

FAO E-Conference on Sustainable Grasslands: Week Four Summary

Week four summary

The fourth and final week of the FAO E-Conference on Sustainable Grasslands concentrated on best practices for sustainable grassland management. Discussions were centred on four key challenges:

- 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

During the discussions several key themes emerged:

- Inter-linkages between sustainability dimensions: environmental, social, economic, governance
- Holistic/systems-based approaches to complex grasslands challenges
- Principles of community participation and capacity building
- Calls for technical and policy guidelines for sustainable grassland management based on a synthesis of best practices and organised around broad agro-ecological zones

Complex challenges call for holistic approaches to grassland management

A recurring theme during our discussions of grassland management has been the linkages and interdependence between the four dimensions of environmental, social, economic and governance sustainability. The importance of nurturing each of the four dimensions was emphasised during week three and reiterated in week four. Two examples illustrate the inter-linkages and complexity of challenges:

Global food production systems threaten South American grasslands

The traditional grassland-based systems across South America are increasingly converted into soybean and other crop fields to produce feed for monogastric and ruminant production in Europe. In this example a globalised food production chain causes the destruction of biodiversity associated with grasslands and generates N, P and pesticide pollution on both sides of the Atlantic. Proposed solutions include greater support for grassland-based systems by labelling and promoting the health benefits of grass-based red meat, developing fair trade and ecotourism markets, nearer food chains and greater food self-sufficiency within regions (in this case protein in Europe).

Desertification of the world's grasslands

Anthropogenic desertification is causing the degradation of grasslands across the US, Africa, Australia, Asia and South America and is a driver of climate change. In turn, desertification aggravates the impact of droughts and floods, poverty, abuse of women and children, and competition for increasingly scarce resources. In the worst scenarios this competition has resulted in violence and war. While it should not be used as an excuse for continuing to apply inappropriate management techniques, climate change threatens to exacerbate these problems through a vicious cycle of feedback effects.

As a product of this complexity, many participants have advocated holistic and systems-based approaches to manage the multiple and interrelated challenges facing grasslands. Examples include silvopastoralism, crop-livestock integration and ecological intensification. Moreover, sustainable livestock and grassland-based systems are inherently holistic and multi-faceted by nature; pastoralism provides a production option for securing livelihoods that can be complementary to other environmental goals such as protecting biodiversity and landscapes.

The way forward: Technical and policy guidelines based on a synthesis of success stories

The environmental, social, economic and governance dimensions of sustainability were again reinforced as an important framework for sustainable grasslands. Based on these pillars, Alain Peeters and others have called for the definition of global technical and policy guidelines for sustainable grassland management to improve the livelihoods of livestock farmers. Technical guidelines could be defined by large agro-ecological zones since solutions largely depend on local conditions. Guidelines should support the cultures and traditions of pastoralists including their traditional knowledge of landscape and biodiversity conservation. Guidelines could involve a synthesis of success stories from grasslands around the world. Already, a number of case studies illustrating best practices from different regions have been shared during the E-Conference:

South Asia Pro Poor Livestock Policy Programme: Importance of community involvement

The South Asia Pro Poor Livestock Policy Programme (SA PPLPP) supports a range of initiatives demonstrating good practices related to common property resources. Important themes in their work include effective management of common lands through community involvement and ownership, community-NGO partnerships, and the importance of democratic village institutions to distribute benefits equitably. Good governance practices are linked to environmental restoration, increased output, improved livelihoods for resource poor households and enhanced food security. For more information refer to: <http://sapplpp.org/>

Participatory Negotiated Territorial Development: Access/tenure rights

Tenure/access rights to grasslands are complex, particularly in areas of seasonal migration, cross-boundary territories and customary resource access. Applying the principles of holistic and integrated management, FAO's Land and Water Division have developed a people-centered approach to support the negotiation of environmentally and socially sustainable agreements on tenure/access and natural resources management. The Participatory Negotiated Territorial Development (PNTD) approach is now being adapted for grasslands and pastoralism issues based on fieldwork experiences in south and east Africa:

<ftp://ftp.fao.org/docrep/fao/012/ak545e/ak545e00.pdf>

Savory Institute: Holistic approach to managing complexity

The Savory Institute is pursuing a strategy of forming 100 learning hubs around the world to reverse desertification and combat climate change. Each hub is locally led and managed but connected through an internet platform. These are places where people and organizations can collaborate and learn together about holistic management strategies, embracing current science, traditional and other sources of knowledge. For more information refer to: www.savoryinstitute.org