



Workshop

Implementing SDG target 15.3 in the EU and in the Member States: Exchange of approaches to implement “Land Degradation Neutrality” (LDN)

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At DG-Environment

Meeting notes

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Background and aim of the Workshop

Since the adoption of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in September 2015 countries worldwide have started processes towards the implementation of the goals and targets. Some of the targets are often already part of national strategies and instruments. Others are new and still need to be further specified to national circumstances – target 15.3 and the concept of “Land Degradation Neutrality” is one of these.

To analyze options for the implementation of target 15.3 the German Environment Agency and the German Federal Environment Ministry currently support the research project “Implementing the Sustainable Development Goals on Soils in Germany” (<http://ecologic.eu/12876>). The project is carried out by the Ecologic Institute and will run until spring 2017.

As part of the project there will be a workshop “Implementing SDGs target 15.3 in the EU and in the Member States: Exchange of approaches to implement “Land Degradation Neutrality” (LDN)” in Brussels on December 6.

The workshop will take place just after the soils stakeholder conference of the EU Commission on December 5th (http://ec.europa.eu/environment/soil/public_events_en.htm).

It aims to exchange experiences of EU Member States on implementing the Land Degradation Neutrality SDG (target 15.3) and explore opportunities and limitations for a common approach in the EU. Part of the program is also receive input about the UNCCD experiences so far with conceptualizing and implementing the target and an exchange of experiences the Target Setting Program of the Global Mechanism that meanwhile over 110 countries participate in.

The workshop will also provide input from the above mentioned research project in terms of conceptualizing LDN for the national implementation and share experiences from Germany about the progress so far.

Program

Time	Topic	Speaker
9.00 - 9.30	Registration	
9:30– 9:50	Welcome by the German Environment Agency (UBA) and German Federal Environment Ministry (BMUB)	
9.50-10.20	Participant introduction/Roundtable	
10.20 – 10.35	<p>Overview of current activities/objectives of the European Commission with regard to EU soil policy</p> <p>Short response/Introduction of the EEA activities (5 min)</p> <p>Followed by 15 minutes of questions/discussion</p>	<p>Josiane Masson DG Environment</p> <p>Eva Ivits, EEA</p>
10.55 – 11.10	<p>Insights into the UNCCD activities</p> <p>Followed by 20 minutes of questions/discussion</p>	Markus Repnik, Managing Director of the UNCCD Global Mechanism
11.30 – 12.00	<p>Experiences from the UNCCDs target setting program</p> <p>Followed by 30 minutes of questions/discussion</p>	Sara Minelli, UNCCD
12.30 – 13.30	Lunch	
13.30 – 14.00	<p>Presentation of the insights of the German LDN research project</p> <p>Followed by 20 minutes of questions/discussion</p>	Stephanie Wunder, Ecologic Institute
14.20 – 14.35	<p>Implementing LDN in Italy – experiences from the target setting</p> <p>Followed by 15 minutes of questions/discussion</p>	Anna Luise, Institute for Environmental Protection and Research, Italy
14.50-15.10	Coffee break	
15.10-16.30	Moderated discussion on the implementation of LDN in the EU	
16.30-17.00	Wrap up of the day, perspectives and further steps	

Welcome and introduction

Sue Martina Starke (German Environment Agency (UBA)) welcomes the participants and outlines the background of the workshop. Germany currently works on the implementation of target 15.3 on Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN). The workshop is part of a research project carried out by the Ecologic Institute on behalf of the UBA which supports this process¹. At the current state a number of open questions remain on both the conceptual side as well as with regards to the implementation. Germany would be interested to exchange with other MS and potentially learn from that experience.

There are three guiding questions for the workshop:

1. What is currently ongoing regarding SDG target 15.3/ Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN) in the EU and in the MS?
2. What are the major challenges/opportunities for the implementation of SDG target 15.3/ LDN? How can they be addressed?
3. Would it be helpful to establish a (scientific, technical, political etc.) exchange network on SDG target 15.3/ LDN in the EU?

Welcome by **Thomas Straßburger, (German Environmental Ministry (BMUB))**. He expresses his appreciation to DG ENV for hosting the meeting and provides a short reflection on the current political process in Germany, the most important being the revision of the Sustainable Development Strategy expected to be published end of 2016/ early 2017. The Strategy is now structured along the SDGs, linking sustainability criteria to the SDGs. It has been proposed in the process and the draft strategy to introduce an indicator to monitor soil quality. By 2017 Germany expects to start developing the indicator, at the moment it is not yet decided how it will be approached since it can entail various criteria and agreement on a common indicator is not easy. It will also need to be decided how to link the soil indicator to the LDN implementation (for more details on the current state of LDN implementation in Germany see also presentation of Stephanie Wunder and workshop background document).

Round table by participants, introduction and expectations.

The morning starts with a roundtable introduction of participants. They briefly explain their involvement in the LDN implementation process and what their expectations are for the workshop. Participants from the countries present (Spain, Slovakia, Belgium, the Netherlands, Malta, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, UK, Hungary, Czech Republic, Croatia) underline the importance of LDN even if only few countries have so far started the process to conceptualize and implement LDN. MS also acknowledge that differences between countries exist (i.e. relevance of different soil threats, for example salinisation is an issue only in some countries, water erosion an issue in most). Also, soil threats have been monitored to different degrees by national monitoring.

The major challenges in implementing the SDG 15.3 that have been reported at the workshop are

¹ Research project „Implementing the Sustainable Development Goals for Soils“ carried out by the Ecologic Institute, see <http://ecologic.eu/12876>. In another project the German UBA has commissioned the Ecologic Institute with a legal study on how the German national law should be amended in order to implement the LDN objective (for example, how to ensure that the compensation measure under the nature conservation law could better integrate soil aspects in the implementation, or how to modify spatial planning provisions to integrate LDN).

- To gain recognition for the value of the concept, and its integrative and cross-cutting aspects
- Lack of action and acknowledgement of the concept at EU political level
- To perceive LDN as an opportunity (e.g. to avoid/save costs, get to a soil quality indicator, to stimulate discussions around degradation and land protection).

Participants also report about existing initiatives:

- The Common Forum on Land Contamination has launched initial discussions within the network, Water joint programming initiative will focus its next call to be launched in June 2017 on the SDGs, are currently collecting research needs on this; French activities to implement the SDGs see <http://www.developpement-durable.gouv.fr/Les-objectifs-de-developpement,47591.html>
- Some Member States are at the very beginning and mostly appreciated learning and hearing about the current status of activities and learning from other examples (e.g. HR, CZ, HU, MT).
- Belgium (Flanders) has contracted a study on how to deal with SDGs implications for the environment and what a strategy / action steps for implementation might be useful (soil carbon monitoring network might be set up, land take compulsory target for 2030 has been decided on). Looking also to the European Commission for inspiration / guidance. Belgium prime minister committed to report on SDG targets.
- Italy – participated in the pilot project on LDN implementation coordinated by UNCCD (see the power point presentation) and shared their achievements and their already ongoing problems
- EEA activities on mapping and monitoring land degradation, a system is being set up
- UNCCD Secretariat spearheading activities to support countries to implement the concept. LDN Target setting program meanwhile taken up in 102 countries (see presentations by Sara Minelli and input by Markus Repnik)
- Netherlands – participating in discussions in the Common Forum, an interministerial programme on SDGs, but currently no focus on land and soils is placed. Working group on “Soil as a resource”. The Netherlands also just set a target to stop land take by 2040 and work on an indicator on soil carbon. They still struggle though with the concept of LDN.
- Hungary is organising a stakeholder conference / consultation to assess the national situation and discuss the way forward.
- In Ireland the responsibility for soil protection is dispersed among ministries; very early stage at the political level.
- Slovakia: have good monitoring structures in place and time – every 5-years repetitions (soil contamination, acidification, soil salinisation and sodification compaction, erosion, decline in soil organic matter and available macronutrients – P,K,Mg and micronutrients – Cu,Zn,Mn)
- Experts from the GIZ and UNCCD secretariat report that developing countries are looking to the EU for confirmation of interest, seeing what the EU is doing.

Josiane Masson (DG Environment) briefly sketches the situation on soil policy in Europe, including the role of Soil Thematic Strategy and the 7th Environment Action Programme, the Expert Group on Soil Protection, the Inventory of soil legislation. She reminded of the importance of keeping in mind that other SDGs, not just 15.3, are important for soils and land. The cross-cutting dimension of other SDGs and their relevance to land degradation issues is important to highlight, as well as climate change. EU soil policies are not sufficient given that the EEA shows continued trends of degradation and these are expected to continue in the future. The COM will continue the structured dialogue with Member States, but it is expected that progress will be slow given the current political priorities of the Commission. An impact assessment for a

future proposal will need to be prepared, the reform of the Common Agricultural Policy will be a key issue for improving agricultural soil protection in the EU.

- ✓ **Ms. Helge Zeitler from DG ENV.F3** (Multilateral Environmental Cooperation) adds that the COM just published a Sustainable Development Package in December. It both includes integration of environmental issues, and sets out guidance for mainstreaming of sustainable development in existing policies. Sustainable development and the EU Global Strategy on Foreign and Security Policy for the European Union are important hooks for good policies on soil and land.

Eva Ivits (EEA) gives an overview on EEA activities relevant for the LDN implementation process. The EEA's task is to support the Commission on data and indicators. LDN is a new topic; a framework for the assessment of land degradation and restoration in the EU is currently being prepared. A mapping workshop took place in March 2016, which highlighted the importance of exchange, the outcome of the meeting was that it is not possible to map land degradation as such, in large part because what is degradation depends on the perception of people. There is a need of a clear idea of what it is before you can map it. While EU continental data is available, and an integrated data platform – spatial data system for land system analysis – is being prepared which will build an inventory of what is available. In terms of baseline, the year 2000 might be a good year given data availability from remote sensing and land use data. The issue of thresholds is tricky because these can't be homogenized for the EU, should be local. An indicator on phenology is being developed as well as a new indicator on fragmentation, and EEA is collecting socio-economic data which is otherwise more scarce.

Definition of the concept is difficult to agree on (do we prioritise certain functions, how to deal with trade-offs, which functions are more important). The background document of the workshop provides a very helpful overview of the challenges and issues, that the EEA also faces.

The scale at which the concept should be applied is dependent on the country, depending on the national governance structures (in some, the responsibility can be attached to municipalities, in others on regions).

In the following discussion one issue that came up is to which degree the discussion on indicators should be separate from the issue of defining the concept (including the level of ambition and the measures to pursue), since the discussion on monitoring and indicators can fully overwhelm the discussion. The definition of the concept may be more of a political process than the issue of data and indicators, but some expressed the opinion that the two should not be too separate.

Markus Replik (Director UNCCD Global Mechanism) gives an overview of the role of the UNCCD Secretariat, and its LDN target setting program stressing the need to respond to the land degradation crisis by pursuing the solution offered by LDN. UNCCD is a promoter, supporter and catalyst for the LDN globally. Currently they are supporting countries (the COP 21 mandate did not restrict this support to affected and developing countries) to implement LDN. According to Replik, the EU is lagging behind with its commitments and may be undermining the process globally, telling others to be active and not backing this up with its own ambition (Italy and Croatia the only two countries in EU committed to setting targets). The LDN implementation can be a glue to bring together EU commitments to various priorities, including climate change. LDN is as crucially important to implement as is the Paris agreement. LDN can be a solution cutting across different policy areas (climate action, CAP, biodiversity strategy, Roadmap to Resource Efficient Europe etc.), reflecting also the need to get to policy coherence. Replik also highlights the importance of considering both a territorial perspective (LDN within EU) and consumption perspective

(extraterritorial impacts through “virtual land imports”). He disagrees that LDN is a blurred concept, and points to the conceptualisation of LDN and three indicators on which progress was made over the last two years.

Sara Minelli (UNCCD) presents the progress on conceptualisation of the LDN concept and LDN target setting program, and the overview of the conceptual framework. A policy brief is available, while the full report will be available by the end of January 2017. The UNCCD Secretariat pursues activities to offer operational guidance to countries, and she illustrates examples of activities in different countries (power point presentation is available). The SDG process including LDN target 15.3 is not a UNCCD mandated process; the UNCCD Secretariat has been tasked with spearheading the process, is a facilitator, but it is a country driven, and the EU is a party to the SDG commitments.

In the follow up discussion, the issue of frequency of monitoring and reporting is raised, with annual reporting not considered realistic. It is expected that most countries will report on a four-year basis. An Australian team is working on a report on indicators. Countries should use the data that is available, they have the freedom to choose their own data. 14 pioneer countries with whom the consultation process (operational guidance) was carried out include Italy, Turkey, Namibia, Costa Rica, Algeria, Indonesia, India, China, Mexico.

Stephanie Wunder (Ecologic Institute) presents the state of the German approach to implement the LDN target and the interim results of the research project (see powerpoint presentation and background document of the workshop)

Anna Luise (ISPRA, Italy) presents the activities carried out in Italy. Italy was among the 14 UNCCD LDN pilot countries, a project already undertaken in 2014. Italy attached the activities to existing initiatives and budgets (no additional budget available for this), including the UNCCD action plan from 2000 and the National Adaptation Strategy to Climate Change, and building on existing available data. The anthropogenic drivers are very strong, climate change exacerbates the trends more than previously thought (shown by modelling). A specific attention has been done on achieving synergies with other processes, in particular the UNFCCC/LULUCF reporting.

In the discussion the question was raised on how to deal with multiple uses of land in the LDN implementation? There is also the question on how to define LD as the definitions of the UNCCD and UN Statistical Commission relate land degradation as the reduction or loss of the biological or economic productivity of land. Hence there is the question if also using land for urban and infrastructure projects in the public interest should or should not be regarded as land degradation.

Also, the indicator on land productivity seems less clear with regard to monitoring requirements than, e.g. the indicator for soil organic carbon (that also still faces challenges). The satellite imagery can deliver different products, which can lead to different trends, so need to be careful when using this data. Productivity is measured in kilograms of carbon fixed in a unit of area and time. The most basic layer may be best (measuring standing biomass). The discussion also took up the question on how to measure restored land, what does it mean to restore degraded land? The technical conversation on this has not yet started.

Concluding discussion

In a final roundtable discussion the participants concluded on their “take away” messages and potential next steps. There was a large need articulated to further continue the debate on LDN implementation. There was a question though in what context this might take place.

One of the relevant opportunities are the regular meetings (bi-annual) of the EU expert group on soil. Other opportunities include the WPIEI (Council Working Party on International Environmental issues) and some of the (currently more technical) expert meetings organized by the EEA.

It may also be helpful to structure the discussion in two streams, on monitoring and the political stream (what should explicit targets be, what is the added value of it, how can it stimulate legislation in EU level). However, some participants stated that an integrated discussion is often more helpful, as it integrates practical aspects on realization potential from the very beginning and enhances political buy in.

Even research projects can only provide results later in the process, it was also discussed that Horizon 2020 projects might help in the implementation and design of concepts for LDN.

Josiane Masson from DG Env responded to this, that the debate at EU level is only starting on this issue, it is not yet well structured. The Expert Group on soil touched on SDGs shortly in the last meeting, the Commission held a presentation on it. Within the Commission it is still open what the role of Commission should be, would it be through H2020, supporting pilot projects, or facilitating discussion between Member States. This still needs internal discussion and clarification of the role. At the moment there is no specific role defined in the context of LDN. The process is at a very early stage, it will be reflected, what the role of the Commission could be, how can the COM contribute to coordinating the process, or at least facilitating it. This also relates to what the role of the Expert Group may be, how extensive the role of the EG in relation to LDN could be. Josiane Masson will find out how far LDN might become part of the subjects of this group, since this is not their mandate, as well as see how it fits with work streams within the Commission. Josiane Masson highlights that it may be useful to keep reporting and the policy making separate, as they include different levels of activities. For policy making actions need to be planned and priorities need to be set by Member States.

On the potential for common activities, and the added value of exchange it was further stated that:

- Many participants expressed the hope that the EU Commission takes an active role in this process, providing a forum to exchange
- Promotional activity by UNCCD could provide impetus for the political discussion in Europe; the challenge of lacking political backing is an obstacle for bringing the LDN implementation forward. Open question on how to involve the group dealing with UNCCD implementation in the EU and their experiences?
- There is a need for awareness rising and exchange on the SDGs, both within the countries and across; forum to discuss would be useful. Within the countries it helps politicians to hear what the neighbours are doing. How to structure the process at country level, need cooperation between institutions, at national and international level. This could also be an informal forum, but some platform is needed for exchange as there are a lot of open questions.
- Need a narrative to persuade the political level, to make the idea attractive – why do you need to work on the goals, what kinds of goals would you set to make them attractive to ministers, parliament the stakeholders. Need an economic argument, show the social and economic benefits of prevention upstream (one euro upstream saves three downstream). In many cases it is not yet clear who the owner of the action, priority setting is, who will spearhead the action (e.g. in NL, IE). One aspect to this is to frame the existing instruments, initiatives, targets in terms of their contributions to LDN, build on what is already there.
- There is potential that the Global Soil Week could transform in a forum for a thematic review of SDGs related to soils and land.

- Interaction with the MAES mapping of ecosystem services process is important.

Most participants expressed that the discussion and opportunity for exchange within the workshop was very helpful, giving ideas and impulses to go back to their countries and think about how to structure the process, how to bring it to attention at political level, discuss with policy makers and have inter-institutional discussions.

UBA concludes by thanking for the active participation and interest, highlighting the key messages from the discussion that exchange is needed, that the technical and political streams do need to be combined somehow, even if pursued somewhat separately, and to focus on LDN as an opportunity.