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Forum: Environmental Commission

Issue: Combating desertification in the Horn of Africa

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Introduction

Figure #1: Map of the Horn of Africa (BlackPast)

Desertification is a major global environmental issue that affects the Horn of Africa due to climate change and human activities that degrade natural resources. The United Nations reports that over 30 million people in this region face severe food insecurity as a result of ongoing land deterioration. Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia experience desertification, which creates environmental problems, economic difficulties, and social challenges that affect their countries.

The international recognition of desertification came towards the end of the 20th century, and since then, there have been several attempts to address its root causes and redress the harm it causes on a global scale. Today, the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification and

the Great Green Wall Initiative are two running projects towards this end. There are challenges in implementing strategies and projects in developing nations due to limited resources, poorly functioning governments, and unmet infrastructure needs.

Addressing desertification will require solutions that include sustainable land management, involve communities, and enhance regional and international collaboration. Utilization of agroforestry systems combined with conservation agriculture strategies will improve agricultural productivity. Involvement of local populations at both the planning and implementation levels will promote the formulation of strategies compatible with ecological requirements and community interests. Enhanced international cooperation can strengthen member states' initiatives to share their best practices and resources, and leverage international finance from multilateral institutions and organizations, such as the Great Green Wall for ecosystem restoration between countries. The issue of desertification can be combated in the region of the Horn of Africa through the focus on sustainable land management, local communities, and collaboration.

Key Terminology

Desertification

Persistent degradation of dryland ecosystems, including arid, semi-arid, and dry sub-humid areas, is caused by climate variations and unsustainable human activities such as overgrazing, deforestation, and poor agricultural practices

Land Degradation

Reduction or loss of the biological, economic productivity, and complexity of land, including forests, croplands, and pastures, caused by human activities, land-use changes, or natural processes

Horn of Africa

The Horn of Africa is the easternmost peninsula of the African continent. The peninsula stretches into the Arabian Sea, the Gulf of Aden, and the Red Sea. It primarily includes Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia. The region is a critical maritime gateway plagued by high, recurring climate-related crises

Soil Erosion

The wearing away of the fertile topsoil layer by natural forces like wind and water or by human activities such as farming and construction. This natural process reduces soil productivity, impairs water quality, and can lead to land abandonment.

Sustainable Land Management (SLM)

The use of land resources, including soil, water, animals, and plants, to produce goods to meet changing human needs, while simultaneously ensuring the long-term productive potential of these resources and the maintenance of their environmental functions. Examples of sustainable land management techniques include agroforestry, which combines trees with crops to enhance biodiversity and improve soil quality, and crop rotation, which alternates crops to prevent soil depletion and reduce pest populations. These methods help balance productivity with ecological health.

Community Resilience

Sustained ability of a community to utilize available resources to withstand, adapt to, and recover from adverse situations such as natural disasters

Reforestation

The process of planting trees in a previously forested area that has been depleted, aimed at restoring ecological balance and combating desertification.

Background

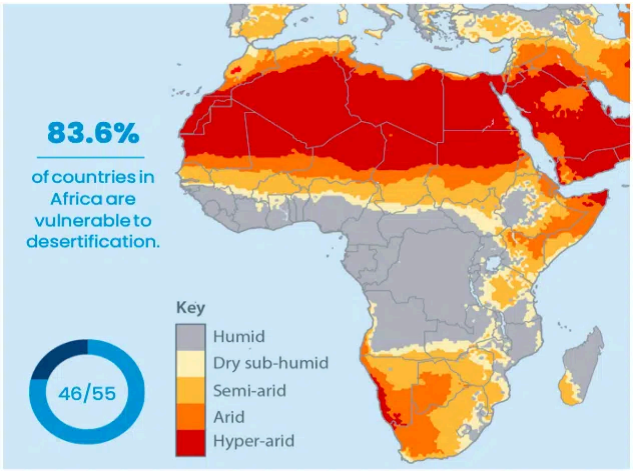

Figure #2: Desertification and Climate Change in Africa (Earth.Org)

Historical Context

Desertification in the Horn of Africa is deeply rooted in a long history of environmental and human interaction. The process of desertification, which transforms fertile land into desert, has been shaped through both natural forces and human external impacts. Desertification has existed throughout history, but its current intensity has reached higher levels since the mid-20th century. Human activities, which include population expansion, agricultural development, and deforestation practices, have created increased land usage demands, resulting in land environmental degradation.

The Sahel region experienced severe drought events from 1968 to 1985, which demonstrated how human activities combined with climatic changes to worsen land degradation in the area between West Africa and Ethiopia. The drought brought about 100000 deaths, while it affected millions of people, which demonstrated the broader impacts of desertification on the region.

The 1970s brought a major breakthrough when severe droughts occurred, which led to livestock and crop production failures that primarily impacted pastoral communities who depended on their herds for survival and financial stability. The World Weather Attribution experts have established a connection between historical drought events and climate variability, which, combined with deforestation, resulted in increased soil erosion and decreased land defense capabilities. Drought conditions in the Horn of Africa have increased the likelihood of extreme dry weather patterns occurring 100 times more often. Higher temperatures drive up evaporation needs, while deforestation and land degradation activities in Somalia, which destroy natural defenses, create stronger impacts during times of low rainfall. The UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) reports that more than 30 million people in the Horn of Africa experienced drought emergencies during this time period, which resulted in continuous land degradation.

Economic Implications

The economic impacts of desertification are severe in the Horn of Africa region. Agriculture, as an occupation for 70% of the population with a contribution of almost a quarter to the GDP of the region, is most seriously threatened by severe land degradation. A World Bank study indicates that the region could lose around $1 billion annually due to reduced agricultural productivity and increased food insecurity.

Communities that rely on subsistence farming and pastoral activities are most vulnerable to economic shocks. Severe food insecurity threatens at least 36 million people across the Horn of Africa due to the worst drought in 40 years. Ethiopia, Kenya, and Somalia are significantly affected. Moreover, economic instability is not only the result of loss due to drought but also leads to social instability and migration issues.

Political Challenges

The region of the Horn of Africa is the main driver in the ability to effectively control the issue of desertification in the region, where the challenges experienced include corruption, war, and administrative challenges in controlling such issues in the region. Although the Dryland Development Programme aims to address the issue of desertification management, it also faces challenges such as finance, governance, and the need for stability.

Some of the international measures that are taken into consideration while dealing with the management of land in Africa include Agenda 2063, an African Union initiative that consists of a roadmap for Africa's socio-economic development in the next five decades, and UNCCD. This helps in the sustainable management of land in Africa. However, the goal of land management in Africa is hindered to some extent due to prevailing political instability in the Horn of Africa, as well as an insecure state of land ownership.

Environmental Consequences

The environmental implications of desertification in the Horn of Africa are alarming. The degradation of arid and semi-arid lands leads to the loss of biodiversity and essential ecosystem services, including clean water supply and soil fertility. This disruption harms not only flora and fauna but also the landscape's climate-regulation functions.

With the loss of vegetation, carbon sequestration capacity diminishes, intensifying the impact of climate change. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the Horn of Africa is likely to endure increased temperatures and altered precipitation patterns, a feedback loop that further intensifies desertification. Increased heat accelerates evaporation, while unpredictable rainfall causes both floods and droughts, straining already fragile ecosystems. Areas such as the Eastern African forests face critical threats, with declines in species richness due to habitat loss. This loss diminishes vital ecosystem functions, such as soil stabilization and nutrient cycling. Furthermore, degradation leads to increased soil erosion, further challenging land recovery.

Social Ramifications

As land degradation reduces productivity, the risk of food insecurity and malnutrition is high. In areas that have experienced more desertification, farming and cattle herding have come under threat. Families that once relied on guaranteed yields from their farms and healthy cattle are struggling to meet their needs. According to UNICEF, more than 2 million children are suffering from acute malnutrition in the Horn of Africa due to decreased farming yields resulting from desertification.

Moreover, with the increase in the struggle for the availability of resources, the number of people displaced also started to rise. Today, many people are moving from place to place in search of fertile land and/or other economic opportunities. This movement of people from one place to another sometimes results in overcrowding major cities and increases the odds of conflict emanating from the struggle for scarce water and land.

Major Parties Involved

African Union (AU)

The African Union, through its 55 member states, is actively addressing the issue of desertification through comprehensive initiatives for the entire continent; these are mainly focused on the Sahel, Sahara, and Horn of Africa regions. Long-term support under the Agenda 2063 addresses sustainable development, conservation of the environment, and climate-resilient farming.

Ethiopia

Ethiopia is a landlocked country located in the Horn of Africa, with high plateaus divided by the Great Rift Valley and surrounded by low-lying arid plains. Home to over 135 million people, Ethiopia is one of the most populous countries with a predominantly rural and ethnically diverse population, mainly Oromo and Amhara. The country faces significant challenges, with approximately 75% of its land degraded. The Ethiopian government addresses this through initiatives such as the Green Legacy Initiative, launched in 2019, which aims to plant billions of trees and enhance sustainable land management.

World Bank

The World Bank, established in July 1944, is an international financial institution that aims to reduce poverty and support sustainable development by providing loans and grants for development projects. Its overall purview spans a wide range of sectors, including infrastructure, health, education, and environmental sustainability. The World Bank's role in funding and supporting a range of projects aimed at promoting sustainable land management practices is significant in the countries of the Horn of Africa. These practices would include the World Bank providing $385 million in funds to countries in the Horn of Africa to tap the region's groundwater potential and boost climate resilience.

Kenya

Kenya, located in East Africa, features diverse geography with savannas, mountains, and the Great Rift Valley, which cuts through the country from north to south. Covering approximately 580.000 square kilometers, it has a population of around 58 million people from different ethnic groups, including the Kikuyu, Luhya, and Luo. In addressing desertification, particularly within its Arid and Semi-Arid Lands, Kenya has made significant contributions. Kenya actively participates in regional and international programs, such as the Great Green Wall initiative, which aims to enhance food security and restore degraded lands.

Sudan

Sudan, located in northeastern Africa, is one of Africa's countries most impacted by desertification, with approximately 72% of its territory being arid or semi-arid, heightening its vulnerability. The country features the Nile River, the Sahara Desert, and mountainous regions in the east. With a population of over 45 million, the country includes Arabs, Nubians, and various Indigenous communities. Desertification is especially severe in northern Sudan, where the Sahara Desert has advanced southward by 50 to 200 kilometers since the 1930s, overtaking land once used for agriculture.

Timeline of Events

Date	Description/Note
June 17, 1994	The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) is adopted, providing a framework for addressing desertification globally.

January, 2007	The African Union launches the Great Green Wall Initiative, aiming to create a green barrier across the Sahel, extending to the Horn of Africa.
July 20, 2011	A severe drought in the Horn of Africa affects over 13 million people, revealing the urgent need for effective strategies against desertification.
December 12, 2015	The Paris Agreement is established, emphasizing global commitments to combat climate change, including land degradation and desertification.
March 1, 2019	The UN declares the Decade on Ecosystem Restoration (2021-2030), led by the UNEP and FAO, a global initiative to prevent, halt, and reverse the degradation of ecosystems worldwide, including efforts in the Horn of Africa.
October 18, 2019	Horn of Africa Initiative (HoAI) was established by five countries to foster economic integration, with a strong focus on building resilience in arid and semi-arid lands.

Previous Attempts/Solutions

On 12 March 1993, an intergovernmental negotiating committee was established to develop an international convention aimed at combating desertification in countries experiencing serious drought and/or desertification, particularly in Africa.

Implementation of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification in Those Countries Experiencing Serious Drought and/or Desertification, particularly in Africa, 23 December 2024, (A/RES/79/207)

The 1977 United Nations Conference on Desertification (UNCOD), held in Nairobi, Kenya, was the first global initiative to address land degradation, spurred by severe droughts in the Sahel. The conference examined the causes and contributing factors, as well as possible local and regional solutions to the phenomenon.

The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification was adopted on 17 June 1994 by the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee for the establishment of an international convention to combat desertification in countries experiencing serious drought and/or desertification, particularly in Africa. Involving 197 parties, the convention aims to reduce land

degradation, reverse desertification, and address the impacts of drought through national programs. The effectiveness of the UNCCD varied by country. For example, Ethiopia has made significant progress in sustainable land management due to strong government commitment, focused on national policies and community engagement initiatives. Through investing in reforestation and soil conservation programs, the country has been able to enhance agricultural productivity. In contrast, some nations have struggled to implement change due to factors such as government corruption and a lack of funding. Limited political will and resources have limited the adoption of sustainable practices. Additionally, social and economic challenges such as poor access to education and technology have exacerbated the difficulties in implementing the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification measures.

The Great Green Wall Initiative, launched in 2007 by the African Union to combat desertification, seeks to establish an 8,000-kilometer green barrier across the Sahel to restore 100 million hectares of degraded land by 2030. It has raised awareness and garnered funding for restoration projects. However, progress in some Horn of Africa countries has been slow, frequently due to political instability. In nations like Sudan and Somalia, ongoing conflicts have disrupted governance and limited the effective implementation of restoration projects. Furthermore, due to shifting political priorities, there can be inconsistent support for environmental initiatives, delaying progress towards set goals.

The African Forest Landscape Restoration Initiative (AFR100) aims to restore 100 million hectares of degraded land by 2030. Over 30 African countries have committed to this goal, with total pledges of more than 120 million hectares to enhance food security, combat climate change, and improve livelihoods. The initiative has shown varying degrees of success. Countries such as Ethiopia and Rwanda have made significant progress, implementing successful reforestation projects that improve local ecosystems and enhance food security. In Ethiopia, initiatives like the Green Legay initiative have complemented AFR100's goals. However, challenges persist in other regions facing political instability, such as South Sudan. In South Sudan, ongoing civil conflict disrupts governance structures, making it difficult to carry out restoration projects and secure community buy-in. The disparity in commitment levels across

nations underscores the need for targeted support and collaboration to achieve AFR100's objectives.

Potential Solutions

Desertification in the Horn of Africa can be combated through promoting sustainable management of the land. This practice involves the application of techniques like agroforestry and conservation agriculture to improve the fertility and yield of the soil, while reducing desertification. It is a practice of undertaking agriculture while at the same time planting trees in the fields to reduce desertification. Relevant information about the practice should be provided to local stakeholders, such as farmers, to ensure its sustainability. The feasibility of these practices depends on nations' appropriate support systems, including training, access to resources, and financial assistance. Implementing these sustainable management practices can help improve crop yields, increase biodiversity, and enhance climate resilience. On the downside, high initial setup costs and limited land availability in some areas may discourage the adoption.

Aside from promoting sustainable land use, countries can establish programs to plant trees in degraded areas to fight desertification and boost biodiversity. Such projects must be designed to involve local communities in the planning and implementation to ensure the chosen tree species are appropriate for the ecosystem and that community needs are addressed. Incentives can be in the form of payment for ecosystem services to encourage active participation and create ownership and long-term commitment to land preservation. Through having adequate funding and collaboration among stakeholders such as NGOs, government agencies, and local communities, these programs can be successfully established. Planting trees can help recover degraded land, which improves biodiversity and soil quality. Active community engagement fosters responsibility, which increases the likelihood of projects being successful. Challenges also exist, such as potential knowledge gaps in which local communities may need training to select suitable species and manage planting.

Lastly, cooperation both in the regions concerned and around the world can be strengthened to overcome the challenges that come with desertification. Nations in the Horn of

Africa might collaborate to exchange best practices, resources, and funding options to address desertification more effectively. Collaboration can be promoted through international agreements like the Great Green Wall Initiative, which seeks to rehabilitate degraded lands across multiple countries. It can be achieved through agreeing to formulate measures to address different environments in different countries. Nations that have strong political will, reliable foundations, and effective communication between nations can achieve collaborative efforts. Through cooperation, knowledge can be shared, which allows countries to learn from each other's successes and increase available resources, leading to larger and more impactful projects. However, aligning the interests and policies of different nations and managing differences in commitment levels or resources can be challenging. This may result in uneven progress or delays in decision-making, since consensus is necessary.

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