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United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD)

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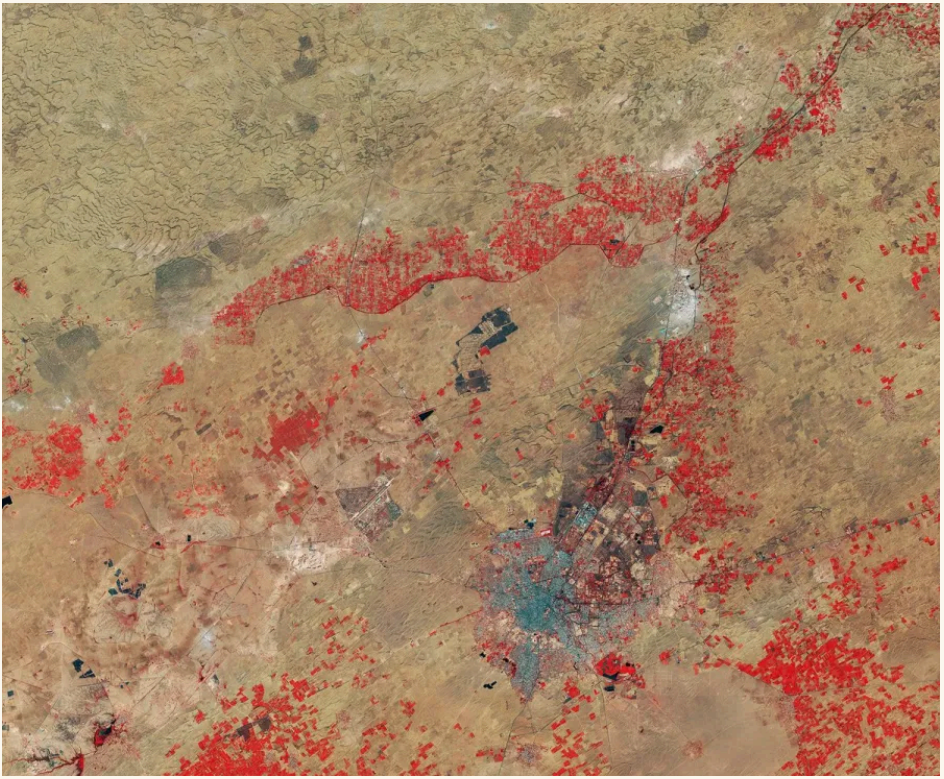
United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD)

Desertification is not just a desert spreading across a map. **It is land degradation in dry areas.** The UNCCD is the treaty that tackles it.



The Thar Desert near Bikaner, India, seen by the Copernicus Sentinel-2A satellite in 2017. ESA supports the UNCCD's Land Degradation Neutrality initiative with land-cover data. Photo: European Space Agency, CC BY-SA 3.0 IGO, via Wikimedia Commons.

At a Glance

Four facts to hold on to.

01
Adopted

17 June 1994; in force December 1996.

02
Parties

197 listed.

03
Secretariat

Bonn, Germany.

04
LDN

Avoid, reduce, then reverse damage.

DesertificationLand degradation in arid, semi-arid and dry sub-humid areas.
NAPNational Action Programme.
LDNLand Degradation Neutrality: no net loss of healthy land.
DrylandsPlaces where moisture is limited compared with water lost to the air.

Four Words That Are Not the Same

Must Know

The definitions

- **Land degradation:** land loses health or useful output. It can happen outside drylands too.
- **Desertification:** degradation in arid, semi-arid or dry sub-humid land. Climate shifts and human land use both contribute.
- **Drought:** rainfall stays far below normal for a time. It is not the same as desertification.
- **Desert expansion:** a desert edge may shift. That map change alone is not the treaty's definition.
- Drylands include semi-arid farmland, not only sandy deserts.

How damage feeds itself

- Bare soil leads to wind or water erosion.
- Erosion means less plant cover and weaker harvests.
- That adds more pressure on the land.
- Poor grazing, tree loss and unsuitable irrigation add to it. Drought makes it worse.
- Soil cover and careful water use help break the loop.

The treaty

- Adopted on **17 June 1994**. In force from December 1996.
- The ratification page lists **197 Parties**.
- Sources: Article 1 definitions and ratification dates and Parties.

> **Quick check 1.** Desertification simply means an existing desert spreads across a map. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

How the Convention Works

Good to Know

From village needs to international review

- The treaty aims to fight desertification and reduce drought harm.
- It gives special attention to affected countries and dryland people.
- A **National Action Programme (NAP)** names the causes of land damage and practical responses.
- A NAP should involve government, scientists and local communities.
- The **Conference of the Parties (COP)** brings Parties together.
- Its **Committee on Science and Technology (CST)** gives scientific advice.
- The **Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention (CRIC)** reviews progress.
- The **Global Mechanism** helps countries find finance and design projects. It does not plant every tree itself.
- Sources: Article 10, CST, CRIC and finance mechanism.

Land Degradation Neutrality

- **LDN** aims for no net loss of healthy, productive land.
- Its order is **avoid, reduce, reverse** damage.
- Restoring one field does not excuse needless damage elsewhere.
- SDG target 15.3 calls for a land-degradation-neutral world by 2030.
- That is a goal. It does not mean the world has reached neutrality.
- Sources: LDN principles and SDG target 15.3.

Quick check 2. A National Action Programme should include local land users and practical measures. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Exam Edge

Previous Year Questions

UPSC 2016 asked about the treaty.

Quick check 3. The UNCCD and the climate convention have exactly the same main job. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

India and the Three Rio Conventions

Great to Know

India’s work

- India’s UNCCD country page lists National Action Programmes from 2001 and 2023.
- India has stated a goal to restore **26 million hectares** of degraded land by 2030. The Environment Ministry action plan states this.
- A target is not proof that work is complete.
- The Thar Desert lies mainly in western Rajasthan. Dry and semi-arid land also occurs beyond it.
- One satellite image cannot show all degraded land. Field data and time-series maps are needed.
- Source: India’s country plans.

Do not swap the three treaties

Convention	Main problem	Typical work
UNCCD	Desertification, land degradation and drought.	Land plans, restoration, drought resilience.
UNFCCC	Climate change.	Emissions and adaptation plans.
CBD	Biodiversity loss.	Conservation, sustainable use, benefit sharing.

- Healthy land helps climate and wildlife goals too.
- The treaties overlap in practice but have different main tasks.
- Read Environmental Degradation and the Green India Mission.

Think it through: why must a drought plan act before rainfall fails?

A warning gives farmers and villages time to save water and adjust crops. Relief after failure cannot prevent the first losses.

Quick check 4. Land Degradation Neutrality puts avoiding damage before repairing old damage. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

What Progress Can and Cannot Prove

Current Affairs

- The convention gives countries a common language, action-plan process and reporting route.
- Its limits are practical. Targets need money, land rights, monitoring and community work.
- Drought can undo weak gains.
- A Government of India update reports recent land-restoration work. Read any figure with its measurement year.
- COP17 met in Ulaanbaatar from 17 to 28 August 2026. It adopted the **Ulaanbaatar Declaration**. The official report lists its decisions.
- UNCCD reported a $1.3 billion project-finance portfolio at different stages.
- $216.4 million was confirmed and moving toward implementation.
- Drought negotiations will continue before a COP18 decision. COP17 update.
- Announced finance is not the same as money spent.

Quick check 5. India's 26-million-hectare restoration target proves the work is already complete. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Quick check 6. Drought resilience begins only after a crop has failed. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Quick Q&A

What is desertification?

Land degradation in drylands.

When was the treaty adopted?

17 June 1994.

What is LDN's order?

Avoid, reduce, reverse.

What is a NAP?

National Action Programme.

What did COP17 adopt?

The Ulaanbaatar Declaration.

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Practice MCQs

1. What is/are the importance/importances of the 'United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification'?
1. It aims to promote effective action through innovative national programmes and supportive international partnerships.
2. It has a special/particular focus on South Asia and North Africa regions, and its Secretariat facilitates the allocation of major portion of financial resources to these regions.
3. It is committed to bottom-up approach, encouraging the participation of local people in combating the desertification.

A. 2 only

B. 1 only

C. 1, 2 and 3

D. 1 and 3 only

See answer ↓

2. The permanent secretariat of the UNCCD is located in which city?

A. Rome, Italy

B. Bonn, Germany

C. Nairobi, Kenya

D. Geneva, Switzerland

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **D.** Statements 1 and 3 are correct. Statement 2 is false: UNCCD's priority region is Africa broadly, not specifically South Asia and North Africa. ↑ Q1
2. **B.** The UNCCD secretariat sits in Bonn, Germany. COP1 in Rome in 1997 chose Bonn as the seat. An interim secretariat worked in Geneva until the move to Bonn in 1999. ↑ Q2

Quick-check answers

1. **False.** ↑ 1
2. **True.** ↑ 2
3. **False.** ↑ 3
4. **True.** ↑ 4
5. **False.** ↑ 5
6. **False.** ↑ 6

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