Drought risk management

Combating drought requires greater global political impetus

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Bonn, 18 December 2023. The 28th UN Climate Change Conference, now under way, began with a bang, as the Parties agreed to create a Loss and Damage Fund with which richer countries formally assume responsibility for the first time for their historical greenhouse gas emissions, which primarily affect poorer countries. The fund shows that although international conventions are cumbersome, they can achieve considerable leverage with time by adopting measurable targets and harnessing support from rich countries.

Many of the Parties, most of which are also members of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification in Those Countries Experiencing Serious Drought and/or Desertification, particularly in Africa (UNCCD), often referred to as the Desert Convention, have in mind the experience with the fund in particular, and with the UN Climate Change Conference in

general, when they urge a binding agreement on drought control to be adopted in preparation for the next UNCCD Conference of the Parties in Saudi Arabia in December 2024.

For many countries, particularly in the more arid regions of the world and specifically in Africa, drought poses a considerable problem for the environment, the economy and society. At a global level, droughts are estimated to have caused loss and damage totalling several hundreds of billions of US dollars over the past 100 years. More than 10 million people have lost their lives as a result of drought – more than from any other kind of natural disaster – with 85 per cent of those affected by drought living in low- to middle-income countries.

Climate change is exacerbating drought in terms of frequency, duration, intensity and regional spread, but droughts have occurred even without climate change and continue to do so, and changes in local land and water use also make a considerable contribution to increasing drought problems. Without intervention, both the global land area and the population facing extreme droughts could increase from three per cent in the period from 1976 to 2005 to eight per cent by the end of the 21st century. Moreover, droughts exacerbate local and regional conflicts and migration.

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In the past, droughts have tended to be addressed using reactive strategies, particularly emergency and food aid in poorer countries. It is now becoming generally accepted that proactive drought risk management can considerably reduce loss and damage and is less expensive than a reactive approach. For the United States, an average cost-benefit ratio of preventive measures of 1:2 has been calculated compared with a situation without proactive drought management, and this figure is considerably higher in other cases.

A proactive drought risk management approach consists of three pillars: (1) prediction and monitoring, (2) vulnerability analyses to assess potential impacts and identify priorities in the need for protection, and (3) measures to enhance resilience. Drought resilience measures include water management, landscape and soil management to regulate and retain water in the land, adaptation measures in agriculture and forestry, social security measures, drought insurance, sectoral and geographical diversification of economic activities, diversification of food sources and trade, and flexible storage.

Poorer countries hope that a binding drought agreement will provide them with support in laying the essential groundwork for more drought risk management. Enhancing the visibility of the problem at international level, exerting global pressure on national governments and improving international financing options are approaches designed to make national drought policy more ambitious and proactive. The Loss and Damage Fund already mentioned could be used as an instrument in this context. However, it will only be able to be used for droughts caused by climate change. Moreover, it is not clear how the fund is to be financed, its use for proactive drought risk management is anything but guaranteed, and experience has shown that rural areas and smallholder farming in particular are greatly neglected in climate action measures. More independent efforts are thus needed to combat drought risks.

Whether or not a binding global drought agreement is reached will presumably be decided at the next UNCCD Conference of the Parties. An intergovernmental working group is currently exploring options. In addition to a binding drought protocol and the amendment of the often very vaguely worded convention, these include the adoption of a global work programme on drought management with concerted efforts by the many international organisations that would need to participate in a comprehensive drought risk management programme. Moreover, the definition of a global target similar to the 1.5 degree target stipulated in the Paris Agreement is being considered along with options to improve financing and to create greater political visibility and urgency. These options are to be drawn up by June 2024 and negotiated at the Conference of the Parties.

The poorer, drought-stricken countries certainly expect richer countries to make a visible and substantial commitment, as already set out in detail for the climate goals. If these expectations are not met, this could not only harm the UNCCD, but might also be detrimental to other environmental conventions that depend on the continual and constructive cooperation of all the member states.