FAO E-Conference on Sustainable Grasslands:

Week Three Summary and Introduction to Week Four

Week three summary

Week three focused on the challenges facing grasslands sustainability. Building on our earlier discussions about the multiple functions of grasslands, we started the process of outlining a framework for sustainable grasslands. As an example, the Sustainability Assessment of Food and Agriculture systems (SAFA) model of a sustainable food and agriculture system was introduced.

A number of participants expressed support for the SAFA model as an appropriate template, with many contributions highlighting the pillars of sustainability: environment, social, economic, and governance. Building on the four pillars, participants identified a series of critical challenges specific to grasslands. Prominent themes from the discussions are summarised below. It is important to emphasise that the sustainability dimensions are interrelated and different issue areas often cut across multiple categories.

Environmental sustainability

- A widely identified threat to grasslands was the conversion to alternative land uses. Market forces, agricultural support policies and urban development are the primary drivers of these changes.
- This has been a common theme throughout the E-Conference with examples in week three from North America, New Zealand, India, Pakistan, Eastern Europe and Central Asia involving forestry, intensive livestock production, annual cropping and cash crop production displacing grasslands.
- These large-scale changes have a double impact on the environment. The reduction in grassland area implies a loss of ecosystems services, while the intensification of agricultural production is associated with increased air and water pollution, land degradation and loss of soil fertility.
- The fragmentation of grasslands caused by land-use change threatens to undermine both the productive base and the level of ecosystems services that grasslands provide.
- As many participants have pointed out, economic priorities are overriding the environmental, social and governance dimensions of sustainability. The short-term profits that can be gained from conversion of grasslands obscure the external and longer-term costs to society and the environment.
- A key challenge is to realign agricultural, food and trade policies to reverse this trend.

Economic sustainability

- Market 'bottlenecks' were identified as an important barrier to the economic sustainability of grasslands. For example, access issues and distances to markets in Central Asia present a significant challenge.
- Bioenergy and carbon markets may offer opportunities in the future but are currently under-developed.
- Economic sustainability was linked to social and environmental sustainability through the principles of Fair Trade to support decent livelihoods. Fair prices would allow pastoralists to derive a better income from supplying urban and international markets, alleviating the exploitation of rural communities and ecosystems.

Social sustainability

- Cultural sustainability was recognized as critical to the long-term status of grasslands. When grasslands are viewed as an integral part of the landscape they are valued and protected by local communities.
- A related concept was the idea of building social capital to instill an ethic of good stewardship.

Governance sustainability

- Land tenure challenges have been a recurring theme during the E-Conference, especially for communally held land. A key question is how to best manage the commons and prevent overgrazing.
- This can be seen as part of a wider debate about the respective roles of national policies and local bottom-up and communal solutions to sustainable management challenges.
- Examples from Kenya demonstrated how pastoralist communities have adopted creative solutions to support restoration and sustainable management of grasslands.
- Governmental policies were sometimes criticised as being inadequate or having unintended negative consequences on grasslands. In other cases, policies have been established but are not effectively enforced. However, it was widely accepted that responsible national level policies retain a crucial role in managing grassland ecosystems at a landscape level. The spatial dimension of ecosystems services implies that some coordination or harmonisation of management approaches is necessary.
- While the multi-functionality of grasslands is widely recognised (e.g. EU project MultiSward), a critical governance challenge is to better integrate these values into decision-making processes. Payments for ecosystems services (PES) schemes were suggested as an option for governments to reconcile objectives of production and biodiversity conservation while supporting local initiatives for sustainability.
- Capacity building is a further opportunity for governments to work with community stakeholders. For example, assisting cooperative societies to develop animal fodder banks.

Introduction to week four: best practices in sustainable grasslands management

Week four will continue our discussions of grasslands management, concentrating on best practices for sustainability. Within this context, we have identified the following key challenges that have been prominent during the first three weeks:

- Governance of global commons: tenure and access to grasslands;
- Environmental degradation and desertification: future of grasslands in the face of climate change;
- Pastoralists and smallholders: contribution to sustainable development and poverty alleviation;
- Grassland-based livelihoods: participation in ecotourism, fair trade and local market development.

Your experience on these priorities, including any other areas of strengths and weaknesses that we should consider in developing the Guidelines on Sustainable Grasslands, is most welcome.