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Land ahoy! Appreciating the value of our common ground

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Land ahoy! Appreciating the value of our common ground

Bonn, Leeds, 14 September 2015. This week, 15 September, the Economics of Land Degradation (ELD) Initiative will launch its report "The Value of Land" at the European Commission in Brussels. This is no mean feat. Land and soil are resources that we typically take for granted. They provide us with food, fibre and energy, they store and restore water, harbour millions of species while also playing a number of other socio-economic, ecological and – not least – cultural roles. Amongst other things land helps to regulate the climate, provides habitat, supports biodiversity and shields us from the impacts of flooding.

Yet, humankind is degrading land at an alarming rate. Indeed, the aggregated impacts of local land-use changes matter on a global scale as we risk transgressing yet another planetary boundary. Despite the tireless activities of numerous NGOs that advocate sustainable land management and the coordination of corresponding international efforts under, say, the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), or the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), progress towards more considerate land policies has been slow. While the world attends to international conflicts, climate change or financial crises, land issues typically fall by the wayside. This looks all set to change. In the latter half of 2015 it's "Land ahoy!" as land is finally gaining ground on the political agenda.

Costing land degradation

The ELD report provides the much-awaited evidence base to spur the world to halt and reverse unsustainable land use. Following the path of the Stern Review on the Economics of Climate Change and The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity (TEEB), it puts a price tag on land degradation and demonstrates the economic benefits of avoided land degradation. It thus provides a basis to consider the socio-economic value of land. In essence, it highlights what we will need to pay now for a shift towards sustainable land management, warning that without action we face a much larger bill to land on our proverbial plates in the future.
Policy makers can and will make more informed and targeted decisions on the basis of economic evidence. If governments can appraise how much it will cost to take action to stop land being degraded in relation to the longer-term cost of inaction, they are more likely to render sustainable land management policies. To this end, the ELD report presents current and future scenarios, providing insight into trade-offs and offering new evidence that it pays to pursue sustainable land management today. Moreover, it provides tools and methods to identify which degraded areas would be worthwhile to restore or rehabilitate. This becomes all the more important in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Specifically, it speaks to SDG 15 on terrestrial ecosystems and its pertinent target 15.3, which calls to strive for a land degradation-neutral world by 2030. Land degradation neutrality defines a state whereby the amount of healthy and productive land resources remains stable or increases across time and space. Of course, the concept's translation into operational policies begs a number of questions that are ultimately political, e.g. what land should count as being degraded in the first place? Against which baseline should the achievement of land degradation neutrality be measured and on the basis of which indicators? Yet, the unequivocal inclusion of land issues in the SDG catalogue echoes the calls of Land ahoy! The world has woken up to the problem of land degradation! We are finally recognising the imperative to stop damaging our remaining land and soil as well as to increase our efforts to rehabilitate land that has already been degraded.

A timely initiative

The launch of the ELD report couldn't be more timely. In the immediate run up to the adoption of the SDGs by the UN General Assembly's sustainable development summit on 25-27 September, it sends a strong signal regarding not only the new goals' appropriateness but also the feasibility of the ensuing sustainable development agenda. Its messages further reverberate in the context of 2015's designation as the International Year of Soils, concomitantly marking the halfway point of the UN's Decade for Deserts and the Fight Against Desertification (2010-2020).

What's more, it will generate momentum for the UNCCD's Conference of the Parties that will convene in Ankara, Turkey, a mere fortnight after the UN summit. It can be expected to address just how land degradation neutrality may be achieved, what resources this will require, and what role the scientific community may play in assessing progress regarding actions supporting the land-related SDGs. Not least, it will inform the envisaged new agreement on climate change, to be adopted by the UNFCCC's Conference of the Parties in Paris in December. This again underscores the need to strengthen the sustainable management of land-based systems in order to capitalize on potential benefits that facilitate adaptation to the impacts of climate change, as well as mitigation.

The case for land has rarely been so strong and the timely launch of the ELD's report may finally leverage adequate appreciation of the value of our common ground.