



LAND GOVERNANCE, NATURAL RESOURCES, AND CLIMATE CHANGE IN THE ARAB REGION

SECURING LAND AND PROPERTY RIGHTS FOR ALL

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THE IMPACT OF CLIMATE CHANGE IN THE ARAB REGION

Climate change in the Arab region is manifested by temperature rise, erratic and decreased precipitation levels and prolonged dry seasons, sea level rise, and increased frequency and intensity of extreme weather events and natural hazards. These natural phenomena impact different land types differently. Agricultural lands are affected by a mix of climatic factors including variability of rainfall and increased incidents of droughts, sea level rise, increased temperatures, floods, soil degradation and erosion. Pastoral and rangelands are also affected by climatic hazards (e.g., drought, floods and blizzards). Oases in hyperarid areas are impacted by water shortage and soil salinization. Forests and woodlands are vulnerable to droughts and heatwaves (with increasing risk of forest fire due to prolonged dry seasons).

Human-induced triggers relating to unsustainable management add to these challenges. These include overgrazing in rural areas, commercial agriculture involving monocultures, unplanned and unregulated urbanization, unchecked commercialization and privatization of land resources, growing land markets and land speculation lead to altering soil properties, biodiversity loss, and reduction in forest plants, native insects and animals. The combined effects of climatic, physiographic and human-induced factors are leading to several regional processes highly associated with land degradation, mainly soil erosion, soil salinity, water erosion and wind erosion. It is estimated, presently, that about 73 per cent of land in the Arab region is impacted by land degradation and loss of biodiversity, with this coverage rising up to 92 per cent in hyperarid areas characterized by scarce water resources and limited fertile lands. This estimate includes around 130 million hectares of degenerated rangeland.¹

Like in other regions, the knock-on effects of the interaction of these factors in the Arab region involve critical risks, including livelihoods decline and increase in poverty levels, food insecurity, forced displacement, human health risks, conflicts over access to and control of natural resources and amplification of existing inequalities and injustices.

It also increases the predisposition to conflict and forced displacement and increased migration. World Bank reports that 10 to 20 per cent of rural–urban migration in the Middle East and North Africa region are related to climatic factors.² The impacts on people cause or intensify competition over access to, use of and control over the available resources, including productive agricultural lands, rangelands and water.

1 ESCWA (2016) Land Degradation Neutrality in the Arab Region – Preparing for SDG Implementation.

2 World Bank (2014) Climate Change and Migration. Evidence from the Middle East and North Africa.



Source: UN-Habitat (2022)

LAND DEGRADATION

Interconnected human-induced processes related to land governance are driving land degradation in the Arab region. Climate change is exacerbating the problem. In pastoral areas, overgrazing due to overstocking is reducing the diversity of plant species and lowering the carrying capacity of pastures. New modes of transhumance that involve transporting animals by truck to fertile lands are accelerating deterioration of vegetation cover due to the influx of large herds to pastures in a short time. The widespread clearing of agricultural land for mechanized farming under monocultures is leading to deforestation. Inappropriate agricultural technologies and land-use practices are putting additional pressure on available grazing lands, accelerating their degradation. This affects the livelihoods of pastoralists in many parts of the region. Unregulated urban growth, soil sealing, open dumping, deforestation, and land-use conversions are

also key drivers of land degradation in the region, with negative repercussions on agrarian systems and livelihoods. Decline of land agricultural productivity and loss of communal grazing accelerate forest degradation. Seepage and water mismanagement have adverse impacts on agricultural land productivity, particularly on agro-ecological zones (rain-fed areas). Poor land management decisions and interventions worsen land degradation challenges.

In the last two decades, Arab countries have taken practical measures of varying scales and thematic emphases to avoid, reduce, and restore degraded lands. To promote more sustainable land management responses, land experts support the promotion of participatory land governance to prevent agricultural land fragmentation, fostering agroecology, and building on traditional knowledge to enhance rangeland management



Source: Mohamed Tohami (2020)

CONFLICTS OVER LAND USE AND NATURAL RESOURCES

The livelihoods of pastoral communities in the Arab region have traditionally involved flexibility and mobility between the dry and wet seasons. The symbiotic relationship they form with farmers along their travel path has been mutually beneficial but not always peaceful due to trespassing of animals on crop fields and intrusion of cultivated areas on pastoral routes. Conflicts between farmers and pastoralists over access to and control over natural resources abound in Arab countries where pastoralism is still an important source of livelihoods.

Climate change is aggravating these conflicts, disturbing the calendars and rights customarily recognized by farmers and herders. Failed land management and inadequate land-use transformations of rangelands, pastoral areas and forestlands are the root cause of the problem. Lack of clear land governance mechanisms in a climate vulnerable context is intensifying the natural resource-based competition between different groups. In some cases - for example, the case of West

Kordofan in Sudan - the private appropriation of public land and natural resources for natural resource extraction is disrupting rural and pastoral livelihoods, widening social inequalities in access to these resources, and increasing the likelihoods of social and political conflicts.

In line with global debates, herding groups in the Arab region recognize the positive role of sustainable pastoralism. The goal of better management of rangelands and securing and improving land tenure is manifested in the attempts by some countries to map, demarcate, protect and regulate pastoral corridors. While crucial, these efforts are not enough to protect the tenure rights of herders. Integrated land policies that recognize herders' high adaptation capacity and knowledge, and efforts to ensure their participation in mapping land rights are needed to minimize land-based conflicts, which are likely to increase in frequency and scale in view of the climate crisis. Research on this topic in the Arab region remains limited, hence, worth prioritizing.



Source: Levi Meir Clancy (2018)

LAND DISPOSSESSIONS AND DISPLACEMENTS

Large-scale land acquisitions as well as land and water grabs are leading to the dispossession of smallholders and other vulnerable groups, forcing them out of their land. Small-scale private property holdings are disappearing in many countries and communal lands are being privatized and fenced off. The drastic expansion of commercial agriculture and the increased appropriation of land and resources for climate mitigation schemes—a phenomenon known as green grabbing—are leading to the displacement of vulnerable land owners and land users. The problem is more severe where land rights are unprotected or unrecognized and where land and natural resources are poorly governed and are exposed to climate change and climate-related hazards.

Further, the Arab region is central to the international debate on migration and population displacements caused by various factors including economic hardships, political upheaval, armed conflicts and natural disasters. Secure access to land and tenure security and infrastructure investments targeting rural and poor urban areas are critical to agrarian rural communities that depend on land for their livelihoods. Secure tenure reduces their vulnerability to climatic shocks and poverty as well as enhances their position vis-à-vis more powerful actors. Compensation, resettlement and land redistribution schemes are crucial strategies in areas exposed to climatic hazards, provided that these schemes are negotiated with and accepted by the affected population. Successful regional initiatives in this regard are, however, difficult to find.



Source: Alex Azabache (2019)

CHAOTIC URBANIZATION

The pace and scale of urban population growth in the Arab region has surpassed the capacities of most governments to plan, set up and expand infrastructure, deliver public services and ensure adequate housing for all. As a result of poor land use and lack of up-to-date regulatory frameworks to guide urban growth, urban settlements have informally encroached on public lands, peri-urban agricultural areas, forests and wooded lands, as well as on low-lying areas and other climatic hazardous areas ill-suited for human settlement. In many Arab cities, vulnerable groups, including refugees and poor rural migrants, live in areas prone to flooding risks.

Empirical evidence from the region shows that the rich have also encroached on areas prone to natural hazards, particularly coastal areas and river deltas that are increasingly commodified and marketed as leisure destinations. It is, however, the poor who are most vulnerable to natural and climate risks. It is not only easier for the rich to recover from

climatic disasters, but they are also in a much better position to implement preventive measures to protect their property and minimize their losses. In addition, the rich are less vulnerable to eviction and relocation threats.

Improving safety against climate hazards requires sound urban planning and disaster risk management. Some Arab cities have taken practical steps in this regard. However, these city managers still have a lot more to do to guide urban expansion away from risky areas and protect natural sites of high significance from harmful uses. Key issues include reviewing existing land-use planning frameworks guiding urban development, assessing how different socioeconomic groups are impacted by natural disasters, revising the existing taxation systems on vacant urban land, exploring the possible densification of certain urban areas along with the introduction of inclusionary zoning, and establishing just environmental and social safeguard policies that support climate change mitigation and adaptation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of the report “Land governance, natural resources, and climate change in the Arab region” confirm that climate change, the greatest challenge of the 21st century, is impacting land, natural resources and ecosystems in the Arab region, with dire impact on people and their capacity to sustain their livelihood. Good land governance and land tenure security are essential for sustainable development in the context of climate change. The report recommends:

- Setting, committing to, monitoring and reporting against land-related Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) indicators and National Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN) targets aimed at the mitigation of and adaptation to the adverse impacts of climate change and at halting or reversing land degradation.
- Pursuing holistic and multidimensional approaches that aim to protect productive ecosystems and the services they provide, and that simultaneously prioritize human security and stability.
- Adopting sustainable land management and land use planning as key tools for responding to pressing environmental issues, but also as key tools to halt land, rangeland and forest degradation and guide urban expansion.
- Promoting sustainable and climate-resilient urbanization through climate-sensitive urban/spatial planning and disaster risk management to ensure urban centres are safe from climate hazards.
- Restoring degraded land to promote food production hence food security and a better life for all.
- Establishing and ensuring the effective implementation of social and environmental safeguards to protect the livelihoods and tenure rights of those affected by large-scale infrastructure and “green grabbing” projects (for example, small farmers and refugees) against forced evictions.
- Securing land tenure rights to ensure the effective participation of all people in climate action, for example, by investing in climate adaptation interventions to ensure the sustainable use of their land and natural resources, including environmental conservation, preservation of biodiversity, and reduction or reversal of land degradation.
- Supporting and protecting pastoral systems by establishing pastoral laws to regulate grazing and delimit pastoral areas as well as legitimizing customary system, including recognizing customary law in courts, creating water points and planting local fodder. The livelihood of pastoralists should be diversified and complemented to make them more resilient to shocks and climate hazards and to avoid the over-exploitation of natural resources.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Respecting and formalizing customary land tenure relations between farmers and pastoralists, strengthening dispute resolution mechanisms, and securing a range of services to enhance pastoralists' well-being, productivity and security.
- Supporting and protecting smallholder farmers through capacity development initiatives, increased access to seeds, tools and products, and access to credit and markets to promote fair competition with large-scale and industrialized landholders in farming.
- Protecting, demarcating and regularizing pastoral corridors for better land use management and dispute resolution.
- Recognizing and improving existing customary and communal land management systems to make them better suited to address modern societies' challenges resulting from climate change.
- Adopting fit-for-purpose and climate-resilient land administration approaches to promote practical solutions to security of tenure and land-use management.
- Promoting just legal and institutional frameworks that consider existing tenure and social relationships, and seek innovative approaches to reconcile customary and statutory laws, secure customary land tenure arrangements, and protect women rights to land for the achievement of the SDGs and the effective response to climate change.
- Embracing multi-level governance (subnational, local and municipal governments and non-State actors) in response to climate change mitigation and adaptation.
- Engaging local stakeholders, including land professionals, government officials, community leaders, religious and traditional leaders, youth, researchers, grassroots representatives and members of the academia, to achieve and improve land governance, securing land rights and advancing land degradation neutrality and land restoration.
- Learning from existing effective and inclusive customary land tenure arrangements for sharing natural resources and resolving conflicts, and exploring new innovative communal land tenure arrangements for securing land rights.
- Strengthening cooperation at the regional level. This requires building vertical and horizontal collaborative relationships between different groups. National and local land actors must be capacitated, empowered and connected to lead sustainable land governance and climate actions in their communities and countries. International organizations can play a key role in supporting and facilitating the creation of such networks as well as in building a top-down and a bottom-up knowledge base while "continuing to act as a convening platform" and ensuring that all voices are heard.

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