

ROLE OF LOCAL BODIES IN IMPLEMENTING THE UN CONVENTION TO COMBAT DESERTIFICATION IN PAKISTAN

Farooq Ahmad*

Zulfiqar Ali¹

Sameera Farooq

*Department of Geography, University of the Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan.

¹Government College Burewala, Pakistan.

E-mail: drylandpk@yahoo.com

Key words: Desertification, Local bodies, Pakistan

INTRODUCTION

Pakistan is a tropical country with vast semi-arid and arid tracks of land spread over 68 million hectares with the population of 145.5 million people in 2002 as against 130.58 million in 1998 showing an average growth rate of 2.1 percent. All of its provinces possess large share of land with valuable natural resources, which are being degraded at very high rate *i.e.*, Punjab 119,310 Km², Sindh 134,896 Km², Baluchistan 149,467 Km² and its proportion is increasing because of over-exploitation of under-developed meadows beyond quick rehabilitation (Ahmad, 1999). Disturbance of the natural equilibrium ultimately results in economical losses, social problems and general moral decline of the society. Degradation of natural and agricultural ecosystem has led to a deep environmental crisis.

The government is indeed, striving hard for the development of the country but this development will be meaningless unless we first resolve the basic and fundamental problems caused due to environmental degradation, which threaten the survival of the growing population of the country.

Government of Pakistan has adopted the Convention on April 22, 1997. The former federal minister for food and agriculture Syeda Abida Hussain said that concerted efforts at grassroots level are essential to combat the environmental problems. She said, "The Convention comes as a ray of hope for more than one billion people around the world whose lives are threatened by the adverse impacts of drought and desertification" (Associated Press of Pakistan, 1997).

UN Convention to Combat Desertification, in many ways is a break through the status up quo. By drawing up and signing this convention more than 100 governments have made specific and solid commitments towards ensuring viable economic resources, friendly environment and sustainable living to proceed coming generation. Among many other things it involves

local people in finding their own solution to the issue relating desertification and land degradation. The Convention to Combat Desertification was adopted on June 17, 1994 and opened for signatures in October that year (Lean, 1995). Containing 40 articles and four regional Annexes, out of those more than 8 articles are directly addressing to the local bodies (UNEP, 1994).

Accompanied by political commitment and will, the Convention could represent a single internationally negotiated vehicle for bringing tangible benefits to the 900 million predominantly poor and food-insecure people who live in the dryland areas that cover 30% of the planet (Ahmad, 1997).

Past approaches to resources conservation that excluded resource users failed because they: generated active local opposition; ignored the need of tangible incentives to farmers; and degenerated to an absence of management rather than the expected state management of dryland resources (Megateli *et al*, 1997).

Main features of CCD

The most important feature of CCD is that unlike some other international conventions it includes concrete national commitments for practical actions, particularly at the local level where desertification must primarily be fought and place a great emphasis on the machinery needed to implement it and monitor its progress.

The Convention pioneers a democratic, bottom-up approach in international environmental law. It clearly emphasizes that the people who are facing desertification, best understand the fragile environments in which they live-must be fully involved and be allowed to participate in the decisions that will shape their lives. The first principle of the treaty commits parties to ensure that decisions on the design and implementation of programme ...are to be taken with the participation of populations and local communities and that enabling environment is created at higher levels to facilitate action at national and local level.

CCD is different from previous attempts to combat the crisis and ensure sustainable development because it legally binds the countries to obliged and implement the Convention in its true spirit and words. Unlike other international environmental treaties, it includes

concrete national commitments for practical action, particularly at the local level where desertification must primarily be fought and places great emphasis on the machinery needed to implement it and monitor its progress.

As rightly suggested by Wollers (1996) the efforts of the affected countries will focus on supporting a process by which the level of education and living standards can be raised and traditional systems, locally controlled as far as possible, adapted to the current situation, in order to delay the process of desertification and reduce its effects. Let us consider above all the approach to local measures to combat desertification since in each case specific and appropriate solutions must be developed on the spot.

In a developing country like Pakistan, in developing and applying desertification control measures, consideration must be given not only to the appropriate technical measures but also to economic and social factors, together with all traditional customs of the local population. Any measures to protect resources will be successful only if it is supported and carried out by the local people. Consequently, the motivation of the target groups to support desertification control measures must be based on measurable economic success, which results in financial gain.

Role of local Government

In the past, development planners too often tended to ignore the people in spite of the fact that the poor communities know more than anyone else about the fragile ecosystem with which they have been endeavoring through out their lives. They should be the keys to combat the desertification. The Convention acknowledges this and recognizes that development must be human-orientated if it is to be sustainable. It breaks new ground and embraces a “bottom-up” approach, insisting that local people must be fully involved in deciding how to tackle the problem of desertification and that their poverty should be addressed.

The third principle of the Convention extends the concept of partnership. It emphasizes the importance of ensuring the participation of local people and their communities. It stresses upon the need that national plans must be carried out in a spirit of partnership, between the donor community, government at all levels, local population and community groups.

The institutions of Local Government assume a dynamic responsibility towards the development and maintenance of local resources, find out local initiatives and motivate the civil society towards a desirable change because:

- Representatives of the local population who are given definite mandate by the communities of their areas and are run on democratic principles govern them,
- Governors of local Governments have committed for the betterment of socio-economic and environmental conditions in their areas,
- Institutions of local Government work within the limited areas of having face to face relations with the local population and stakeholders,
- They are intermediaries between local population and the national Government and hence may guide the national planners by feeding them with the local initiatives, their essential needs, wishes and hopes,
- Institutions of local Government have normally built an infrastructure and capacity to undertake development activities,
- They represent both national Government and local population in favour to bringing a change in the attitude and behaviour of the stakeholders of beneficiaries.

Expected participation of local bodies

One of the most important elements of the Convention to Combat Desertification is formation of National Action Programme (NAP) by signatories, which is actually linked-up with the implementation of this Convention.

In practice NAP is to be drawn up by a democratic process, which will require the participation of all actors (stakeholders). Since National Action Programmes are the backbone of the implementation mechanisms of CCD. It is desirable that the local communities (figure 1) must be considered throughout all the development processes involving formulation, implementation and monitoring stages of plans consulted both at drafting and implementation stages. Although in Pakistan first draft (April 1994) and second draft (December 1996) of NAP are completed, yet no significant contribution of local communities was sought for these drafts. Nevertheless, a limited NGO participation was noticed in the first draft, which is a negligible representation of the Civil Society. It is desirable that a local participation of the

indigenous and civil society is essentially needed for a dynamic and feasible NAP. This must be taken into account before the final approval of the NAP.

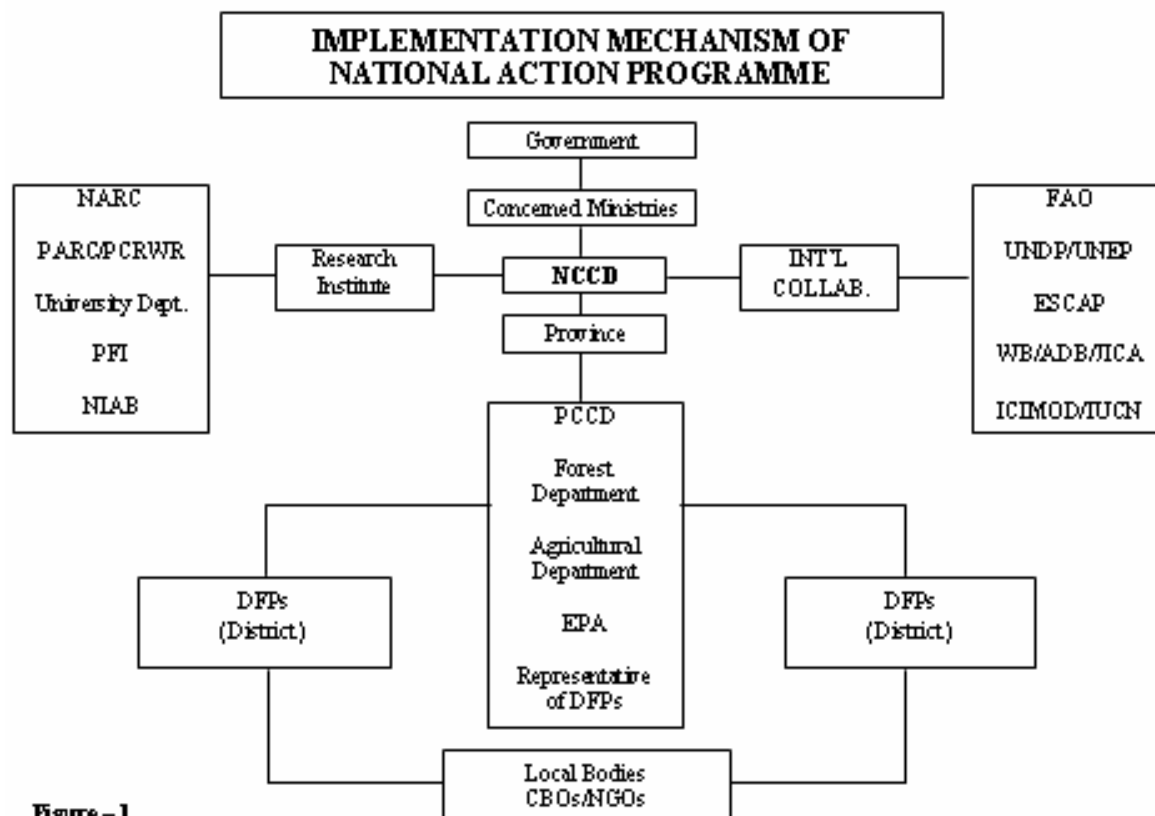


Figure - 1

NCCD: National Coordination Committee to Combat Desertification

PCCD: Provincial Coordination Committee to Combat Desertification

DFPs: District Focal Points, **CBOs/NGOs:** Community Based Organizations/Non-Governmental Organizations

Role of District Councils/Union Councils

District Councils and Union Councils may play an effective role in the implementation of the CCD in Pakistan. This is because of the fact that Union Councils and District Councils have sufficient mechanism and infrastructure to implement and monitor the CCD activities. Furthermore, they could also develop the infrastructure and raise funds to combat land degradation in their respective areas. Similarly, these councils may also be used as platforms for the capacity building and training of the NGOs, CBOs and VOs in the affected areas (Kazmi, 1997).

In addition to that these can also be treated as forums of accountability. As Convention gives full-authority to local bodies to criticize the implementation mechanism of the CCD at any stage. The institutions of local Government can play a significant role in:

- Disseminating people's perception to planners of provincial and federal governments,
- Helping in formulation of dynamic plan for sustainable development,
- Helping local communities for harnessing benefits from development activities and enhance their income,
- Providing essential infrastructure demanded for undertaking desirable development,
- Extending meaningful evaluation and monitoring measures for development projects and feedback to planners,
- Create awareness building in civil society,
- Ensures accountability at various stages of the projects,
- Acquiring desired volume of funds from different agencies.

CONCLUSION

In the light of above discussion we would like to suggest that for the successful implementation of CCD in Pakistan a very strong local involvement is needed to achieve the expected results. Therefore, it is recommended that Government of Pakistan must create a policy for participatory development based on local materials and techniques within the framework of existing indigenous and public property institutions.

REFERENCES

- Ahmad, Farooq (1999), "Ecological restoration in Cholistan", *Journal Geographic*, Vol. 2(1), pp. 34-38.
- Ahmad, Nasim (1997), "The desertification convention: new hope for an old problem", *Bulletin of International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD)*, April, No.1, pp. 4-5.
- Associated Press of Pakistan (1997), "Abida for adoption of UN convention", April 23, *Daily Dawn Karachi, Pakistan*.
- Kazmi, S.J.H. (1997), "The monitoring of desertification: role of modern techniques and local perception", *Proceedings of the 8th International Conference on Rainwater Catchment Systems*, 21-25 April 1997, Tehran, I.R. Iran, pp. 1159-1161.

- Lean, Geoffery (1995), “Down to Earth: the center of our common future”, Geneva, Switzerland.
- Megateli, N., Schmidt, K. and Wagner, L. (1997), “A summary report on the international symposium and workshop on combating desertification”, Sustainable Developments, Vol. 4(1), International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD), Canada, pp. 1-10.
- UNEP (1994), “United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification”, UNEP’s Information Unit, Geneva, Switzerland.
- Wollers, Matthias (1996), The political dimension of desertification, or “We must go slowly, because we are in a hurry”, Agriculture + Rural Development No.2, pp. 60-62.