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Drynet: a global initiative focusing on drylands

June 17th is designated as the United Nations' World Day to Combat Desertification, commemorating the day in the year 1994 when the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) was adopted in Paris. Significantly, this is the day that 14 organisations from around the world are launching a joint initiative called Drynet. In India, the partner organisation for this initiative is the Lokhit Pashu-Palak Sansthan, an NGO functioning in Rajasthan since 1996. Other partner organisations are from Iran, Turkey, Pakistan, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Mauritania, South Africa, Senegal, Kazakhstan, the Netherlands, France and Germany. BothENDS, an organisation based in the Netherlands, is coordinating the initiative.

Drynet is a European Union-funded project that aims to strengthen civil society networks, such as farmers' collectives, indigenous groups, women's organisations, trade unions and non-governmental organisations with the right knowledge and visibility to influence dryland development policies in affected countries.

Desertification, drylands and land degradation

Desertification can occur in any dry area, and does not necessarily denote an expansion of existing natural deserts. It involves a complex interplay of various parameters including human impact and climate in dry areas, ultimately resulting in degradation that is so severe that the land cannot be returned to a productive state.

Climate change is already a significant concern, and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), an international body of 3000 experts, projects that the global mean temperature may increase between 1.8°C to 4°C by 2100…and more importantly, a warming of about 0.2°C per decade is projected for the next two decades (Jayant Sathaye, 2007). Changing climatic conditions can make communities increasingly vulnerable and reduce their ability to adapt.

Drylands are significantly distinct ecosystems, and globally, close to one billion people directly depend upon drylands and their products for their livelihoods. Due to current climatic changes and unsustainable land use, land is degrading faster than ever. In India, drylands constitute about 67% (223 million ha) of the geographical area, and land degradation (including desertification in drylands) affects nearly one-third of the geographical area (Prakash Narayan and Amal Kar, 2006).

Communities in developing countries often bear the heaviest burden of land degradation and desertification because their sustenance is usually directly linked to land productivity. Yet, human resilience and innovative interventions can make a difference. Local organisations or even individuals in many parts of the world have developed alternative land management strategies to adapt to or mitigate the effects the desertification. Many of these approaches have achieved notable success; however, they need to be revealed and brought to the attention of policy makers and other stakeholders.

Success stories

A good example of a sustainable dryland initiative developed by local civil society organisations is the Polyculture project in the Brazilian Drylands. Although known for its rainforests, Brazil also contains a large semi-arid region. Much of this is severely degraded, due to large-scale deforestation, ploughing and cattle- and goat-herding beyond the capacity of the land. Rain in this region is unpredictable, often coming in downpours followed by long dry periods even in the rainy season. In spite of this, the many farmers plant corn and beans as subsistence and cash crops. The unpredictability of the rainfall exposes them to agricultural failure. Worse, many farmers clean-till and hoe the land, leaving it open and exposed to the sun and drying winds. It is in this scenario that the `polyculture project' showed an alternative to an agricultural system that had come to depend heavily on irrigation and chemical inputs. Today the project boasts of 500 demonstration fields on farmers' plots and works directly with 1000 families of farmers. The strategy of the polyculture model is to imitate a natural ecosystem, which is resilient in the face of climatic variations, while new products are introduced to guarantee household revenues.

In India, several organisations and individuals are working towards adaptation to and mitigation of the effects of land degradation and desertification. In the state of Karnataka, rainwater harvesting is being propagated, not just in rural areas but large cities as well, as a means to compensate for decreasing ground water resources. NGOs like Tarun Bharat Sangh and Jal Bhagirathi Foundation are working on water harvesting in desert areas.

In the state of Rajasthan, Lokhit Pashu Palak Sansthan (LPPS), which was involved in providing health care to the animals of the Raika pastoral communities, noticed an alarming decrease by about 50% in the camel population in its project area between 1994 and 2003. The main reasons were the lack of grazing lands for breeding camels, and a slackening demand for camels as draft animals. Disturbingly, the centuries-old taboo against selling camels for meat had crumbled under these pressures, and hundreds of female camels were sent to the meat market. The camel which is synonymous with the state of Rajasthan, and at the vanguard of the battle against the frequent droughts and devastating famines that occur in the region, was itself under threat.

LPPS embarked on a Camel Yatra, literally a pilgrimage, to draw attention to this issue. In early 2005, on camel-back and accompanied by Raika camel breeders, an LPPS team traversed Rajasthan from south to north, covering a distance of 800 kilometres in 28 days. Along the way, they mingled with village people, distributed flyers and pamphlets and collected comments about the problems faced by the camel pastoralists and their families which were of help in understanding their problems.

Mobile livestock herding, including camel pastoralism, is a viable way of using drylands in a sustainable and biodiversity-conserving manner. However, since the carrying capacity of the land is limited, it is important to add value to the livestock products, for instance by making camel milk ice cream or cheese and marketing them. If such viable options are available, livestock herders could be encouraged to continue their profession.

The Camel Yatra resulted in extensive media coverage and a revival of interest in sustainable camel rearing. Currently, LPPS is coordinating a pilot project to explore the viability of processing camel milk sold by local camel rearing communities into

products like ice cream and marketing them, so that a source of income is available that will enable them to continue with their traditional camel rearing profession.

Focusing on and giving a future to drylands

By identifying, collecting, sharing and disseminating many more of these success stories, the 14 Drynet partners will strengthen national civil society networks with both knowledge and skills, making them important partners for policy makers in putting dryland and related poverty issues higher on the political agenda. Using newsletters, radio programmes and an interactive website, Drynet will stimulate and promote sustainable development in an effort to provide stakeholders with an urgently needed practical response to combat land degradation.

Bibliography

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