of desertification more in general, discusses its well-known logical and empirical shortcomings and presents new reasons for questioning its value as an analytical tool, especially as its survival obscures the need to better define and measure dryland degradation. The closing section (eight chapters) examines the use and relevance of the notion of desertification through regional case studies, documenting dryland degradation and state policies to control it. This includes experiences from rangelands in southern Ethiopia, Argentina’s Patagonia, the Bolivian Andes, and Central Asia. These chapters highlight the global commonalities surrounding the misuse and misunderstanding of notion of desertification, particularly in rangeland areas. The inclusion of experiences from a diversity of countries and land-use systems worldwide strengthens the core arguments of the book. These chapters also underline the continuing challenges of providing reliable estimates of land degradation and of validating approaches to restoring and sustainably managing land.

The notion of desertification as desert encroachment is shown to have been iconic but flawed: a great source of confusion contributing to inappropriate policies. The desertification approach, rooted in classical/equilibrium ecology, is contrasted with the ‘resilience’ approach of the new-ecology (post-1970s), centred on complex dynamics. Overall, the book challenges the use of desertification narratives to justify top-down agricultural and environmental policies. Instead, people-centred development is recommended as the way to strengthen resilience. Several of the chapters focus on livestock production as an area of particular misunderstanding in the drylands, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa and in China, where accusations of irresponsible land use embedded in the desertification narrative have been used to justify reallocating pastoral lands to other uses.

This book is also a stimulus to improve monitoring and assessment of land degradation in the drylands, in order to objectively evaluate the different sustainable land management options that are being developed or revived. A number of examples of restoration and sustainable land management are outlined. In some cases, this includes actions supported by governments through National Action Programmes to combat desertification and which are based on bottom-up, participatory approaches that strengthen land rights and build on local knowledge

and practices. Major efforts are now needed to capitalise on this progress, and decidedly place sustainable land management on the agenda of mainstream public sector investments.

While doing a good job at inventorying the ways in which desertification narratives have mobilised funding and consensus behind unsustainable and often draconian land-management policies and intervention, the book does not provide estimates of the relative balance with investment in sustainable land management. For example the extent to which governments are co-financing investments from the Global Environment Facility that are designed to achieve the goals of the UNCCD. An examination of such investments could have given a more complete picture with regard to ongoing attempts to combine the historical and institutionalised efforts based on the desertification narrative with the new resilience paradigm. Evidence presented in this book suggests that the two are not irreconcilable.

The core lessons of the book could be interpreted as bringing clarity to a number of intertwined social, environmental and economic concerns in the drylands. This clarity is needed due to the conflicting aims and perspectives of different stakeholders; therefore achieving it ultimately depends on dialogue and negotiation. For this reason, the central recommendation to build local resilience through participation and governance is all the more relevant. Enabling dryland land users to influence public policy and investments will require greater emphasis on achieving equity, securing rights, and building capabilities.

Ultimately, while contemplating the demise of the ‘desertification paradigm’, the book concludes that the policies that disempower people in the drylands may actually be driven by deeper, underlying forces than the concept of desertification. The final chapter concludes that ‘desertification’ could be ‘a convenient crutch for actions that would have happened regardless.’ This leaves a hanging question with regard to what happens if the term ‘desertification’ is abandoned, without addressing the underlying issue of disempowerment. As long as dryland peoples remain disempowered and marginalised, they will continue to face challenges to their resilience. Indeed, the final chapter concludes that the UNCCD, and SDG Target 15.3, are here to stay, and therefore emphasis should shift towards reinterpreting (reframing) desertification for a more positive drylands narrative.

The publication of this book coincided with the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals, and the subsequent adoption by parties to the UNCCD of Target 15.3 on Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN).¹ Development of the LDN target has been influenced by some of the concerns raised in the book and it is unfortunate that the book has been unable to examine this more closely. How countries develop LDN targets and implement actions to achieve SDG15 will help to clarify the extent to which countries are reinterpreting the term ‘desertification’ and learning from past failures.

More generally, nuanced approaches that deal with locally defined challenges, and greater emphasis on people-centred solutions are not inconsistent with the overall aims of the Sustainable Development Goals, not just Target 15.3, and indeed are increasingly part of the agenda of the UNCCD; they are also consistent with the Harmonised Regional Strategy for Implementation of the ‘Great Green Wall Initiative of the Sahara and the Sahel’, published by the African Union Commission and the Secretariat of the Panafrikan Agency responsible for

¹ Decision 2/COP.12: Formulation, revision and implementation of action programmes in view of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

the Great Green Wall. Other global initiatives and commitments can provide a vehicle for the desired policies and investments, including the Four per Thousand initiative under the Lima-Paris Action Agenda,² the Bonn Challenge to restore 150 million hectares of degraded forest landscape by 2020, and the African 100 initiative to restore 100 million hectares of deforested and degraded land by 2030.

In conclusion, *The End of Desertification?* provides a thorough discussion of the different sides of a complex debate on land degradation in the drylands. The book elaborates on some of the problems that arise from the use of the notion of desertification as an analytical tool, leading to misguided or even disproven development approaches. The book outlines what can be done to move to more appropriate, resilience-oriented approaches to sustainable dryland management. Underlying the discussion on desertification, is a thought-provoking insight into the way development narratives unfold and evolve. *The End of Desertification?* leaves unanswered the question of whether such narratives can be re-written, re-directed or re-captured to achieve different goals.

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² <http://newsroom.unfccc.int/media/408539/4-per-1000-initiative.pdf>