



Twentieth session of the United Nations Forum on Forests

Item 6. Emerging Issues

Panel Discussion on: *Dryland Forests*

Thursday, 8 May 2025 (3:00 pm to 6:00 pm), Trusteeship Council Chamber, UNHQ, New York

Concept Note

I. Background

In accordance with the quadrennial programme of work of the United Nations Forum on Forests (UNFF) for the period 2025–2028¹, the twentieth session of UNFF (UNFF20) will hold discussions on its thematic priorities in support of the implementation of the United Nations strategic plan for forests 2017–2030. The Bureau of UNFF20 decided that “dryland forests” be discussed under agenda item 6 on “emerging issues” during UNFF20.

In preparation for the discussions at UNFF20 on dryland forests, the UNFF Secretariat and the National Centre for Vegetation Cover Development and Combating Desertification (NCVC) of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia co-organized an event² on the sidelines of the Sixteenth Conference of Parties of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD COP16) on 6 December 2024 in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. The side event provided a space for representatives of UNFF members, UN entities and other experts to discuss the challenges and threats faced by countries with dryland forests and share information on best practices to conserve and sustainably manage dryland forests. Speakers and participants highlighted the need to bring further visibility to dryland forests and their contributions to sustainable development, including through national capital accounting of dryland forests. Experts emphasized the need for innovative, bold and articulated actions at all levels to protect, restore and sustainably manage dryland forests, as well as the sharing experiences to address common challenges.

Within UNFF, issues related to dryland forests have been discussed mainly under the umbrella of low forest cover countries (LFCCs). Issues related to LFCCs, dryland forest countries, and countries affected by sand and dust storms (SDSs), though interconnected deserve their own separate consideration. FAO, UNEP, UNCCD also have a long history of work supporting dryland countries and LFCCs, and yet there is room for enhanced cooperation between these processes and entities to better assist countries affected by the growing challenges and threats to dryland forests. In 2025, the Thirtieth Conference of the Parties of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC COP30) in Belém, Brazil could provide an opportunity to raise the profile of dryland forests and their role in combatting climate change. In 2026, issues related to dryland forests can gain new momentum at UNCCD COP 17 in Mongolia.

¹ Available in the annex to [Economic and Social Council resolution 2024/15](#)

² A summary of discussions at the side event “Significance of Dryland Forests for Achieving Land Degradation Neutrality, Combating Biodiversity Loss, and Climate Change” can be found on the UNFF website:

<https://www.un.org/esa/forests/news/2024/11/highlighting-dryland-forests-unff-secretariat-and-saudi-arabia-to-host-side-event-at-unccd-cop16/index.html>

II. Context for the Panel Discussion

Drylands account for approximately 41% of the planet's land surface. For millennia, drylands have been shaped by a combination of low precipitation, droughts, and heat waves, as well as human activities such as fire use, livestock grazing, the collection of wood and non-wood forest products (NWFP), and soil cultivation. Dryland forests are among the most vulnerable ecosystems in the world, characterized by species that are highly specialized and adapted to the extreme conditions including drought, salinity, temperature extreme variations and heat. They cover about 1.1 billion hectares of forests, accounting for 27% of the world's forest area³. About two thirds of dryland forests have over 40% canopy cover³.

Dryland forests play an essential role in combating desertification, preserving biodiversity, supporting livelihoods, and regulating local climates. Drylands are home to about 2 billion people, the majority of whom depend on ecosystem services from forests and woodlands, grasslands and trees outside forests. Trees and forests are critical resources for both people and animals in drylands, where livestock production is the primary livelihood activity of many rural people and is considered key for food security and resilience⁴. It is estimated that half of the world's livestock thrives in these ecosystems⁵. Drylands are also important for biodiversity, hosting around 20% of the world's plant species⁶. Furthermore, dryland forests provide essential ecosystem services such as food, fuel, timbers, shade and regulation of soil and water cycles³. Dryland forests also contribute significantly in efforts to mitigate and adapt to climate change. Trees and shrubs in drylands are uniquely adapted to the combination of high temperature and water scarcity⁷, making them capable of resisting disturbances, especially when under sustainable management practices.

However, dryland forests face numerous challenges that threaten their existence and the benefits they provide. These forests are constantly under stress from various environmental and anthropogenic threats including water scarcity, rising temperature, unsustainable land use, invasive species, deforestation, land degradation and desertification, and population pressure. According to the 2020 FAO Forest Resources Assessment (FRA), South America and Africa lost 68 million and 49 million hectares dryland forests, respectively, between 2000 and 2018⁸. It is reported that climate change and unsustainable land use practices have contributed to degradation and desertification of over 12% of drylands, affecting the lives of millions of people, who are increasingly facing severe challenges of food insecurity and poverty^{3,9}. Desertification, land degradation and drought disproportionately impact poor rural communities, small-scale farmers, women, youth and Indigenous Peoples. As in other contexts, women in drylands play an important role in agricultural and livestock production yet they have unequal access to and control of land.¹⁰

³ FAO. 2019. Trees, forests and land use in drylands: the first global assessment – Full report. FAO Forestry Paper No. 184. Rome. <http://www.fao.org/3/ca7148en/ca7148en.pdf>

⁴ FAO. 2022. *Grazing with trees – A silvopastoral approach to managing and restoring trees*. FAO Forestry Paper, No. 187. Rome. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cc2280en>

⁵ UNCCD. (2017). *The global land outlook* (1st ed.). United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification

⁶ Maestre, F. T et. al (2021) Biogeography of global drylands. *New Phytologist*, 231(2), 540–558. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nph.17395>

⁷ Peguero-Pina, J. J., Vilagrosa, A., et al. 2020. "Living in drylands: functional adaptations of trees and shrubs to cope with high temperatures and water scarcity" *Forests* 11, no. 10: 1028. <https://doi.org/10.3390/f11101028>

⁸ FAO. 2020. *Global Forest Resources Assessment 2020: Main report*. Rome.

⁹ Burrell, A. L., Evans, J. P. & De Kauwe, M. G. 2020. Anthropogenic climate change has driven over 5 million km² of drylands towards desertification. *Nature Communications*. Springer US, 11(1).

¹⁰ UNCCD. 2022. Study on the differentiated impacts of desertification, land degradation and drought on women and men. <https://www.unccd.int/resources/publications/study-differentiated-impacts-desertification-land-degradation-and-drought>

Despite their numerous environmental, social, and economic benefits, there is a lack of sufficient awareness and recognition about the significance of dryland forests. These ecosystems and their contributions have received limited attention in national and regional policy and planning frameworks. Their potential to enhance local and national economies has been overlooked, and their role in sustainable environmental management remains underappreciated. While some countries have implemented various actions including afforestation, erosion control and soil conservation to improve the management of drylands, these efforts need to be integrated into forest action plans and other relevant frameworks, such as Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans (NBSAPs), Land Degradation Neutrality Target Setting. This integration builds synergies and policy coherence and can support financial resource mobilization.

The conservation, restoration and sustainable management of forest drylands are critical to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, as well as globally agreed objectives on climate change, biodiversity, and land degradation neutrality. In its input to the 2025 High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF), the Bureau of UNFF20 invited the HLPF to recognize the role of forests in dry and semi-dry regions, particularly in afforestation and for industrial wood production and combating land degradation, as well as their importance for mitigating sand and dust storms and enhancing ecosystem resilience in arid regions.¹¹

III. Objectives

The panel discussion will engage UNFF members and partners in an exchange of experiences and ideas for advancing the protection, conservation, and sustainable management of dryland forests, considering their contributions to the achievement of objectives under the three Rio Conventions, the Global Forest Goals (GFGs) of the UN Strategic Plan for Forests 2017-2030, as well as other UN initiatives, such as the United Nations Decade on Combating Sand and Dust Storms (2025–2034) and the United Nations Decade on Ecosystem Restoration (2021–2030). The panel will also consider challenges and opportunities related to dryland forests. The presentation by the panelists and the interactive discussion will be guided by the following questions:

- What are the main contributions of dryland forests to the agreements and objectives of the three Rio Conventions and the GFGs of the UN Strategic Plan for Forests 2017-2030?
- What are the key challenges and threats to dryland forests? And what best practices exist in enhancing the conservation, sustainable management and utilization of dryland forests?
- How inclusion of actions on dryland forests in the NDCs, NBSAPs, LDNTS of the three Rio Conventions could contribute toward climate change mitigation and adaptation, biodiversity protection and land degradation neutrality?
- How can education, including the development and sharing of skills and knowledge on sustainable land management, contribute to building the resilience of dryland forest ecosystems and the populations that depend on them? What actions can be considered to address gender inequality and improve livelihoods in dryland forest communities?
- What collaborative policy and/or strategic actions can be taken at the national, regional and global levels, and by the UNFF to address the needs and concerns of dryland forest countries, as well as LFCCs

¹¹ The theme of the 2025 HLPF is “Advancing sustainable, inclusive, science- and evidence-based solutions for the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs for leaving no one behind”. The SDGs to be reviewed in-depth are Goals 3, 5, 8, 14 and 17.

and countries affected by sand and dust storms, and to assist these countries to overcome existing challenges?

IV. Programme and Modalities of the Panel

The panel will include the following speakers (tbc):

- Keynote speaker
- Panelist 1
- Panelist 2
- Panelist 3
- Panelist 4
- Panelist 5

Following the presentation by the panelists, the Chair will open the floor for an interactive discussion. There will be no pre-determined list of speakers for the discussion. Delegations who wish to intervene should request the floor by pressing their microphone button when the floor is opened by the presiding officer. Priority will be given to delegations speaking on behalf of a group of States, pursuant to customary protocol. Delegations speaking on behalf of a group of States are asked to inform the Secretariat in the room to be accorded priority. The time limit for interventions will be 5 minutes for delegations speaking on behalf of a group of States, and three minutes for individual delegations. In the event of time constraints, the time limit for individual delegations and delegations speaking on behalf of groups will be reduced further, as needed. These time limits will be strictly enforced including through the muting of microphones.

V. Panel Coordinator

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