

FAQ – Desertification?

What is desertification?

According to the definition of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), “desertification means land degradation in arid, semi-arid and dry sub-humid areas resulting from various factors, including climatic variations and human activities”. Land degradation is the reduction or loss of the biological or economic productivity of the drylands.

What causes desertification?

Several factors and processes, which are often interlinked, cause desertification: soil erosion caused by wind and/or water; deterioration of soil properties; long-term loss of natural vegetation; overexploitation of soils and vegetation such as through unsustainable management practices (e.g. cutting of timber to obtain firewood, excessive pastoralism, inadequate crop irrigation leading to salinization of soils, overutilization of ground water resources). The current trend of global warming is likely to increase droughts (and torrential floods) in the world’s drylands, and is thus further contributing to desertification.

How can we combat desertification?

An integrated approach using various measures can help to reverse desertification and land degradation, such as:

- preventing or reducing land degradation right from the start of any economic activity in the drylands;
- rehabilitating of partly degraded land, reclamation of desertified land;
- diversifying income opportunities for dryland people so as to reduce human pressure on fragile dryland ecosystems;
- designating protected areas for dryland conservation and sustainable development using the biosphere reserve concept;
- using scientific studies to conserve and sustainably manage water and land resources;
- educating children on the preservation of drylands;
- informing dryland inhabitants and decision-makers on best practices in dryland management;
- using renewable energy sources (especially solar and wind power).

What is UNESCO doing to combat desertification?

Using science to promote sustainable development in the drylands has been a major activity of the UNESCO Natural Sciences Sector since the 1950s. In particular the UNESCO Man and the Biosphere ([MAB](#)) Programme and the UNESCO International Hydrological Programme ([IHP](#)) study ecological and hydrological processes in the drylands. Moreover, UNESCO has produced educational kits to combat desertification targeted at primary and secondary schools in dryland countries, which are available in hard-copy formats and on the Internet in different languages.

In addition to [scientific publications](#) on desertification, UNESCO has produced two educational kits to combat desertification for schools in dryland countries in hard-copy format and on the Internet in different languages.

- For primary schools: [Education Kit on Combating Desertification](#)
- For secondary schools: [Teaching Resource Kit for Dryland Countries](#)