Module B

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Frame of Reference

4.1 The baseline in LDN
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The novel aspect of the LDN target that sets it apart from earlier efforts to tackle land degradation is the specific adoption of neutrality as the goal. To assess whether this goal of neutrality has been met, a reference, or baseline, must be established, against which performance can be assessed.

Neutrality implies that there is no net loss of what LDN is intended to maintain. Thus “no net loss” in this context means that land-based natural capital is maintained or enhanced between the time of implementation of the LDN conceptual framework (t0, typically the year 2015, when the decision to pursue LDN was adopted by the UNCCD) and a future date (such as the year 2030) when progress is monitored (t1). This frame of reference is important for two reasons. First, it places the focus on the aspirational goal of LDN, that is, ensuring that there is no net loss of land-based natural capital. Second, neutrality is monitored through change in values of a specific set of consistently measured indicators, which is more readily detected than land degradation status per se, as degradation does not occur in linear or easily discernible patterns. The precision (repeatability) in such measurements of change can be quite high, whereas the precision and accuracy (how close the measured value is to the actual value) of many efforts to assess land degradation status has been relatively low. This is reflected in the wide range, from 1 – 6 billion ha, in global estimates of degraded land. The accuracy of these estimates is widely disputed, and all have a large error associated with them (low precision), making them less than ideal for a baseline, which should be as precise as possible, to facilitate detection of change.

Therefore, the baseline for LDN is the initial value of the indicators, and deviations at a point in the future are the basis for monitoring achievement of neutrality. The LDN baseline is therefore the initial value of each of the indicators used to monitor progress in achieving LDN. The baseline values of these indicators are averaged over the period leading up to implementation of the LDN conceptual framework (t0 e.g., 2015) and re-measured at t1 (e.g., 2030) to determine the change in land-based natural capital. The ambition of a country with respect to achieving LDN is no net loss, and thus the LDN target is equal to the baseline (Figure 4). A goal of no net loss may not seem ambitious but many countries are experiencing trends of increasing degradation (e.g., due to unsustainable land management practices, land conversion for agriculture, and urban expansion), and so the vision of LDN requires this trend to be halted and reversed. In recognition of specific national circumstances, flexibility in implementing LDN is required. Countries may elect to set their LDN target above no net loss and raise the level of ambition. Under rare circumstances, a country may elect an LDN target that includes some net loss, if they anticipate future land degradation that
is not possible to counterbalance with gains elsewhere. In such circumstances, a country would need to justify this target.

It is important to note that LDN considers all land degradation whether due to human or natural causes. In particular, climate change is likely to increase the risk of land degradation in many countries, and could lead to losses despite efforts to reduce or reverse land degradation, making LDN more difficult to achieve.

Monitoring progress toward the LDN target involves both quantifying the baseline (the initial values of the indicators) and gains and losses relative to the baseline in the future. The condition of the land, particularly in the drylands, is highly variable temporally, largely due to climate variability. Therefore, the baseline should be quantified by averaging the indicator values over an extended period (e.g., 10-15 years) prior to $t_0$, rather than using the values of a single year. Similarly, monitoring achievement is undertaken by averaging over an extended period of at least 5 years (chapter 7.2). Uncertainty in the estimates of indicators must also be considered in monitoring, to determine whether a change is significant, as discussed in chapter 7.3 Interim monitoring, that occurs prior to $t_1$, such as the regular reporting to the
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UNCCD, should be undertaken to evaluate progress towards the target and provide the opportunity to modify plans as needed, and contributes to the iterative learning that is necessary to effectively implement this framework.

Ideally all countries would agree to use the same baseline period for tracking progress. The use of a dynamic forward baseline (such as a “business as usual” projection over the period t0 to t1) or a shifting window (recalculated every five years, for example) could mask absolute changes in land degradation, and thus would not reflect the LDN vision. The LDN monitoring approach is detailed in chapter 7 (Module E).

BOX 2
Principles related to the frame of reference

1. The LDN target equals (is the same as) the baseline: The baseline (the land-based natural capital as measured by a set of globally agreed LDN indicators at the time of implementation of the LDN conceptual framework) becomes the target to be achieved, in order to maintain neutrality.

2. Neutrality is usually the minimum objective: countries may elect to set a more ambitious target, that is, to improve the land-based natural capital above the baseline, to increase the amount of healthy and productive land. In rare circumstances a country may set (and justify) its LDN target acknowledging that losses may exceed gains, if they forecast that some portion of future land degradation associated with past decisions/realties is not currently possible to counterbalance.
REFERENCES


UNCCD. (2013b). *Report of the Conference of the Parties on its eleventh session, held in Windhoek from 16 to 27 September 2013*. 


