



# Strengthening systemic local solutions for combating land degradation through agroecology

Assessing agroecology's contribution to the strategic objectives of  
the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD)



## Key messages

- Agroecology contributes to the UNCCD goal of achieving land degradation neutrality (LDN) by providing guidance on practical implementation. The 13 principles of agroecology cover ecological, economic and socio-political aspects. These principles align well with the five strategic objectives of the UNCCD Strategic Framework.
- Agroecological approaches improve the condition of affected ecosystems, combat desertification and land degradation. They have many overlaps with sustainable land management (SLM) practices as outlined in strategic objective 1.
- Diversifying agricultural production, reducing inputs, recycling and creating local value chains improve living conditions for affected populations (strategic objective 2). Fair management of land and natural resources, along with the participation of women, youth and indigenous peoples, strengthens local decision-making.
- In drought-affected areas (strategic objective 3), agroecology reduces exposure to drought by enhancing ecosystem health and diversity. Further, it reduces the vulnerability of the communities to the effects of drought through economic diversification and local value chains.
- With its holistic approach, agroecology offers global environmental benefits for climate change and biodiversity. It promotes an efficient use of financial resources, supporting the implementation of the three Rio Conventions (strategic objectives 4 and 5).

## Introduction

The UNCCD was adopted in 1994 as one of the three Rio Conventions. It aims to combat land degradation and the effects of drought, particularly in drylands (UNCCD, 2022a). The Convention emphasizes the need for a bottom-up approach by supporting the participation of local communities in combating land degradation. The goals of the UNCCD are as pressing as ever as land degradation contributes to biodiversity loss, exacerbates climate change impacts and threatens the livelihoods of affected communities worldwide. However, in recent

years, public discussions have been dominated by the other two Rio Conventions: The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). Significant attention has been given to their landmark agreements: the Paris Agreement and the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF). In 2024, the focus of international debate is shifting towards strengthening synergies between the three Conventions as they all hold their Conferences of the Parties (COP).

The discussion on the need for food system transformation has become more prominent at recent COPs, especially at the UNFCCC with the establishment of the “Sharm el-Sheikh Joint Work on implementation of climate action on agriculture and food security” (UNFCCC, 2022) and at the CBD with the “Decision 15/28 on Biodiversity and Agriculture” as part of the GBF (CBD, 2022). In this context, attention has grown for agroecology as an

option to transform the food system in a way that increases food and nutrition security while at the same time combatting land degradation, protecting biodiversity and reducing climate risks and enhancing adaptation capacities; thus, contributing to the goals of all three Rio Conventions. In the following brief, we will analyse how agroecology contributes to the UNCCD goal of achieving LDN, specifically to its 2018 – 2030 strategic framework.

## The Strategic Framework of the UNCCD

In the first years after the adoption of the UNCCD in 1994, significant progress was made in formulating policies and plans to combat land degradation. During the time, the UNCCD also broadened its focus towards the joint goal of achieving land degradation neutrality. Nevertheless, countries faced

challenges in implementing their national action plans. Among the reasons for the slow implementation were a lack of clear, quantitative, time-bound targets to guide action and insufficient financial support to implement its programs (IISD, 2022). Consequently, the UNCCD introduced the overall objective of LDN in 2015.

The UNCCD defines **Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN)** as *“a state whereby the amount and quality of land resources necessary to support ecosystem functions and services and enhance food security remain stable or increase within specified temporal and spatial scales and ecosystems.”* (UNCCD decision 3/COP.12, 2015).

In the same year, the global objective to achieve LDN was incorporated into the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development as Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) target 15.3 *“by 2030, combat desertification, restore degraded land and soil, including land affected by desertification, drought and floods, and strive to achieve a land degradation-neutral world”* (IISD, 2022). At the 13<sup>th</sup> Conference of the Parties (COP) in 2017,

the UNCCD 2018 – 2030 Strategic Framework was adopted. It defines strategic objectives and an implementation framework to achieve LDN while guiding the actions of all UNCCD stakeholders and partners. The Framework contains five strategic objectives, each with specific expected impacts (UNCCD, 2017, [↪ see Table 1](#)).

Table 1: Strategic objectives and expected outcomes of the UNCCD Source: UNCCD, 2017

**STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 1:**

**To improve the condition of affected ecosystems, combat desertification/land degradation, promote sustainable land management and contribute to land degradation neutrality.**

- 1.1** Land productivity and related ecosystem services are maintained or enhanced.
- 1.2** The vulnerability of affected ecosystems is reduced and the resilience of ecosystems is increased.
- 1.3** National voluntary land degradation neutrality targets are set and adopted by countries wishing to do so, related measures are identified and implemented and necessary monitoring systems are established.
- 1.4** Measures for sustainable land management and the combating of desertification/land degradation are shared, promoted and implemented.

**STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 2:**

**To improve the living conditions of affected populations.**

- 2.1** Food security and adequate access to water for people in affected areas is improved.
- 2.2** The livelihoods of people in affected areas are improved and diversified.
- 2.3** Local people, especially women and youth, are empowered and participate in decision-making processes in combating desertification/land degradation and drought (DLDD).
- 2.4** Migration forced by desertification and land degradation is substantially reduced.

**STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 3:**

**To mitigate, adapt to, and manage the effects of drought in order to enhance resilience of vulnerable populations and ecosystems.**

- 3.1** Ecosystems' vulnerability to drought is reduced, including through sustainable land and water management practices.
- 3.2** Communities' resilience to drought is increased.

**STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 4:**

**To generate global environmental benefits through effective implementation of the UNCCD.**

- 4.1** Sustainable land management and the combating of desertification/land degradation contribute to the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity and addressing climate change.
- 4.2** Synergies with other multilateral environmental agreements and processes are enhanced.

**STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 5:**

To mobilise substantial and additional financial and nonfinancial resources to support the implementation of the Convention by building effective partnerships at global and national level.

- 5.1 Adequate and timely public and private financial resources are further mobilised and made available to affected country Parties, including through domestic resource mobilisation.
- 5.2 International support is provided for implementing effective and targeted capacity-building and “on-the-ground interventions” in affected country Parties to support the implementation of the Convention, including through North – South, South – South and triangular cooperation.
- 5.3 Extensive efforts are implemented to promote technology transfer, especially on favourable terms and including on concessional and preferential terms, as mutually agreed, and to mobilise other non-financial resources.

Since 2015, countries have been invited to formulate voluntary targets on how to achieve LDN at the national level, which more than 100 countries have done to date (UNCCD, nd). The UNCCD has also invested in developing concepts and building up knowledge to help decision-makers and land users restore degraded

land and prevent further degradation. The UNCCD’s “Scientific Conceptual Framework for Land Degradation Neutrality” aims to provide a scientific foundation for understanding, implementing, and monitoring LDN. SLM has evolved as the central concept for land restoration.

Sustainable Land Management (SLM) is defined as *“the use of land resources, including soils, water, animals and plants, for the production of goods to meet changing human needs, while simultaneously ensuring the long-term productive potential of these resources and the maintenance of their environmental functions.”* (WOCAT, 2024). It describes integrated strategies that combine the rehabilitation, conservation and sustainable management of land and water resources which enhance the productivity of land and the living conditions of local communities who depend on it (Hartmann et al., 2024).

## Supporting Implementation of the UNCCD through Agroecology

In recent years, the role of global agriculture and food systems in land degradation has gained more attention under the UNCCD as highlighted, inter alia, in the UNCCD's Global Land Outlook 2022. The same report also referred to agroecology as a sustainable alternative to transform agricultural systems from a main cause of degradation to supporting land and soil restoration (UNCCD, 2022b). In 2023, the midterm evaluation of the UNCCD 2018-2030 Strategic Framework identified the *“need for guidance on concrete approaches that can be applied locally as long-term solutions toward the objectives of the UNCCD and its Strategic Framework”* (UNCCD, 2023, p.5). It is mentioned in relation to strategic objective 1 (improve ecosystems) that *“many respondents highlighted agro-ecology and regenerative agriculture practices as key long-term solutions for achieving goals related to LDN”* (ibid., p.28). A key suggestion of the evaluation is to *“develop practical guides for stakeholders at different scales to transform LDN into an operational agricultural framework (e.g. agro-ecological best practices)”* and in relation to strategic objective 4 (global benefits) to increase *“the UNCCD attention to advancing specific approaches such as agro-ecology and regenerative agriculture as concrete measures to address land degradation at country/local levels”* (ibid.,

p. 43). The suggestions of the midterm evaluation highlight that agroecology, as well as other practices such as regenerative agriculture, can offer valuable approaches for the implementation of programmes and projects on land degradation in addition to the already existing concept of SLM advocated by UNCCD.

Promoting agroecological approaches is increasingly regarded as a promising strategy for a sustainable transformation of current agriculture and food systems which are exceeding the capacity of the social and ecological systems on which they are based on and are at the same time facing multiple crises such as land degradation and climate change (GIZ, 2024a, 2024b). Agroecological approaches are considered as nature-based solutions (NbS) that can simultaneously contribute to the SDGs and to the goals of the three Rio Conventions: protecting biological diversity, combatting climate change and addressing land degradation (GIZ, 2024a; Hartmann et al., 2024). They have many overlaps with SLM, which is as well considered as a NbS, but anchor these practices in a wider approach of social and political change.

**Agroecology** is understood as a dynamic and systemic approach that addresses the ecological, socio-cultural, technological, economic and political dimensions of our food systems – from production to consumption – and provides guidance on their future development (GIZ, 2024a). It aims to address food and nutrition security through the holistic integration of different measures: strengthening the use of natural processes, promoting closed production cycles and reduced use of purchased inputs, as well as stressing the importance of local knowledge and participatory processes to develop knowledge and practice through experience in addition to conventional scientific methods (HLPE, 2019).



FAO (2018) identified ten elements of agroecology to guide the transition towards sustainable agriculture and food systems. Based on these elements, the High Level Panel of Expert (HLPE, 2019) of the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) elaborated the 13 agroecological principles (→ see **Table 2**).

The 13 principles serve as a guide for agroecological approaches, but need to be adapted to the local conditions, specific objectives and targeted actors. The principles can be applied on various levels, from the farm level to rural territories or wider society. Therefore, agroecological programmes and projects have different priorities depending on the implementing institution or country-specific context (FAO, 2018).

**Table 2: 13 principles of agroecology according to HLPE 2019** Source: HLPE 2019

	<b>Recycling</b>	Preferentially use local renewable resources and close as far as possible resource cycles of nutrients and biomass.
	<b>Input reduction</b>	Reduce or eliminate dependency on purchased inputs and increase self-sufficiency.
	<b>Soil health</b>	Secure and enhance soil health and functioning for improved plant growth, particularly by managing organic matter and enhancing soil biological activity.
	<b>Animal health</b>	Ensure animal health and welfare.
	<b>Biodiversity</b>	Maintain and enhance diversity of species, functional diversity and genetic resources and thereby maintain overall agroecosystem biodiversity in time and space at field, farm and landscape scales.
	<b>Synergy</b>	Enhance positive ecological interaction, synergy, integration and complementarity among the elements of agroecosystems (animals, crops, trees, soil and water).
	<b>Economic diversification</b>	Diversify on-farm incomes by ensuring that small-scale farmers have greater financial independence and value addition opportunities while enabling them to respond to demand from consumers.
	<b>Co-creation of knowledge</b>	Enhance co-creation and horizontal sharing of knowledge including local and scientific innovation, especially through farmer-to-farmer exchange.
	<b>Social values and diets</b>	Build food systems based on the culture, identity, tradition, social and gender equity of local communities that provide healthy, diversified, seasonally and culturally appropriate diets.
	<b>Fairness</b>	Support dignified and robust livelihoods for all actors engaged in food systems, especially small-scale food producers, based on fair trade, fair employment and fair treatment of intellectual property rights.
	<b>Connectivity</b>	Ensure proximity and confidence between producers and consumers through promotion of fair and short distribution networks and by re-embedding food systems into local economies.

	<b>Land and natural resource governance</b>	Strengthen institutional arrangements to improve, including the recognition and support of family farmers, smallholders and peasant food producers as sustainable managers of natural and genetic resources.
	<b>Participation</b>	Encourage social organization and greater participation in decision-making by food producers and consumers to support decentralized governance and local adaptive management of agricultural and food systems.

## How Agroecology Contributes to the UNCCD 2018 – 2030 Strategic Framework

There are multiple synergies between the 13 agroecological principles and the five strategic objectives of the UNCCD. A common element is the systemic approach of agroecology and the combination of different measures that address ecological, economic and socio-political aspects in a comprehensive manner. In this way, the agroecological principles reflect the different dimensions covered by the strategic objectives of the UNCCD. To highlight the different types of connections, ↪ **Figure 1** and ↪ **Figure 2** illustrate the interlinkages for strategic objective 1 and 2. Interlinkages with strategic objectives 3 to 5 are not illustrated graphically, as connections can be found for all 13 principles and the respective expected outcomes. These linkages will be discussed below. This analysis is based on current knowledge of the effects of agroecology on the different impact areas of the strategic objectives.

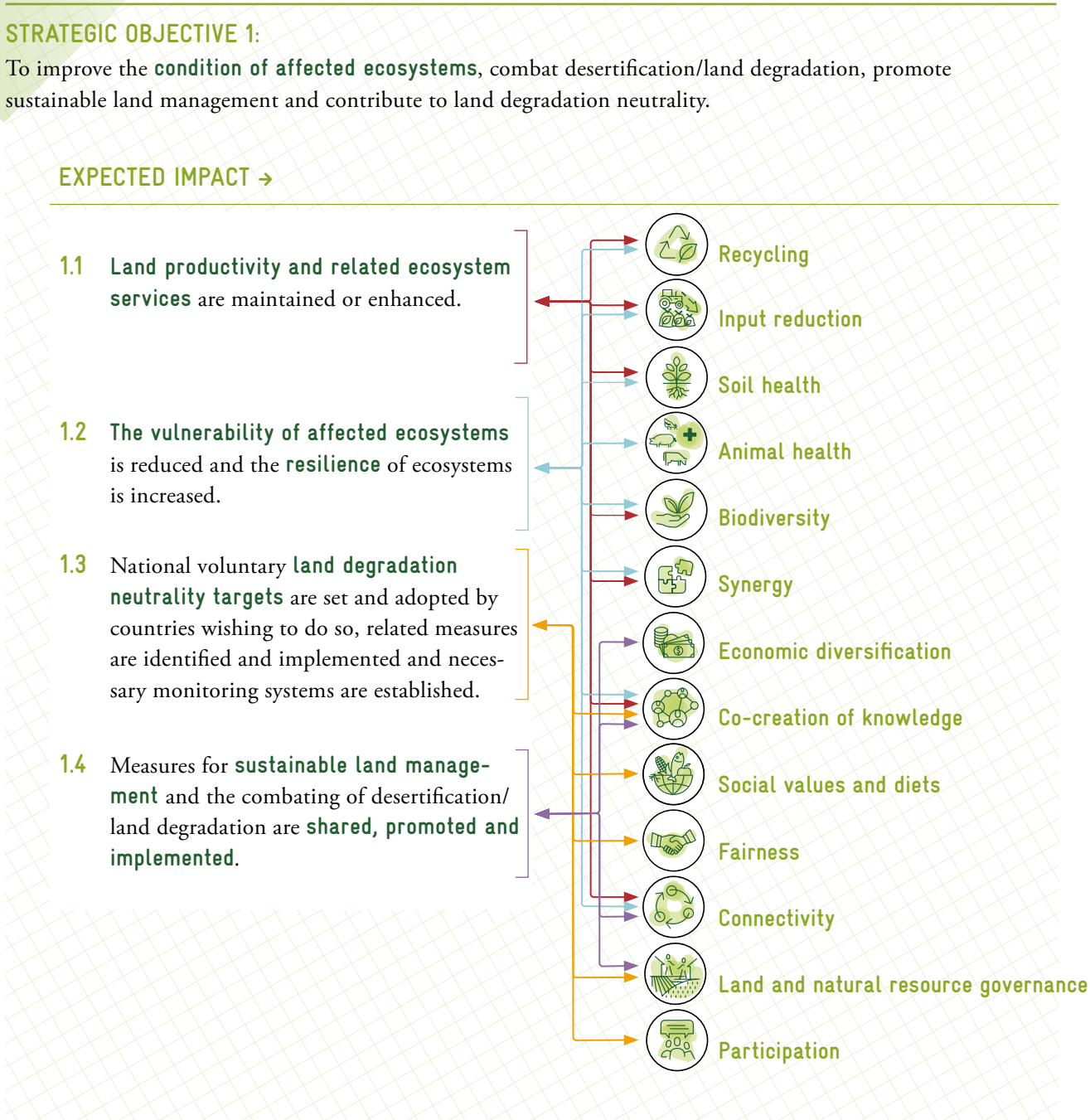
As ↪ **Figure 1**, illustrates, the agroecological principles contribute to the four dimensions of **strategic objective 1** aiming to strengthen affected ecosystems and combat desertification and land degradation. Many similarities can be found in agroecological

and SLM approaches (Hartmann et al., 2024). Both contribute to regenerative processes that restore degraded ecosystem functions, particularly by improving long-term soil health to counteract widespread land degradation (HLPE, 2019; UNCCD 2022b; Beste/Lorentz, 2022). Practices such as agroforestry, contour ploughing and terracing improve soil structure, reduce erosion, and enhance water infiltration, thereby mitigating the risks of soil erosion and desertification (Sinclair et al., 2019). This also contributes to building up carbon stocks. An important element is to build on the positive ecological interactions and synergies between different elements of agroecosystems (animals, crops, trees, soil and water). Furthermore, agroecology also relates to the co-creation of knowledge by fostering linkages between farmer-led and scientific approaches and by combining traditional practices with new techniques (FAO, 2018; Hartmann et al., 2024). In addition, the agroecological principles highlight that the participation of women and indigenous peoples in decision-making on land and natural resource management has direct effects on ecosystems, as they are enabled to protect the health of the ecosystems that their livelihoods and culture depend upon (GIZ, 2024b).



Figure 1: Interlinkages between strategic objective 1 and the 13 principles of agroecology

Source: Own illustration



**Strategic objective 2** focuses on improving the living conditions of affected populations (↪ see Figure 2). Strengthening ecological systems through measures that enhance soil and animal health contributes to stabilising food production and access to water, as healthy soils with diverse soil life have better water retention capacity and improve yields. Ensuring long-term soil health and productivity is thus a central building block

for achieving food and nutrition security and poverty reduction. The economic benefits of agroecological approaches, such as reduced inputs, economic diversification and increased connectivity of local and regional markets, also directly contribute to the living conditions of local communities (Derkimba et al., 2024; GIZ, 2024c). Strengthening the ties between producers and consumers at different levels, for example by fos-

tering local markets or enhancing fairness and sustainability of global value chains, can make incomes and livelihoods more resilient. Supporting diversified, seasonally and culturally appropriate diets also strengthens local food systems. Land and ecosystem restoration combined with local value chains can create immediate decent jobs, offering new perspectives, especially for young people (HLPE, 2019; CIDSE, 2018; GIZ, 2024b). The ecological and economic benefits can also help reduce migration forced by desertification and land degradation. Responsible land and resource

governance provides incentives and opportunities for smallholder farmers to combat land degradation in the long term. Agroecology emphasises the participation of affected groups like women, youth and indigenous peoples in land and natural resource governance. Ensuring fairness in economic and decision-making structures enhances their decision-making autonomy and further improves their ability to influence their living conditions (CIDSE, 2018). This directly mirrors the objectives of the UNCCD (expected impact 2.3).

Figure 2: Interlinkages between strategic objective 2 and the 13 principles of agroecology

Source: Own illustration

**STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 2:**

To improve **the living conditions** of affected populations.

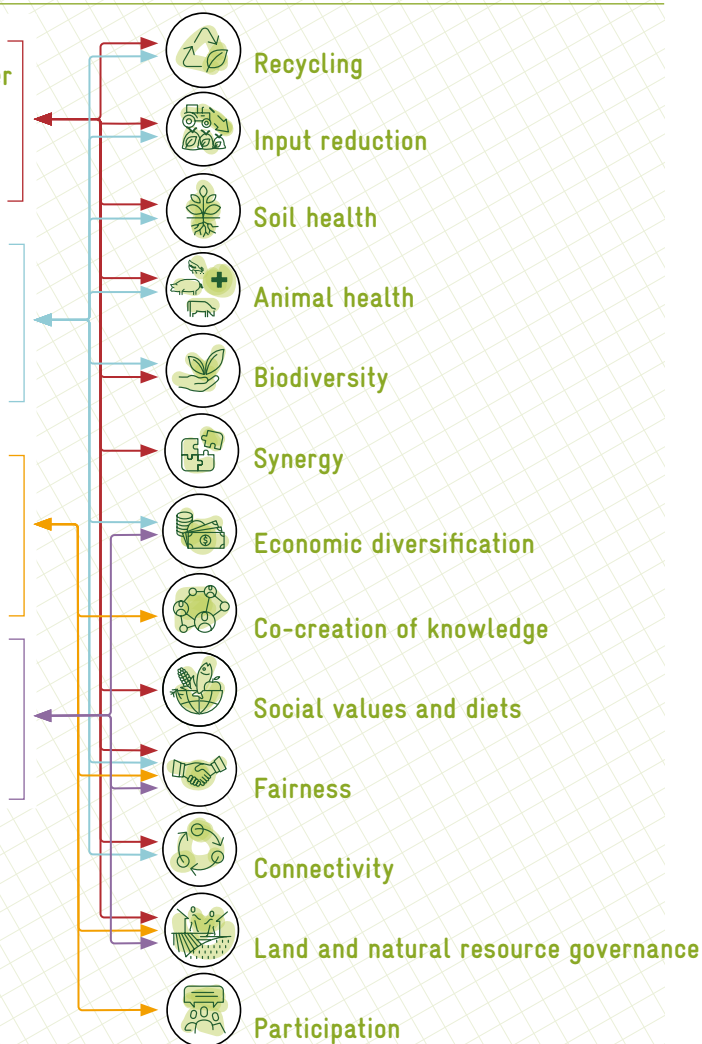
**EXPECTED IMPACT →**

**2.1 Food security** and adequate access to **water** for people in affected areas is improved.

**2.2** The **livelihoods** of people in affected areas are improved and diversified.

**2.3 Local people, especially women and youth**, are empowered and participate in decision-making processes in combating DLDD.

**2.4 Migration** forced by desertification and land degradation is substantially reduced



**Strategic objective 3** specifically aims to decrease drought risk by reducing the number of people exposed to drought and their vulnerability to it. Although exposure to drought is unavoidable, the vulnerability of agricultural systems can be mitigated. The aspects highlighted under strategic objectives 1 and 2 also apply specifically to drought-affected contexts, as agroecological approaches can reduce the sensitivity of agricultural systems to drought and increase their resilience. Important factors are e.g. the promotion of locally adapted plant varieties, such as indigenous and drought-tolerant crops, and practices to maintain soils and strengthen their water retention capacities, all of which increases ecosystem resilience to drought (Désertif'actions, 2022). Agroecological approaches contribute to reducing vulnerabilities to drought impacts by diversifying production systems leading to increased and diversified income. Participatory and fair governance of land and other natural resources supports responsible management of water resources and decision-making autonomy which is necessary for effective action during drought phases (CARI, 2023).

Through the holistic and integrated nature of agroecological approaches, agroecology generates multiple positive effects for global environmental benefits

under the different Rio Conventions (**strategic objective 4**). The UNFCCC recognizes agroecology as relevant for adaptation and increasing resilience to climate change, with co-benefits for mitigation, such as increased carbon storage in healthy soils and in above-ground biomass through agroforestry, or through reducing nitrogen fertilizer use (Biovision/FAO, 2020). The CBD acknowledges that agroecology can simultaneously support targets related to the reduction of threats to biodiversity such as pollution, ensure diversity of genetic resources, and increase agrobiodiversity managed by farmers (Global Alliance for the Future of Food, 2024).

Regarding **strategic objective 5**, agroecology offers two potential contributions. With the rising interest of donors and funding agencies in agroecological approaches, these institutions can play a crucial role in supporting a more efficient use of funding to achieve multiple objectives of the three Rio Conventions and SDGs simultaneously. Agroecology also plays an important role in supporting non-financial resources by fostering peer-to-peer learnings, strengthening capacities and technology transfer among actors within the same context. Such a co-creation of knowledge can be a valuable addition to technology transfer as mentioned in the strategic objective.

## Conclusion

As this analysis shows, agroecological approaches are strongly aligned with the strategic objectives of the UNCCD, as both address the ecological, economic and socio-political change necessary to achieve LDN. Agroecology is defined as a bottom-up approach and thus fits well into the UNCCD's strategic orientation. This assessment, which focuses on the five UNCCD strategic objectives, confirms the results of other analyses examining the broader alignment of agroecology with SLM and LDN (Hartmann et al., 2024). However, there is still a need to better explore the connec-

tion between agroecology and SLM. Linking the work of the international Agroecology Coalition to the actors associated with the UNCCD can provide an opportunity for mutual learning.

Agroecological principles can complement SLM approaches to strengthen the implementation of land restoration policies and programmes. Despite the increasing interest in agroecology within the scientific work under the UNCCD, the political process has not been consistent in recognising its potential for



combating land degradation. After being mentioned in two decisions at COP14 in 2019, none of the decisions adopted at COP15 in 2022 mentioned agroecological approaches (Derkimba et al., 2024). Strengthening the recognition of agroecology within COP decisions and the support programmes of the UNCCD, such as the LDN Target Setting Programme, could provide an opportunity to foster LDN through agroecology.

Access to finance and other resources, as expressed in strategic objective 5, is another important precondition for countries to enhance the implementation of the LDN targets. In this regard, the decisions made at the COPs of the Rio Conventions provide important guidelines to international funding institutions. Thus, decisions focusing on linking agroecological

approaches with combating land degradation could play an important role in financing respective national-level implementation, strengthening national capacities and highlighting synergies with other Rio Convention commitments (Nationally Determined Contributions – NDCs, National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans – NBSAPs). Projects and programs based on agroecology can put concrete measures into practice that stabilize ecological systems, support diverse and local economic value chains, revitalize local rural economies, and strengthen fair and participatory land governance systems. Such a systemic approach based on agroecological principles can generate multiple ecological benefits and is a good example of showcasing synergies between the Rio Conventions UNCCD, UNFCCC and CBD.

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