Spreading the word: lessons in networking and using media to advocate for sustainable land use in the drylands

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Spreading the word: lessons in networking and using media to advocate for sustainable land use in the drylands.

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Sustainable land management (SLM) cannot occur without the involvement of those who work directly with the land. Insights from their local experience and knowledge are essential if policymakers are to design sustainable long-term plans that address root causes instead of symptoms.

The need for a bottom up approach to SLM is reflected in various multi-lateral agreements including the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD). The UNCCD places great importance on the participation of civil society in the implementation of the Convention, and promotes adherence to and implementation of sound SLM practices. Furthermore, the UNCCD calls for the participation of civil society at the policy level in the drafting and reviewing National Action Programmes to implement the Convention. While these participatory processes and structures exist in theory, in practice they do not function effectively.

In order for civil society to participate meaningfully at the policy level, it needs to be well-informed, both in terms of content and process. However, this is often not the case. The dissemination of relevant information and broad awareness-raising using appropriate technologies on a range of SLM and dryland issues is thus an essential step towards such participation.

In order to further the cause of SLM at a grassroots level and to help enhance civil society engagement with national and international policy processes such as the UNCCD, Drynet was launched in early 2007. Drynet is an initiative of 14 civil society organisations from around the world which together have formed an international network, with the support of the European Union and the Global Mechanism of the UNCCD.

Drynet’s aim is to strengthen civil society networks at national levels and to provide them with access to necessary information and skills to enhance their knowledge and visibility, and to positively influence dryland development policies.

Drynet makes use of a range of networking tools and communication media in order to achieve this aim. This paper reflects some of the experiences and lessons learned from various Drynet partners in networking and using media to promote sustainable dryland use.

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1. Introduction

Drylands cover more than 40% of the earth land surface area, and are found on all continents apart from Antarctica (MEA, 2005). They “include all terrestrial regions where water scarcity limits the production of crops, forage, wood, and other ecosystem provisioning services” (ibid, 2005). Areas climatically classified as dry sub-humid, semiarid, arid, or hyper-arid are considered to be drylands.

Drylands are home to a third of the world’s human population, of which at least 90% live in developing countries (ibid, 2005). Estimates of rural dryland populations vary from 900 million to 1.2 billion (Unisféra, 2005). As such, the majority of people living in these areas are engaged in subsistence agriculture, pastoralism, forestry and subsistence fisheries. Thus, their livelihoods and options for economic development are directly linked to the quality of the land and its resources. In most countries with drylands these activities account for 30–50% of the Gross Domestic Product (ibid, 2005).

Most of Southern Africa is officially classified as dryland. Indeed, the region is recognised as one of the major dryland regions in developing countries, in particular Namibia and Botswana, large parts of Zimbabwe, South Africa and Mozambique and parts of neighbouring states (Morton and Anderson, 2008). For example 91% of South Africa is classified as dryland (DEAT, 2004). Of the approximate 90 – 100 million people living in southern Africa, more than half rely on agriculture for their livelihoods. With the high levels of poverty, and thus limited economic alternatives, majority of people are highly dependent on healthy agricultural and natural systems for their health, survival and wellbeing.
Land degradation and desertification:
Desertification is defined as the destruction or degradation of productive land in dry areas as a result of mismanagement or overuse and has long been recognized as a major global economic, social and environmental problem (www.unccd.int). Estimates of land area affected by desertification range from 36% (1,900 million ha) to 70% (3,600 million ha) of the world’s drylands depending on the methodologies or definitions used (Unisféra, 2005). According to the Global Environmental Outlook (UNEP, 2003), 550 million ha of land degradation in drylands is caused by agricultural mismanagement. It is estimated that between 5 and 6 million ha are permanently lost to agriculture each year through human-induced soil degradation (Unisféra, 2005) In Africa, an estimated 500 million ha of land are affected by land degradation, including two thirds of the region’s productive agricultural land. Approximately 30% of the Sahelian degradation is induced by human activity (Valerie et al, 2006). It is thought that desertification directly affects 250 million rural dwellers and that 135 million are at risk of being forced to abandon their land.

According to the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (2005), among the major causes of desertification are:
- Policies leading to unsustainable resource use and lack of supportive infrastructures.
- Policies that replace pastoralism with sedentary cultivation in rangelands. The majority of drylands (65%) are rangelands that are more suited to sustainable pastoralism than crop production.
- Land tenure practices and policies that encourage land users to overexploit land resources.

Thus, inappropriate and unwise policy making that is not adequately informed by the realities of rural economies and their associated systems of resource use has been shown to undermine rural livelihoods and expose dryland populations, especially the poor, to adverse conditions. In this context civil society organizations (CSOs) have a crucial role to play in relaying information between those communities and relevant policy-makers.

2. UNCCD: a bottom up approach:

Policy frameworks such as the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) and its National Action Plans (NAPs) are designed to ensure political attention and financial resources for drylands and the communities they sustain. These policy frameworks should lead to the creation or conservation of the political, economic or ecological incentives dryland communities need in order to use the land and resources sustainably. The key to sustainable drylands is therefore two-fold: the enabling conditions should match with local land use practices being sustainable, and local experience and insight should inform policy processes and decisions. Preconditions to enable local farmers, pastoralists and other land users to fight poverty and restore the carrying capacity of dryland ecosystems include access to technological change (thereby marrying traditional know-how and modern insights), conducive legislation and institutions (which offer clarity and security about land and tree tenure), and access to markets and information on prices. It is essential that the relevant policy-makers are well aware of local contexts and needs. In order to create this “enabling environment”, the participation of populations, communities and civil society is essential.
The UNCCD is one important international agreement that enshrines obligations to promote the participation of local populations in international law. Article 3 of the UNCCD notes that:

*In order to achieve the objective of this Convention and to implement its provisions, the Parties shall be guided, inter alia, by the following:*

(a) the Parties should ensure that decisions on the design and implementation of programmes to combat desertification and/or mitigate the effects of drought are taken with the participation of populations and local communities and that an enabling environment is created at higher levels to facilitate action at national and local levels;

(c) the Parties should develop, in a spirit of partnership, cooperation among all levels of government, communities, non-governmental organizations and landholders to establish a better understanding of the nature and value of land and scarce water resources in affected areas and to work towards their sustainable use;

(Article 3 - Final Text of the Convention, A/AC.241/27, 1994)

The UNCCD is the first legally binding international agreement on the problem of land degradation (Lean, 1995). The UNCCD was developed with a new approach in mind, “emphasizing action to promote sustainable development at the community level.” (www.unccd.int). “It breaks much new ground, pioneering a “bottom-up” approach that starts with the people actually affected by the crisis and replaces the concept of aid with one of partnership.” (Lean, 1995).

Great emphasis is thus placed on participation by civil society (both at a community and an organisational level) and cooperative partnerships between government, local communities, researchers and Non-governmental Organisations (NGOs) in implementing the UNCCD. As Johnson et al (2006) note, “dryland communities have great resources that can be put to fighting poverty and desertification, provided they are properly empowered and supported by national and international development partners.” The UNCCD seeks to contribute to achieving exactly these results.

Currently 193 countries, including South Africa, have ratified the UNCCD and are thus Parties to the Convention (www.unccd.int/convention/ratif/doeif.php). It is important to note that while participatory structures thus exist on paper in all of these countries, they are often not functional in practice.

### 3. The need for networking, organisation and information

Initiatives to develop and rehabilitate drylands face many challenges. In part, this is because these objectives have been poorly integrated into overall development strategies and aid agreements. In addition, there are poor links between the policy community and the communities working at a grassroots level. Policy makers are often unaware of what is happening at the grassroots level and fail to recognise and ensure the mastery, management and, even ownership of local natural resources by local communities. The process of including communities in the decision making structure tends to be very weak, even though most of these processes will be made in their name.
and for their benefit. It is often difficult for local communities to be well-informed on national and international policy issues, and while much relevant information abounds at research and institutional levels, this information seldom finds its way to the grassroots communities. Community organisations, particularly CSOs, have limited access to knowledge and information on best practices and relevant scientific research on drylands and often lack crucial networks and skills to be able to participate meaningfully in decision-making processes. Many local experiences stay local because nobody actively documents them, organises for others to visit and learn from the indigenous knowledge inherent in a particular community and as such, it is often difficult for policy-makers to be well-informed of local realities and circumstances.

Local communities often rely on experience and intuitive wisdom to react and respond quickly to unexpected and undesirable surprises and events due to their intrinsic flexibility and their direct relation to the natural resources surrounding them. The ability of communities to cope is based partly on historical experience, and partly on survival instincts, knowledge and access to information. Local communities are also the first to recognise the symptoms of crisis, since they affect their daily lives so strongly.

It is clear that sustainable land management (SLM)\(^1\) cannot occur without the involvement of those who work directly with the land. Local action is by definition limited in scale. But coupled with less context-specific, higher-level policies and management plans, local action is a powerful and essential part of long-term natural resource management.

In order for local populations and communities to participate meaningfully at the policy level and to benefit directly from the policies developed, they need to be well-informed, both in terms of content and process. Thus, what is needed is an “information-hub” that facilitates information flow both ways, in order to strengthen the knowledge base of both local communities and decision-makers.

Drynet was developed to be that hub for relevant stakeholders in countries throughout Africa, Latin America, Asia and Europe.

4. **Drynet: strengthening CSOs and facilitating exchange**

Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) can provide a crucial link between local land users and national and international decision makers. They are able to serve as the eyes and the ears of the local population, implementing activities at a grassroots level, conserving, documenting and spreading traditional knowledge and monitoring change. They are well placed to voice the concerns and needs of local communities to policy makers, although they often lack the organisational capacity to take up the role of translating local needs, realities and solutions into viable policy recommendations. While the causal patterns of desertification and land degradation

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\(^1\) Sustainable land management can be defined as land use practices that ensure land, water, and vegetation adequately support land-based production systems for the current and future generations (Nkonya et al, 2004). Sustainable land management is imperative for preserving and/or restoring the resource base and to support livelihoods in dryland areas.
vary in different countries, the CSO coordination and cooperation is a priority if these functions are to be carried out in different settings. However, experience in Africa over the first decade of implementation of the UNCCD showed that poor communication strategies and inadequate CSO cooperation were hampering the abilities of civil society to fulfil its role adequately.

This gap was recognised by a group of 14 CSOs\(^2\) who came together to form Drynet, a networking initiative which aims to strengthen civil society at national levels and to provide them with access to the information and skills needed to enhance their knowledge and visibility so they can positively influence policies. A further aim of Drynet is to build international links between CSOs so that they can learn from each others’ experiences and share knowledge. Drynet believes that civil society groupings and organisations that work in a coordinated manner at the regional and international level are better able to respond to pressing risks and opportunities such as climate change and the advance of biofuel production. Drynet is a 36-month project funded by the European Commission and the Global Mechanism.

In each of their countries, Drynet partners reach out to all relevant actors, organise seminars for discussion and experience sharing and training, and facilitate joint strategising to ensure that necessary changes take place. Drynet currently engages with more than 1000 civil society partners worldwide. In addition, the European Drynet partners also monitor the foreign policies and investments of Europe which have influence on dryland ecosystems and inhabitants, identify problems and causes in cooperation with their Southern partners, and feed these concerns into the national and international policy making process through policy dialogues.

\(^2\) Drynet is coordinated by Both ENDS, a Dutch NGO. The other Drynet partners are CARI (France); CENESTA (Iran); Central Asian Regional Environmental Centre Kazakhstan (CAREC), (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan); Environmental Monitoring Group (EMG); ENDA (Senegal, Madagascar, Morocco); Instituto Sertao (Brazil); League for Pastoral People (LPP), (Germany); LPPS (India); OLCA (Chile); Probioma (Bolivia); SCOPE (Pakistan); TEMA (Turkey); TENMIYA (Mauritania).
5. Use of different media to get the message across

Because Drynet partners are situated in all corners of the world, they exchange information via appropriate media instead of face-to-face communication. Furthermore all partners make use of media to reach out to local organisations and communities in different ways that are adapted to local customs and contexts.

Internal communication and exchange

As Drynet partners are scattered across the globe, three primary forms of communication are used: email, Skype and the Extranet. Skype is a cheap and effective way of communicating one-on-one or for holding group discussions. For example, some of the regional and international Steering Committee meetings are conducted as group Skype chats. Such a medium has the added advantage of providing an immediate transcript that can be kept for record purposes.

At the beginning of the Drynet project, the need for an online facility where partners should share and exchange internally was identified. To this end, the Extranet was created. Accessible through the internet, the Extranet is a secure site requiring a login name and password, which provides significant storage capacity and includes a discussion forum, notification board, library, calendar of events, weblog possibilities and an online reporting tool. It has proved to be a very effective internal communication tool.

Newsletters

By far the most appreciated information feature of Drynet is the newsletter, published once every three to four months.

There is a well thought out concept for Drynet newsletters. Each newsletter combines general, international-level information with locally relevant information. The 13 local newsletters all have the same four pages with international, drylands and Drynet related information. Each partner then adds articles, news, and other relevant country-specific information to their regional section.
Drynet partners all work with InDesign, in which they are able to create their own newsletter based on a common template, in their own language.

This system of publishing the newsletter works very well, as reflected in a quote from a Pakistani reader: “We live at a place where we don’t have access to the daily newspaper and don’t have electricity to keep ourselves abreast of new developments in the world. But, we are continually receiving Drynet Urdu newsletter at our village. It gives us knowledge about dryland area and new happenings in the world. Villagers always wait for newsletters, and appreciate Drynet team for giving the opportunity to improve knowledge. I am small farmer of district Tharparkar, and we don’t have opportunities to learn more technique about dryland development, but when I read Iran’s story about grapes, I tried to cultivate it in my farm.”

In addition to these 13 local newsletters, an international drynet newsletter is published that has the same four pages of international-level information, and four pages with a selection of articles from several local newsletters.
Other publications/ written material

Drynet partners not only publish their own newsletters, they also contribute extensively to other magazines, newsletters, conference papers and publications. For example, articles were written for an IUCN publication on Drylands that was published during the IUCN World Conservation Congress 2008 (IUCN, 2008). Drynet has commissioned and published position papers on key issues related to the UNCCD, and distributed these electronically and in hardcopy to a wide range of stakeholders. Papers published include *Desertification and climate change: Linkages, synergies and challenges; The Biofuel Boom and its Consequences for Drylands;* and *Is the UNCCD stuck in a knowledge traffic jam?* Sometimes Drynet organizes side events at conferences, and Drynet members always try to find innovative forms for these. For example, see [http://www.dry-net.org/index.php?page=2_2&articleId=13](http://www.dry-net.org/index.php?page=2_2&articleId=13) for side event COP8.

Website

Furthermore, Drynet members maintain a website to service CSOs and other stakeholders who are looking for information. The website collects all information that members produce themselves, and it contains an agenda listing events that could be of interest for organizations working on drylands and desertification issues. It also has a “links” section to forward the reader to other relevant sources of information.

Radio outreach

In most countries radio is the best means of reaching farmers, herders and other communities in drylands. Within Drynet, partners have the opportunity to use radio for awareness raising in a way that is most appropriate to the local circumstances. Sometimes it works best to distribute ready-made audio files to community radio stations, as has been done by OLCA, the Drynet partner in Chili. They have provided more than 60 community radio stations with audio files, posters and stickers related to desertification and drought issues. Although the programmes were designed to be transmitted between March 22 (World Water Day) and April 22 (World Earth Day) in 2009, most radio stations are still broadcasting the audio files since their content is not time-bound.

In other instances, entire programmes are developed together with radio stations. For example, in Senegal, ENDA TM has developed a partnership with two dominant community radio stations. Contracts were entered into for the production of a series of radio programmes on desertification and dryland development in three main Senegalese languages, Serer, Wolof and Pulaar.

Some Drynet partners have also reached radio audiences through being interviewed. For example, Drynet partner LPPS from India was interviewed for a programme of the BBC Radio World Service called "Return of the Nomad", by Susie Emmett. (go to [http://www.dry-net.org/index.php?page=2_2&articleId=120](http://www.dry-net.org/index.php?page=2_2&articleId=120) for the audio file). EMG from South Africa was similarly interviewed by SAFM for World Desertification Day, and Drynet partners visiting South Africa were interviewed on the same national radio station (go to: [http://www.safm.co.za/portal/site/safm/menuitem.bbad30974bb2a636c6b0eb550a24daeb9/](http://www.safm.co.za/portal/site/safm/menuitem.bbad30974bb2a636c6b0eb550a24daeb9/). General Section, “Otherwise - Drynet interview”.

In some countries access to radio is tightly controlled by government and access is difficult. Drynet partner from Turkmenistan, Ms. Guldjamal Nurmuhammedova of CAREC, has had to
apply to Minvodhoz (Ministry of Water Industry) for permission to broadcast a public interest programme, because this is the obligatory procedure in that country.

**Performing arts and puppetry**

Drynet’s South African partner, the Environmental monitoring Group has supported a rural puppetry group to convey the significance and urgency of the issues of sustainable land management to diverse audiences. A 20 minute puppet show was developed and performed by youth from the environmental NGO, Ecolink, and members of the local community in White River, and directed by Janni Younge from Sogo Theatre. The show was based on conversations and stories that emerged from performers’ research around the topics of desertification within the local community. Making use of life-sized puppets, the story revolved around issues of water, land and climate change, with a strong focus on the cultural, social and spiritual linkages to both the challenges facing local communities and the potential solutions to these. The show was performed as part of the celebrations of the World Day to Combat Desertification in 2008, in a performance watched by senior politicians and bureaucrats as well as civil society representatives from across the country. Deeply touching and unaffected, the performance left a lasting impression on many, because it was able to communicate beyond the written word and to mobilize people’s deepest memories and emotions. Subsequently the same show was performed in two other centres, in one case at the request of the Provincial Government of the Northern Cape Province.

**Marches and rallies:**

There are a number of other forms of communicating locally. Most Drynet partners go out into the villages to spread information and ask for attention of policy makers for these dryland regions. For example, SCOPE Pakistan organized a walk in Mithi with participants carrying saplings, asking for public attention for drylands. The walk ended at Mithi Press Club where
SCOPE representatives, social activists and area notables addressed the rally. The speakers highlighted the World Day to Combat Desertification and demanded protection of small holders by giving them access to credit and technology. Go to [http://www.dry-net.org/index.php?page=2_2&articleId=61](http://www.dry-net.org/index.php?page=2_2&articleId=61) for the whole article.

**Press conferences**

Usually, community members and CSOs go to the press with their issues. However, in Turkey and Uzbekistan, CSOs have chosen to rather bring the media and journalist to the affected areas. In Turkey, the press conference on the launch of Drynet and the issue of land degradation was held in one of the most important desertification areas in Turkey, Karapınar, “in order for press members to feel what desertification is like”. Drynet member TEMA organized the event in collaboration with Yuruks (Nomadic shepherd people in Anatolia), who offered participants their traditional meals and rented their camels.

In Uzbekistan, the mass media provides no special coverage of ecological issues. In order to raise public awareness on desertification issues, a local NGO (the Tashkent Environment Information Center) has been organizing round tables and media tours for both ecologists and journalists. Its aim is to build links between the media and environmental professionals from NGOs and the government, in order to raise public and political awareness regarding environmental problems. The idea is to give professional environmentalists more access to media channels and to provide journalists with the information to communicate about the often-complex relationships between natural and social forces that shape contemporary environmental problems. The tours and roundtables have been followed by TV programmes, radio broadcasts and newspaper articles, and in 2008 the Centre won a state-run competition for supporting NGOs. Drynet partner CAREC documented this initiative as an Inspiring Initiative to use it as a showcase and inspire others.
For the full story go to: http://www.dry-net.org/index.php?page=3&successstoryId=26

Political cafes
In the Netherlands, Drynet partners Both ENDS and EMG organized a popular debate in a format known as a “Political Café”, focused on drylands and small scale agriculture. This event, preceded by an expert meeting with scientists, politicians and NGOs from the Netherlands, was a facilitated discussion in a café-like setting to which the general public was invited. A relaxed setting was created by inviting discussion between the audience and a panel of experts, as well as providing refreshments in a suitable venue. Dutch and European policies and practices related to the topic were discussed, in order to pass on the outcomes to relevant policy makers. See http://www.dry-net.org/index.php?page=2_2&articleId=128.

Face to face exchange
Drynet partners regularly organize seminars as well as training sessions for both local CSOs and other stakeholders. These opportunities for face-to-face exchange are always more fruitful than any exchange through paper, and therefore information spreading, awareness raising and networking needs, at times, to be in the form of direct meetings and exchange.

Other examples
CENESTA, Drynet partner in Iran, did a photo contest on drylands to communicate the complexities and issues of Iranian drylands and communities to the general public as well as decision makers. They also translated the simplified guide to the UNCCD into Farsi so more people can understand what this UN Convention is about. http://www.dry-net.org/index.php?page=2_2&articleId=149
6. Lessons learned and conclusions

The media communication strategies of Drynet have played a vital role in stimulating debate on the core issues that affect drylands at all levels, from local communities to international gatherings such as the Conferences of the Parties and other meetings of the UNCCD.

In the experience of Drynet partners, if policy related information is to reach local level stakeholders, it is of the utmost importance that the information is presented in the right language and form. Drynet therefore goes to great lengths to present information as far as possible in local languages. This means that the translation budget needs to be adequate to do so. These efforts have been rewarded, and the Drynet newsletter is currently available in 12 languages.

Flexibility within CSOs and their networks is vital in order to adapt media activities to local contexts, such as radio activities. Information only spreads to where it is wanted and needed – people do not exchange if they do not have a need for information. The experience of Drynet has been that most information exchange takes place within country networks, and to a lesser extent between Drynet partners in the region.

Information and media are powerful tools for negotiation and for influencing policy. However, if decision makers choose to behave in an autocratic and/ or untransparent manner, the ability of civil society to impact on these decisions is curtailed. For example, in the lead up the UNCCD COP 9 no information has been published regarding procedures and processes for selection of CSO delegates for sponsorship, or on the theme that will be proposed for the Open Dialogue Session. This has limited the ability of NGOs to start preparing for the event.

Effective dialogue lies at the heart of every functional human community, and this is what Drynet has achieved through the use of media in many forms and in many different places on the planet. An important aspect of this has been to ensure that all partners are able to use Drynet media products to share information and to tell their stories, thus sharing ownership of the outcomes and enhancing the impact of the analysis.
7. References:


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